



Háskólinn  
á Akureyri  
University  
of Akureyri

# Psychological Safety as a key to enhancement

Vaka Óttarsdóttir

Director of Quality and HR

# My background

- Educational background:
  - Pedagogy, Education, Coaching and HRM
- Prior to joining UNAK in 2018 I worked for 16 year for an international IT company
  - Human Resource Manager
  - Director of Product Development

# The University of Akureyri

- Founded in 1987
- Currently 2.540 students and 230 permanent faculty and staff
- 19 undergraduate and 28 graduate programmes
- UNAK has been instrumental for the regional development in Iceland and has had wide-ranging effects, including opportunities for students to study in their home region

# UNAK

- The first university in Iceland to appoint a director of quality into a full position
- The RA 2014 and the IWR were instrumental in informing the current strategic plan for UNAK and the new RA and IWR will be used in the ongoing strategic plans for 2023-2030
- Now we are systematically implementing Plan-Do-Check-Act
  - Implementing dashboards with key statistics and performance indicators

# Two recent reviews

- A special commissioned review of the Police Science programme
  - Conducted online in November 2020
  - Report published in March 2021
- An Institution Wide Review (IWR) of UNAK
  - Conducted online in November 2021
  - Report published in May 2022

# Two judgements

- UNAK received limited confidence in the Police Science Review on:
  - Managing standards of degrees
  - Managing quality of student learning experience
- UNAK received confidence in the IWR on:
  - Managing standards of degrees
  - Managing quality of student learning experience
- Both judgements are, in my opinion, correct and highly useful for the university

# The Police Science programme

- In August 2016, UNAK was selected by MESC to develop and deliver the basic education for prospective police officers in Iceland
- With limited time to develop the necessary infrastructure or to recruit the required staff, UNAK received the first students three weeks later
- The structure is very complex, involving two different ministries and two separate institutions
- The programme has been in constant development since its initial hasty setup
- Getting a judgement of confidence under these circumstances would have been almost impossible

# Challenges

- Special Commissioned reviews had not been done previously and guidance was somewhat limited
- The review did not fit well within the 7-year quality cycle
  - The staff in the department of Police Science was all relatively new
  - This meant that the RA report was written by junior staff members who had never been involved in SLR or periodic review of programmes
- Covid 19 had to take precedence over everything else
  - The university was in a survival mode
- Due to Covid the review was online
- We did not have an Icelandic contact in the review



# Misunderstandings

- In part, the report suffered from factual inaccuracies and/or misunderstandings
- Reasons:
  - The RA report should have had more involvement from senior staff
  - In the meetings:
    - People felt insecure
    - New staff members lacked experience of UNAK's processes
    - Some had difficulty understanding the questions from the review team
    - People struggled with discussing quality issues in English

# Lesson learned

- Language is an issue
  - Most of our staff members would say that they speak good English, but we realized that discussing quality was a challenge
  - Some staff members had problems articulating what they wanted to say
    - Lacked the correct vocabulary when it came to discussing quality and organizational structure
    - Not knowing in advance what questions, you will be asked and having a limited time can be a big challenge

# Psychological safety

- Psychological safety is about creating an environment where staff can speak up, share ideas, ask questions and make mistakes without fear of humiliation or retribution
- Especially important when working with others and dealing with the unknown
- Having a review is stressful
- We needed to take steps to increase the psychological safety of our staff members participating in the review

# Psychological Safety

- Before the IWR I had virtual practice meetings where I would have discussions with the groups participating in the review
- One part of this was to explain the review process and the focus on enhancement
- Sharing openly what is working well and what is not with the focus on enhancement
- After the review, many staff members shared that they felt that the practice meetings had really helped them feeling more secure before and at the meeting

# Trust the Process

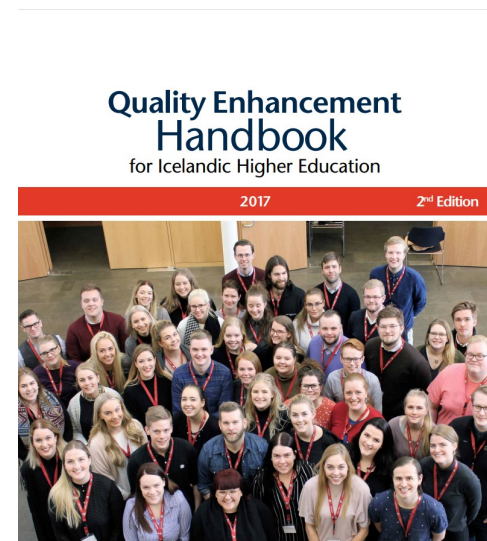
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- In soccer rules are quite clear
- Could limited confidence be similar to getting a yellow card?
- No confidence is the red card?
  - What happens with two yellow cards? Is that a red card?
  - What happens in the next review if you have not followed up on the recommendations?



# Thoughts about QEF3

- More discussion within the universities, on the framework is needed to create a better understanding
- The handbook needs to be available in Icelandic as well as English
- More information on the process around limited confidence and no confidence



# Training of the IWR Teams

- Transparency could be increased on this
  - The universities know very little about the preparation of the review teams
- Compliance with the ESG
  - Do the different review teams have a common understanding of the minimum requirements?
- Atmosphere
  - Should be peer-based process according to the handbook
    - Felt very different between the two reviews
- To stress the importance of using as simple English as possible

# Was the process enhancement oriented?

- It might differ between universities
  - How do the universities work with their RA?
  - How do the universities use the recommendations put forward in the IWR
  - Do they view this as a tick box exercise or enhancement?
- At UNAK both the RA and IWR are used actively in our enhancement work and to inform our strategy and planning
- Year on report as well as Mid term progress report really help to keep us on track