

# National Union of Icelandic Students

*Policy on Quality in the Icelandic  
Higher Education Community*



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STÚDENTA

National Union of Icelandic Students' Policy  
on Quality in the Icelandic Higher Education  
Community

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Universities are a source of new knowledge, opportunities and ideas. Education and its quality are the foundation for the competitiveness and value creation necessary to ensure good quality of life and a strong society. Increased access to education and a higher level of education enhance economic growth and have economic benefits for societies. In addition, education has an impact on values, knowledge, attitudes and ability of individuals and this in turn influences and forms the culture of societies as a whole.

There is no doubt about the importance of development in Icelandic society and of competitiveness being maintained in an international context in as many areas as possible. Development and safeguarding of higher education in the country is a prerequisite for this to occur and if it fails there is a risk of society deteriorating and being unable to keep up with those nations we wish to compare ourselves with.

## **Quality of studies**

An emphasis shall be placed on quality of studies always being in the foreground when strategic decisions are made. Quality of studies is defined based on the effort of institutions to analyse their own operations and organise all aspects of university studies so that they contribute to attaining the learning outcome or objective that has been set. Quality of studies can also be defined based on the competences and abilities that each student obtains during his/her studies. Sus-

tainable development, critical thought, sourcing of new ideas, and good ethics shall be a prominent part of education, research and development in all higher education institutions.

It is important that students attain a solid academic background, receive purposeful training and acquire skills and competences in applying knowledge. Universities shall adopt a strategy on quality of studies and teaching, as well as a research strategy. In addition, they should have internal processes to increase the transparency of their operations, facilitate follow-up, as well as ensure that the university operates according to internal and external criteria, laws and regulations.

## **Comprehensive educational policy**

Foresight, stability and transparency in the educational system are key prerequisites for educational institutions in the country being able to attend to their role. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture must set a comprehensive educational policy, particularly a policy for the higher education level. The policy shall include practical and ambitious goals for the development of the higher education level, and quality of studies shall take precedence. Such a policy should be formed in good collaboration with students, the universities and other pertinent stakeholders, such as the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education.

## **Diverse and ever-changing economy**

University studies shall prepare students for a diverse and ever-changing economy.

The government must attend to preparing an employment policy for the country with diversity of studies and industry as a guiding principle. It is advisable to ensure consistency between various aspects stated in the educational policy for the country and the country's employment policy.

## **Statistical information**

In order to make it possible to form a comprehensive educational policy, tenable statistical information on the student population is a key aspect. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture is obligated to collect key information on the operations of the universities. This information is important for students, university administrators and other parties. The information should be public as was the aim when its collection began. Currently, public statistics on the composition of the group and progress in studies or other general information on students is lacking. Such information must be collected with special consideration given to the social dimension, and while students still do not reflect a cross-section of the nation, equal access to education has not been sufficiently ensured.

At a ministerial meeting in Yerevan in 2015, the then Minister of Education, Science and Culture signed a Memorandum of Understanding to the effect that

the student group should reflect society. Furthermore, the current government agreement states that equal access to studies is a primary objective.

## **Funding of the higher education level**

In the current government agreement, the aims are for funding to the higher education level to reach the average of the OECD nations before 2020 and that of the Nordic Countries before 2025. These objectives were reflected in the national budget for 2018 and it is necessary that purposeful work be undertaken to reach them with the national budget in coming years.

The mathematical model of the universities must be reviewed as its original goal was mainly in relation to increasing the number of students in Iceland. This contradicts with the current needs of the universities which are, for example, to offer studies that compare with those offered by universities abroad and which prioritise quality of programmes. Variables that determine how funding is allocated to different schools/faculties of the universities must be based on the actual cost of operating schools/faculties.

Higher education institutions are dependent on reliable and predictable framework conditions to work in accordance with and this requires financial stability and independence for long-term strategic planning. The model should be systematically reviewed every five years in order to ensure that it is consistent with the needs of the higher education

level, in collaboration with pertinent stakeholders.

Among the roles of the mathematical model is to bring the policy of the government into practice and thus serve a specific purpose. Therefore, a prerequisite for a changed mathematical model is that an educational policy is in place. It stands to reason that it is not possible to determine variables in a mathematical model such as this one in a purposeful way until information and an educational policy are in place.

