

EVALUATION OF TOURISM STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND

A report commissioned by the
Ministry of Education, Science and Culture

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Part I – General Outline

I. Introduction

I.1. The Expert Panel

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- Professor Godfrey Baldacchino, Department of Sociology & Anthropology, University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI), Canada, Canada Research Chair in Island Studies and Visiting Professor at the University of Malta, Malta
- Dr. Edward H. Huijbens, Director of the Icelandic Tourism Research Centre, Akureyri
- Dr. Eiríkur Stephensen, the Icelandic Centre for Research (RANNIS), Liaison Officer

I.2. Terms of Reference

The Expert Panel is appointed according to Article 8 of Rules No. 321/2009 on Quality Control of Teaching and Research in Higher Education Institutions. The Committee is to base its reference on the components of Article 4 of the same act. They are:

- a. role and objectives,
- b. administration and organisation,
- c. structure of teaching and research,
- d. competence requirements of personnel,
- e. rules regarding admission requirements and rights and duties of students,
- f. facilities and services provided to teachers and students,
- g. internal quality management system,
- h. description of learning outcomes,
- i. finances.

1.3. Working Method

The Expert Panel received a *Tourism Studies at the University of Iceland. Evaluation of teaching and study Self-evaluation report* and further documentation on 24 April 2010 by email (see Appendix II). A site visit to the University of Iceland was originally

scheduled for spring 2010 but due to the eruption of Eyjafjallajökull it was postponed to October.

The Expert Panel met on 4 October 2010 for a first discussion about the exercise and then made a site visit to University of Iceland on 5 October during which it had the opportunity to discuss with management, faculty, students and external representatives and look at facilities (see agenda in Appendix I).

A report was then drafted after the Iceland visit and circulated amongst Expert Panel members by email correspondence. The descriptive parts of the final version (Part II – Report) were sent to the University of Iceland for a check of factual errors and misinterpretations on 10 November 2010. The Expert Panel received some factual corrections on 17 November 2010 and revised the report accordingly.

1.4. Short Evaluation of the Work Process

The expert panel found the work process to be a very positive experience which benefitted from the open and constructive dialogue that the panel were able to develop with the University of Iceland's administrators and its academic staff and students, and from the excellent support received from Magnús Lyngdal Magnússon and Eiríkur Stephensen (RANNIS) in the organisation of the review.

The University provided a comprehensive Self Evaluation Report (SER) that enabled the panel to develop a detailed set of issues to be considered prior to each of the scheduled meetings. Unfortunately, the Appendices to the SER were initially only made available in Icelandic and although some of the Appendices were subsequently translated, the compilation of this report necessitated some further work by panel members using the University's web-site to acquire, as best they could, additional detail of course structures and learning outcomes. This work was completed successfully, subsequent to the visit itself.

The schedule of meetings arranged by the University enabled the expert panel to meet a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including the Rector and her Senior Managers; Senior Managers in the School of Engineering and Natural Sciences and the Faculty of Life and Environmental Sciences; teaching staff; current undergraduate and postgraduate

students; alumni and employers. These meetings proved to be most fruitful in providing the panel with the range of evidence on which this report is based.

The work of the expert panel was guided by Article 4 of the Rules on Quality Control of Teaching and Research in Higher Education Institutions which has provided a satisfactory framework for the review. However, the nine criteria that are set out in Article 4 were not deployed directly by the University in framing the SER, so evidence gathered by the panel has had to be mapped onto the criteria to produce this report. A closer alignment of the key headings in the SER with the Article 4 criteria would have made some of the reporting more straightforward.

Overall, the panel valued the opportunity to meet with colleagues from the University of Iceland, to develop insights into the challenges that Icelandic universities presently face, and to share good practice in the delivery of tourism programmes.

