

NOQA MEETING 2026

Reviewing Iceland from abroad

Structure, induction and support for international panels

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International panel composition

Panel composition is the single element that most affects how we prepare a panel.

- Six universities, ~21,000 students.
- Everyone has taught, examined or collaborated with everyone else.
- Domestic peers are therefore not credibly independent.
- All members except the student member are recruited from outside Iceland.

Composition is deliberately designed

STANDING POOL PER QEF CYCLE

- Previous IAQA panel members
- Board nominations
- Recommendations from other agencies
- An open call

ASSEMBLED AGAINST A COMPETENCE SET

- Institutional, research and education management
- Quality management and prior EQA experience
- **Fit for purpose approach:** Competences matched to the institution's profile
- No more than 60% of one gender

Three continuity anchors inside a fresh panel

CHAIR

Where possible, has served on a review in Iceland before.

SECRETARY

From a standing list agreed by the Board at the start of the cycle.

STUDENT MEMBER

Has studied in Iceland, nominated by the national student union.

Some context is brought in through selection rather than only through briefing.

Structure as the primary support



Each meeting closes with an explicit task for the next.

Division of labour and support material

DIVISION OF LABOUR

By area of investigation, with a lead and a support member for each evaluation theme.

WRITTEN SUPPORT MATERIAL

- QEF Handbook and guidelines for panels
- Indicative questions and reading questions for the SER
- Report template and meeting template

Two demands in tension: comparability and fitness for purpose

6

institutions

6

different panels

COMPARABILITY

Comparability rests almost entirely on how well each panel is inducted into our framework.

FITNESS FOR PURPOSE

The judgement is holistic and fitted to the institution — its profile, its enhancement topic, its circumstances.

Three evaluation themes as reference points

Learning and teaching

Research and innovation

The quality system and strategic management

- The effectiveness statements are not a checklist.
- The judgement is holistic: a balanced position across the themes.
- The enhancement topic attracts formative feedback only.

Two possible outcomes, three criteria

OUTCOMES

Passed

Follow-up review required

CRITERIA — EACH ASSESSED SEPARATELY, ALL THREE MUST PASS

- An operationally effective, fit-for-purpose quality management system
- Ongoing enhancement of activities
- Follow-up on recommendations from previous IWRs

Vocabulary matters

Commendations

Good practice worth naming.

Necessary areas of improvement

Only where follow-up is required. They define the scope of a follow-up review two years later.

Recommendations

Stated as objectives, not prescriptive actions. They become the agenda of the Annual Quality Dialogue.

Formative feedback

On the enhancement topic.

The categories are not stylistic labels. A miscategorised finding changes the review outcome.

The contextual induction

HE LANDSCAPE

The public/private distinction, including private institutions without tuition fees.

FUNDING

Performance-based model from 2025; 83% of OECD average spend per student.

INSTITUTION-SPECIFIC

Example for a current review: a merger is under way at the same time as the review.

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Who Icelandic students are

43%

aged 30 or over

76%

in paid work

~50%

studying predominantly or entirely online

35%

with children

31%

reporting a limiting disability

18%

first-year dropout, against an OECD average of 13%

Conduct on site

- An explicit panel duty to ensure those with limited English are heard.
- Open questions, no institutional jargon: ask how things are done rather than naming a specific institutional scheme.
- Multiple role-holding is normal in Iceland: panels may meet the same person in several capacities.
- Ethics written down: no socialising, confidentiality, no attribution of critical comments, no supervisors in meetings with subordinates.

The Review Manager travels with the panel and stays reachable throughout.

Where consistency is actually enforced

REVIEW MANAGER

Attends part of the final panel meeting to offer guidance on the outcome criteria.

THE BOARD

The outcome is provisional until the Board approves it: procedure, sufficiency of evidence, clarity of reasoning, alignment with the evaluation themes.

Challenges that remain

We aim for the panel to include someone who already knows the Icelandic sector, but in a small pool this cannot be guaranteed.

No way of testing whether two panels would reach the same conclusion about the same institution.

Recruiting student panel members and supporting them as full peers among senior international academics.

DISCUSSION

- 1 Since we can standardise our frameworks, but not the panels, there is no way of testing whether two panels would reach the same conclusion about the same institution. Peer review rests on the experience and judgement of the people in the room.

How do you manage the risk that this creates?

- 2 Every panel reads the framework against some picture of the sector.

Where does context matter most in your reviews – and how do you make sure the panel knows it rather than assuming it?

What is briefed, what is selected for, and what is left to the panel's own assumptions.