The educational level of the nation has been lower than in the other Nordic Countries, but with increased enrolment and access to university studies we are currently almost equal with them. A reduction in student numbers through admission restrictions is therefore not a remedy for the financial position of the higher education system for the future, but rather a step backwards. Implementation of admission restrictions should only be undertaken with the primary goal of increasing the quality of studies. It is important to keep in mind that a reduction in student numbers does not automatically lead to increased quality of studies. Access to education and quality of studies must be fostered through better funding and more developed and improved methods of teaching. In addition, care must be taken that admission restrictions do not threaten equal access to studies. It is clear that admission restrictions must be approached with caution and objectives of implementing

them must be clear and measurable.

Access to studies is not only about access to higher education institutions; it is about everyone who wishes to acquire an education having a real opportunity to pursue with diligence those studies they are interested in. This consists in students having access to satisfactory housing at an affordable price, being able to afford necessities, having good mental health and good general health. It is therefore necessary that students, as diverse a group as they are, receive adequate support to study irrespective of economic status, background, social circumstances or position in other respects. Students must fulfill academic requirements to be admitted to university programmes. Institutions must also offer a skills assessment that evaluates previous work and the experience of the applicant to undertake university studies. Such an assessment makes it possible for individuals to apply for the studies they are interested in and leads to a student group with diverse backgrounds and experience.

## Study programmes

Study programmes are the core of each higher education institution. When preparing new study programmes, institutions must have a clear and transparent process and the same applies when major changes are made to existing study programmes. Programmes shall be reviewed in an organised manner every few years. Learning outcomes of study programmes and individual courses shall be regularly reviewed with the aim of ensuring consistency between learning outcomes, teaching methods and assessment methods, making sure that the knowledge, competences and skills of students are tested. Processes of institutions shall include consultation with pertinent stakeholders and new study programmes or major changes shall not be approved without this taking place. Students shall always be consulted when an institution creates or renews study programmes.

In creating study programmes, a clear objective shall serve as a guiding principle and the objective must be consistent with the strategy of the faculty and university as a whole. A study programme shall also be designed, on the one hand, with respect to students being able to pursue their studies partly abroad and, on the other, with respect to practicum where appropriate. Study programmes and courses shall generally be structured with the aim of contributing to interactive participation of students, administration of practical assignments, practical teaching, and moderate weight of final exams. Universities should examine

and evaluate the advantages of conducting study sessions and implement these where appropriate at all university levels.

Structure of study programmes shall be in accordance with the criteria of the European Higher Education Area, the National Qualification Framework for Higher Education and the Icelandic Qualification Framework.

## Education based on research, innovation and evidence-based knowledge

Teaching in university programmes shall be based on leading research and evidence-based knowledge, whether that knowledge is developed within or outside the universities. Independent work methods, critical thinking and good ethics shall always be a prominent part of teaching. Furthermore, teaching should develop in step with societal changes, as one of the primary roles of universities is to graduate students who can address the challenges of their local community, country and the world. It is imperative that universities have clear work rules on the proportion of time that academic employees devote to research, on the one hand, and teaching, on the other, in order to ensure that a teacher can attend well to both types of work.

A strong connection between research and development leads to increased quality of studies. Teaching should be approached in a solution-oriented way and it should include group work and group projects. Early in their academic career, students must be given an in-

roduction to research methods, critical thinking regarding data use, and ethics of research work.

In order to ensure a connection between research and teaching, it is important that teachers relate research in academic fields to teaching. Students should also receive training in scientific work methods and an opportunity to participate in research.

Doctoral students play a large role in developing and renewing the research environment. It is therefore important to foster doctoral studies in Iceland, attend to their funding and the learning conditions of doctoral students in Iceland and abroad.

### ***Innovation***

University studies should provide students with fundamental knowledge and experience in innovation. Constant development of education and forming of new solutions should be the core of innovation during the educational career. Innovation can be defined as something which is, on the one hand, new and usable in a certain field, and on the other, has financial or social value. One of the roles of higher education institutions is to encourage idea generation and to be an active participant in renewing society; to do this, the institutions need to maintain good consultation with parties from industry.