Part II - Report

II.1. University of Iceland

II.1.a. Role and Objectives

The University of Iceland is the primary higher education institution in Iceland, with a tradition in providing university-level education that dates to 1911. It delivers over 300 programmes of study ranging across disciplines in humanities, social science, health, engineering, natural science and education, and includes provision across the range of undergraduate, Masters and Doctoral level study – the latter two having grown exponentially in the last few years. The University is seeking to position itself as a research-led institution with a strong international reputation for its research and scholarship. The SER refers to a dual vision that sees the University as providing education and research of international standard whilst also providing educational programmes and research that underpins the future prosperity of the Icelandic community. In 2006, the University adopted a five year plan aimed at positioning itself in the top 100 HEIs globally. However, following the crisis in the Icelandic economy in 2008, budgets have been reduced and an agreement between the University and the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture to finance this strategy has been provisionally shelved.

In its meeting with the expert panel, the Rector and her senior managers reaffirmed that the commitment to position the University as an HEI of international significance remained a clear aspiration, but in the interim the policy would be progressed in a more incremental fashion, as resources permitted. Examples of this approach include a new strategy aimed at increasing the level and quality of research publications prepared by University staff and submitted to international journals. The University has also prioritised postgraduate studies to facilitate the publication effort by its staff. The panel commends this approach as a pragmatic response to the current position, but would also sound a cautionary note that any new focus on postgraduate education should not distract from maintaining the quality of the undergraduate programmes.

The meeting with senior managers confirmed that a key strategic objective for the University is to develop its role in serving the needs of Icelandic society and to help strengthen the economy of the country. The panel views the development of the

programmes of study in tourism (which have been implemented in a phased fashion since 1999) as supporting this objective, not least because of the strategic importance of the tourism industry to the resilience and revival of the Icelandic economy. It is clear from discussions with the senior managers that they share the view that tourism has a growing strategic significance within Iceland, but the discussion did not reassure the panel that the University would be able to channel resources to support the development of the tourism studies programmes, even though the objectives of the programmes are well-aligned with the higher level objectives of the University to support the development of Icelandic economy and society.

II.1.b. Administration and Organisation

The SER explains that the University has recently undertaken a radical restructuring of its internal organisation in which a previous pattern of 11 semi-autonomous faculties was replaced by a suite of five academic schools which between them contain 25 faculties. Tourism Studies, together with Biology and Geography, now form the Faculty of Life and Environmental Sciences, within the School of Engineering and Natural Sciences. The work of the Schools and Faculties is complemented by the usual range of administrative and student support services, all of which are ultimately accountable to the Rector and the University Council.

The review panel is satisfied that the overarching structures of the organisation and administration of the University are well-conceived and generally appropriate for the management of a modern university. However, it is concerned that the organisational framework is not particularly well-matched to the needs of areas of study such as tourism which is, by its nature, inter-disciplinary.

The panel spent some time exploring with different groups the issue of the placement of the Tourism Studies programme within the new University structure. The panel is concerned that, as a small programme of work, the subject does not have a high level of “visibility” – either within the University or, very importantly, to external audiences. This lack of visibility is not helped by its placement in a School in which it has to compete for attention alongside some much larger and well-established areas of work (such as engineering) and with which, it has to be said, there are very few synergies. These concerns were endorsed – to varying degrees - by teaching staff; by senior

managers of the School of Engineering and Natural Sciences; and by students. Teaching staff, in particular, felt it was difficult to get their “voice” heard, struggling amidst “hard” science disciplines and at the end of a rather lengthy chain of command.