### **Teaching and teaching methods**

Teaching and its implementation is a large and important part of quality of studies and shall ensure that students

fulfill the objectives stated in learning outcomes. Students should always be encouraged to adopt independent work methods but at the same time, sufficient guidance by teachers should be ensured. Teaching methods should be tailored to the different needs of each university. For example, the needs of students in universities that emphasise arts and creative subjects are different from those of students in universities that place an emphasis on strong distance programmes.

Teaching and the course catalogue should be in constant development in good consultation among students and teachers. In order to accomplish this, there must be freedom within universities to develop different teaching methods and teaching evaluation at all university levels. Such development is the responsibility of higher education institutions, as well as improvement to teaching with respect to new teaching methods, teaching evaluation and changed attitudes in society.

Great emphasis should be placed on cross-disciplinary teaching at all levels of university studies. An ever-changing modern society urgently requires broad knowledge across fields, rather than specialised knowledge in one field.

### ***Use of digital teaching methods***

Online courses are constantly being developed and are becoming ever more common. Recording of lectures and use of digital teaching methods, such as edX or other MOOC, can open up more diverse possibilities to improve teaching quality. Education also becomes more accessible



and flexible; this contributes to equal access to studies and especially for students who do not have the opportunity to attend conventional classes at set hours. Higher education institutions must ensure that those who make use of digital equipment have sufficient skills and offer teaching and instruction to improve digital skills if necessary. In submitting assignments and exams, digital equipment shall be used, but the possibility shall, though, be in place to request that exams be conducted in a conventional way. One of the main barriers to implementing digital teaching methods is that employees do not believe they can follow up on these innovations. It is therefore important that administrators of faculties/schools are forward-looking, set a good example and are leaders when it comes to implementing new, diverse and digital teaching methods. It is furthermore necessary that all universities provide good support to employees by offering courses etc. to enhance their abilities in this area.

### ***Practicum***

The purpose of practicum is to give students an opportunity to acquire experience out in the job market in relation to their studies. An agreement shall always be in place between a university and job site that provides for the aims of the practicum and the experience that the trainee will acquire during the practicum. Information on how practicum will be assessed for credit shall always be in place before it begins. Universities shall place great emphasis on practicum and its connection to industry and this

applies to all study programmes offered at Icelandic universities.

Furthermore, it shall be made possible for students at Icelandic universities to pursue practicum abroad.

In order to ensure that the prerequisites of the agreement have been fulfilled following the practicum, the trainee shall submit an evaluation of the practicum and, furthermore, the superior shall submit an evaluation of the performance of the trainee. Nonetheless, practicum shall be flexible to a certain extent, so that the trainee and supervisor of the job site have freedom to develop their cooperation.

Practicum that takes place in public institutions or in companies run for profit shall always come with a salary. It must be ensured that the trainee receives an adequate salary in accordance with the wage agreements of other employees in the respective organisation, with consideration given to the projects and responsibility that the trainee undertakes. It is also important that supervisors of a job site ensure consistency and that trainees have the same wages for the same jobs. Trainees may never be viewed as free workforce and it is also necessary that there is a direct connection between the work and studies of the student.

Practicum at university level is neither covered in the Higher Education Act nor other set regulations, and it is important that this be changed. Such regulations should, for example, provide for the responsibility of a university and job site.

### ***Student ID numbers***

In all exams and assignments, student ID numbers shall be used when reviewing and grading. Student ID numbers ensure the anonymity of students and contribute to fairer grading, especially in light of the fact that those who review exams or assignments may be fellow students or have other connections to students, not least in as small a community as Iceland. It shall be simple to use student ID numbers in a system implemented for taking exams and submitting assignments.

### ***Necessary qualifications of teachers***

Teachers shall have the ability to organise and conduct teaching which emphasises diverse teaching methods and assessment. Teachers shall furthermore have the ability to analyse challenges, register and assess experience and results of their own teaching. Universities shall also place an emphasis on professional development of teachers, and it is important to have processes within universities which address teachers' professional development.

### ***Assistant teachers***

Assistant teachers who are also students are a useful addition to teaching as they can be of help in reviewing learning material and assignments and in providing guidance. It is a valuable experience to disseminate knowledge and faculties should therefore enable students who have demonstrated good understanding of learning material to become assistant teachers where appropriate. Universities are responsible for assistant teachers knowing their obligations and roles. This

can be communicated with a teaching handbook or training at the start of teaching. Assistant teachers shall receive a salary for their work.

### ***Course catalogue and diverse assessment***

The universities of the country shall offer student-centred studies with an emphasis on diverse teaching methods and assessment. Great emphasis shall be placed on active student participation, practical assignments and ties to industry, in addition to training students in critical thinking, creativity and independent work methods with ethical values as a guiding principle. Higher education institutions shall provide accessible, informative and practical course descriptions. The objective of a course must be stated in course descriptions for all courses at university level. It is the responsibility of universities to ensure that all necessary information on a course is accessible both prior to and during studies.

Assessment shall be carried out in a diverse way and consideration must be given to what kind of assessment is most appropriate at each time. Consideration must also be given to the integration of assessment and teaching, assessment and course descriptions, as well as integration of assessment and learning outcomes at each time. The results of course assessment should indicate the knowledge and competences that students have acquired at each time. Universities shall have the aim that assessment results are processed objectively and that

a clear process for appeals is in place for students who do not accept the results of assessment. As an emphasis is placed on diverse teaching methods at university level, it is necessary that assessment be as diverse as possible and reliance on only large final exams should be avoided. Grades in final exams do not reflect on their own the actual competences and knowledge of students.

### ***Feedback***

An emphasis shall be placed on careful feedback and on feedback being provided within a suitable time limit. Feedback shall be given for assessment that takes place over the course of the semester and at the end of the semester. Students shall have a right to such feedback, irrespective of what form the assessment takes, that is, verbal, written or otherwise.

It is important that universities have clear and fair rules on deadlines, which grant students this right. The deadlines shall be manageable for teachers and it is appropriate to give consideration to the size of courses. In general, students should not have to wait long until they receive grades and feedback for course components, as such information shall be released in close proximity timewise to the material in question. This also opens up the possibility of offering the option to take repeated course components, where appropriate, within a reasonable time period.

### ***The right to take repeated course components due to illness or other reasons***

As regards the assessment for each

course, it shall be ensured that students have satisfactory minimum right to take repeated course components due to illness or other reasons so that students have a real possibility to make improvements and thus increase the chances that they manage to complete the course with satisfactory results and at the correct time. A higher education institution must have a clear policy concerning the right to take repeated course components; in particular, consideration shall be given to equality perspectives.

The right to take repeated course components due to illness or other reasons refers to the latter of two possibilities to take the course component in question.

### ***Study progress of students***

Universities must set rules on the educational career of students from enrolment to graduation. Such rules shall be made in extensive consultation with students and other stakeholders and care must be taken that they are not too restrictive for students to complete their studies but that they contribute to flexible learning paths. Universities shall ensure that students are aware and informed of the rules in question. All students have an unconditional right to a one-year leave from studies. Higher education institutions must make accommodations for students who do not wish to study full-time, either with individual-based study programmes or with a study leave. In the case of a study leave, study progress requirements should be adapted to the length of the

study leave. The diversity of students must also be kept in mind and every effort made to accommodate the needs of students who require special assistance.

It is necessary that reception of first-year students is well arranged so that both academic and social aspects of the university studies are addressed. Upon graduation, students shall receive free of charge a Diploma Supplement along with their graduate certificate.

### **Learning facilities**

The campus area shall be an encouraging environment where students can work on projects, actualise ideas and acquire knowledge outside the classroom. A good and stimulating learning environment makes it possible for students to obtain academic as well as practical experience. Students shall have access to suitable laboratories or work rooms and all equipment used in teaching shall be comparable to that of elite universities.

Students shall have access to a library but if such facilities are not offered in the immediate environment of students, universities are responsible for providing them with such access and informing students of the possibilities that are available.

There is a need to coordinate the quality of the learning facilities of the universities and in particular, the facilities of the public universities. Furthermore, minimum requirements for good learning facilities shall be specified in the Higher Education Act. A review shall be carried out of learning facilities and im-

provements made where needed. Such a review shall be conducted in consultation with students.

Universities shall place an emphasis on offering a creative learning environment that encourages entrepreneurial activities, for example, with an innovation centre. Students can make use of such facilities to experiment with innovation ideas and work independently on ideas, in cooperation with other universities and/or industry.