The panel is also of the view that the placement of the programme may be impacting in indirect ways upon the structure of its curricula. These issues are explored in more detail in subsequent sections, but the panel notes that the placement of the programme in a Faculty of Life and Environmental Sciences encourages the adoption of a particular view of tourism as being concerned primarily with nature and environment rather than - say - with economy, management, foreign languages, society and culture, which are just as legitimate areas of intersection with tourism. Furthermore, some of the barriers that the organisational frameworks of schools and faculties often create, may be limiting the scope for teaching teams to shape curricula that draw on disciplines in other areas and/or the scope for students to identify and access elective modules of study from programmes that lie outside their home School. In this respect there is a particular issue with the variable management of ECTS credits between Schools at the University of Iceland. This issue might be seen as a consequence of organisational structures that allow Schools to create their own interpretation of the credit system and on which the University should perhaps aim to adopt a consistent practice (see Section II.1.c below).

II.1.c. Structure of Teaching and Research

The panel were not able to consider the details of the structure of teaching at the time of the visit as this material lay within the parts of the SER that were only made available in Icelandic. Subsequent to the visit an outline set of module summaries and related learning outcomes have been made available to the panel and a similar set of documents, in English, have been extracted from the University’s web-site.

On the basis of inspection of these documents, the panel is satisfied that the structure of the teaching programmes is broadly appropriate for degree programmes and at the levels specified (i.e. diploma, honours, masters, etc). The breadth of tourism as an area of study is such that there is always the potential for some material that might be considered essential in one context to be excluded in another; but, on balance, the panel

is satisfied that the programme of study is appropriate. However, it is capable of enhancement, in order to encompass the breath of the field.

In evaluating the structure of the curricula, the panel paid particular attention to the views of present and former students, as well as employers. Students recognised and generally valued the fact that the courses, particularly at undergraduate level, provided a solid and broad grounding in tourism. However, there was also wide consensus that the current focus of the course - around geographical and environmental perspectives of tourism - was a limitation. As the SER points out (page 17), student interest tends more towards social issues and students told the panel that wider immersion in aspects of the business of tourism would be useful and would increase the employability and overall “goodness of fit” of those graduating, within the industry. The panel were advised that the curriculum in Tourism Studies currently contains four mandatory courses (28 ECTS) that are related to business and that students have freedom to choose elective courses in business, marketing and economics. Major/minor combinations of tourism with business are also available. This provides a useful basis from which more integrated programmes of tourism and business might be created (see below), as well as enabling the development of the stronger ties with the Icelandic tourism industry that the panel believes should be developed.

This view was echoed by representatives of external stakeholders who felt that closer liaison between the local tourism industry and the University would bring richer benefits. The opportunities are ripe with the University’s propinquity with main industry stakeholders, but employers stated that they were seldom asked to comment on the relevance of proposed curricula and that opportunities to bring external speakers into the University to provide classes to students on their specialist areas were seldom taken up. Some areas of collaboration have been established; for example, graduates from tourism programmes who have produced an outstanding thesis are eligible for an award that is co-ordinated by the Icelandic Tourism Research Centre and conferred jointly by the universities and representatives of the industry. However, such collaborations – whilst commendable - should be seen as a starting point for a much wider process of engagement with the industry.

The panel therefore endorses the view that closer working relations between the University of Iceland and the Icelandic tourism industry would bring mutual benefits: enriching the student experience; adding breadth and depth to the curricula; enhancing the employability of those graduating; building and strengthening collaborative networks; and possibly stimulating programmes of research that might be funded through a partnership approach.

The development of a broader curriculum may be advanced by working more closely with the industry, but may also draw on the breadth of expertise that exists across the University as a whole and which, as noted above, is often central to a multidisciplinary subject such as tourism. In this respect the panel endorses the concerns that are voiced in the SER (page 25) that, in some contexts, the structure of learning programmes are becoming distorted in ways that are not always beneficial, by the variable treatment of ECTS credits across the University as a whole. Courses are variably rated – generally between 6 and 10 ECTS credits – but the panel was advised by staff that courses in some Schools attract as many as 10 credits, whilst in other Schools courses with comparable workloads are assigned as low as 6 credits. Some students are consequently choosing elective areas of study, not because they necessarily complement the core curriculum in tourism, but because they attract more credits for the same amount of work. The panel was unable to gain clarification from either the University senior managers or the managers of the School of Engineering and Natural Sciences as to the reasons for these anomalies and recommends that the University gives further consideration to how it can ensure a broad consistency, within all Schools across the institution, in the allocation of credits to courses.