In order for students to see a benefit in pursuing university studies in Iceland, the higher education system must be sufficiently quality driven to support a knowledge community, increase competitiveness and develop in accordance with international standards. The importance of an independent quality assurance system that supports the independence of the universities to safeguard the standards of their processes and degrees is indisputable. Active participation by students contributes to the credibility of the system. It is important that students who participate in quality assurance work have sufficient knowledge of their role, projects and the responsibility that comes with their participation, in order to contribute and actively participate. Higher education institutions should keep their students well informed and take the initiative in providing them with training in these matters to further strengthen students. LIS also places an emphasis on assisting these students and providing them with instruction and support at each time.

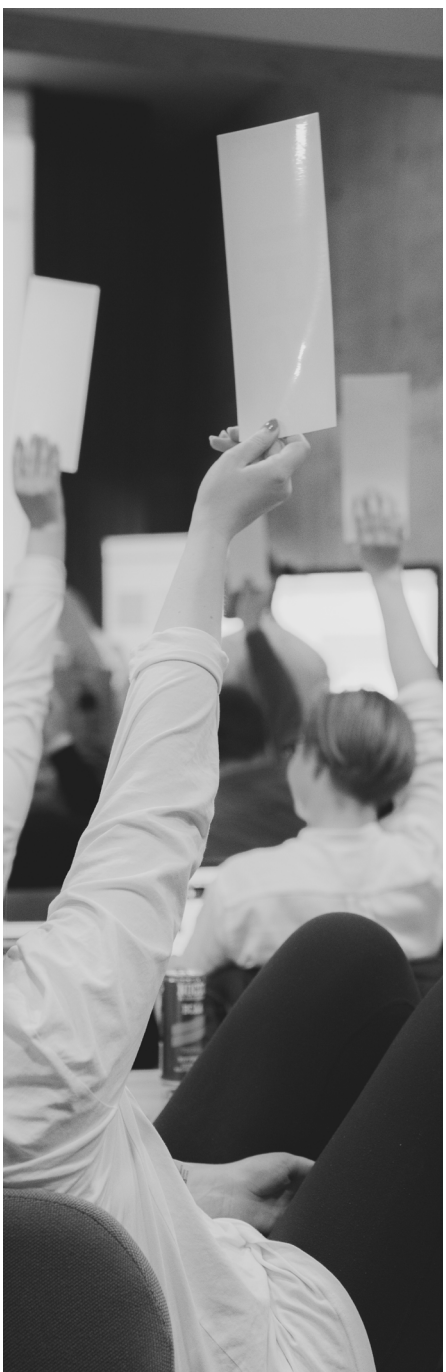
It is important that the Quality Board communicates well and actively with student organisations, the Ministry, universities and industry representatives. In order for the Quality Board to attend to its role and to prevent conflicts of interest, it is important to contribute to its independence from the Ministry and other stakeholders. Furthermore, it must be ensured that the Board has financial independence and sufficient manpower to fully attend to its operations. It is im-

portant that the Quality Board is composed of qualified specialists at each time and that it can also operate an office.

In the current laws and regulation, the Quality Board is not mentioned specifically but instead it works for the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture on the basis of the Higher Education Act no. 63/2006, and Paragraph 2 of Article 11 in the Act states that the Minister shall adopt rules on quality assurance of teaching and research. Regulation no. 321/2009 covers the aims of quality assurance of teaching and research in universities, criteria for internal and external review and publication of information. Article 8 states that the Minister can assign to an independent party or review group the implementation of external review, but it is not explained in further detail who shall carry out the review. It is advisable to assign to the Quality Board legal status as a review party for quality of teaching and research by further covering this in laws or a regulation.

The Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education should apply for membership to the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) as soon as possible. The Association contributes to European collaboration in the field of quality assurance in universities and is an umbrella association for associations and/or institutions operating in the European Higher Education Area in the field of higher education. Membership to the Association would be a recognition for the Quality Board and the framework

programme in Iceland and would ensure access to information, knowledge and experience from other members of the Association on a formal platform. It is to the benefit of students that development of universities and quality assurance systems is, for example, coordinated with international standards. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture has thus far had observer status on behalf of Iceland but this should be in the hands of the Quality Board and, in addition, the aim in the near future should be for the Quality Board to attain full membership to the Association.





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