Alongside the issue of consistency in credit rating, the panel has serious concerns over the level of staffing that is available to support the delivery of the curricula. The SER reports that the tourism department has the equivalent of 3.0 full time tenured positions (2 of whom are fully engaged in teaching tourism) and whilst there is a larger number of part-time sessional teachers who are available to support the delivery of the tourism modules (and some modules are delivered by other faculties or schools), the student to staff ratio (at *circa* 1:53) is very high by international standards. (In the UK, for example, the student to staff ratio in typical tourism programmes will be *circa* 1:30). The student to staff ratio is also, according to the Rector, out of line with most of the rest

of the University. Not only does the shortage of staff lead to high workloads, it also impacts the structure of teaching, as curricula generally reflect the primary interests and competencies of members of staff. Indeed, in discussions with student groups the panel were advised that one of the potential weaknesses of the programme was the level of exposure by students to the same staff, which led to some degree of repetition of material and overlap.

It was not clear to the panel how far the staff in tourism have been able to engage with colleagues in other schools and faculties to develop the programme of awards, although a minor elective exists in business administration, to which students can devote a third of their credits. The panel notes that, across the University as a whole, there are several disciplines that are directly complementary to the study of tourism and that some use of modules from other Schools and Faculties to build the tourism curricula is already evident. However, the panel perceives further opportunities to strengthen provision by creating a suite of named awards that combine existing course elements from different Schools and Faculties to produce a richer palette of awards. For example, the core elements of study of tourism as delivered by the Faculty of Life and Environmental Sciences already provide the basis, when combined with other areas of study from within the same School, for a degree in Tourism and Environment. But the same core might also be combined with modules in business and marketing to provide an award in Tourism, Business and Marketing, and/or with modules in the social sciences and/or humanities to provide an award in Tourism, Culture and Society. The panel suggests that the course team consider an approach of this nature as a means of building award programmes that provide a wider range of perspectives on tourism (some of which will be better matched to the diverse needs of the tourism industry) whilst also helping to address some of the issues of staffing by spreading the delivery of core modules across a wider pool of University staff. Closer prescription of core modules in awards might also address issues identified below (Section II.1.h) in which some students might select electives that relate only loosely to tourism as their area of study.

High student to staff ratios inevitably impact upon the ability of the staff to deliver suitably the programmes of study and to support student learning (see II.1.f below), but also reduce the capacity to engage in research at an appropriate level. The University's mission is clear in its commitment to produce research of international standard as a

defining feature of the University as a whole; this was reinforced to the panel in meetings with the University's senior managers. Managers explained both the expectations and the incentives to staff to produce quality research, some of which are financial.

The panel is agreed that, under the circumstances of staff shortage and high teaching loads, the current levels of research output from the core staff in tourism is commendable. In discussions with staff the panel explored issues of research funding. Clearly, since the economic crisis of 2008, funding streams have become more restricted, but staff also expressed the view that funding applications from tourism studies to RANNIS have been unsuccessful. Staff believe that part of the reason for this lack of success is that the internal systems of review and approval of research applications by RANNIS are not well-matched to the needs of interdisciplinary programmes such as tourism. The staff also assert that there is a lack of research-focused thinking within the industry, although the panel heard from the external stakeholder group that there may well be opportunities to work with industrial partners to develop programmes of research that are not at present being explored. In particular, the tourism industry might well be a useful source of smaller research grants that act as “pump-priming” to develop successfully a programme of larger bids to bodies such as RANNIS, or to develop or participate in collaborative programmes of research with colleagues from the international research community.

II.1.d. Competence Requirements of Personnel

The University's Human Resources Policy sets out a clear framework that defines the mutual expectations that govern the employment of staff at the University. The Policy makes explicit the University's commitment to engage its staff in the University's management and its decisions, and to support their professional development. The same document also makes clear the University's commitment to recruit well-qualified staff to support its programmes of teaching and research.

At present, the Tourism Studies programme has two full-time faculty posts that are dedicated to supporting the programme and draws selectively on two other faculty members (both Geographers) to support parts of the tourism teaching. The two full-

time faculty posts in tourism are presently staffed at the Associate Professor level. These staff, together with the two supporting Faculty members, are active in producing research and scholarship at a level that is well above the average at the University, in addition to their teaching duties. This is reflected also in the level of satisfaction expressed by postgraduate students with the supervision provided by the staff.

As previously noted, the panel has concerns over the level of staffing and its ability to support a wide-ranging curriculum of the kind that Tourism Studies is likely to require. The panel also notes, with concern, a comment in the SER that refers to the fact that a shortage of administrative staff has led to more administrative tasks being allocated to academics. The requirement for academic staff to undertake administrative functions is never desirable, but in a situation in which academic staff levels are already under pressure, problems will only be made worse.

The high student to staff ratio places inevitable pressures on staff that must impact in negative ways on the delivery of their work. This was also reflected in discussions that the panel held with current undergraduate students. The students who met the panel recognised that staff were broadly supportive and willing to give their time wherever possible, but also noted that it was often difficult to get guidance on the preparation of assignments or receive feedback on work that had been assessed. Students also noted that e-mails sometimes went unanswered and that it was often difficult to get appointments to see staff to discuss particular issues. In addition, the students commented that some areas of the curriculum were widely repeated. The panel is of the view that all these issues are directly related to the level of staffing. The staff, in themselves, are well-qualified and are competent to deliver aspects of Tourism Studies; but additional (preferably full-time) staff, with expertise in complementary areas of tourism, are clearly needed to ensure that the programme is fully supported and that the competence of the staff to deliver the programme is not under-mined by the excessive workloads that the current situation is creating.

The panel noted that two of the four members of the tourism staff are still in the process of completing a PhD and senior managers from the School and Faculty expressed a clear desire for staff to be qualified to this level. This is an important step in building the competence of staff to supervise research students working in tourism and to underpin

teaching at Masters level, which currently also draws upon staff from other disciplines, for example, geography. Senior managers explained that there were financial incentives offered to those members of staff who were research active and that the University also offered matched funding for external research grants that staff might secure. The panel commends this approach as a positive way of building a competent and well-qualified staff.

II.1.e. Rules Regarding Admission Requirements and Rights and Duties of Students

As a public institution, admission to the University of Iceland is generally governed by the requirements set down in the relevant legislation. For admission to undergraduate programmes the basic requirement is that students shall have completed a matriculation examination. Postgraduate students are normally expected to hold a degree in a discipline relevant to their proposed areas of study. The University has the right to waive the need for a matriculation certificate and to award credits for studies completed in other institutions, although the panel noted that at present, credit was not given for some areas of the programme at Hólar University College. Given the clear advantage of developing collaborative programmes in tourism, both nationally and internationally, this is an issue that the University might wish to reconsider.

The University does not presently charge tuition fees, although there is a yearly registration fee of ISK 45,000 which is common to all public universities in Iceland. The registration fee is, however, low by comparison, particularly with the private universities in Iceland which may charge fees as high as ISK 900,000 per annum.

At present, the University does not appear to offer specific guidance to students on general expectations concerning attendance and the completion of programmes of study. Figure 1 presents the enrolment and graduation figures for the tourism programme at the University of Iceland between 1999 and 2009. The panel notes that the graduate percentage rate appears to fluctuate and that the proportion of students who drop out of the course of study has been in the order of 23%. This is high in comparison to international examples and raises some concerns about the levels of commitment to courses of study on the part of many of the students.

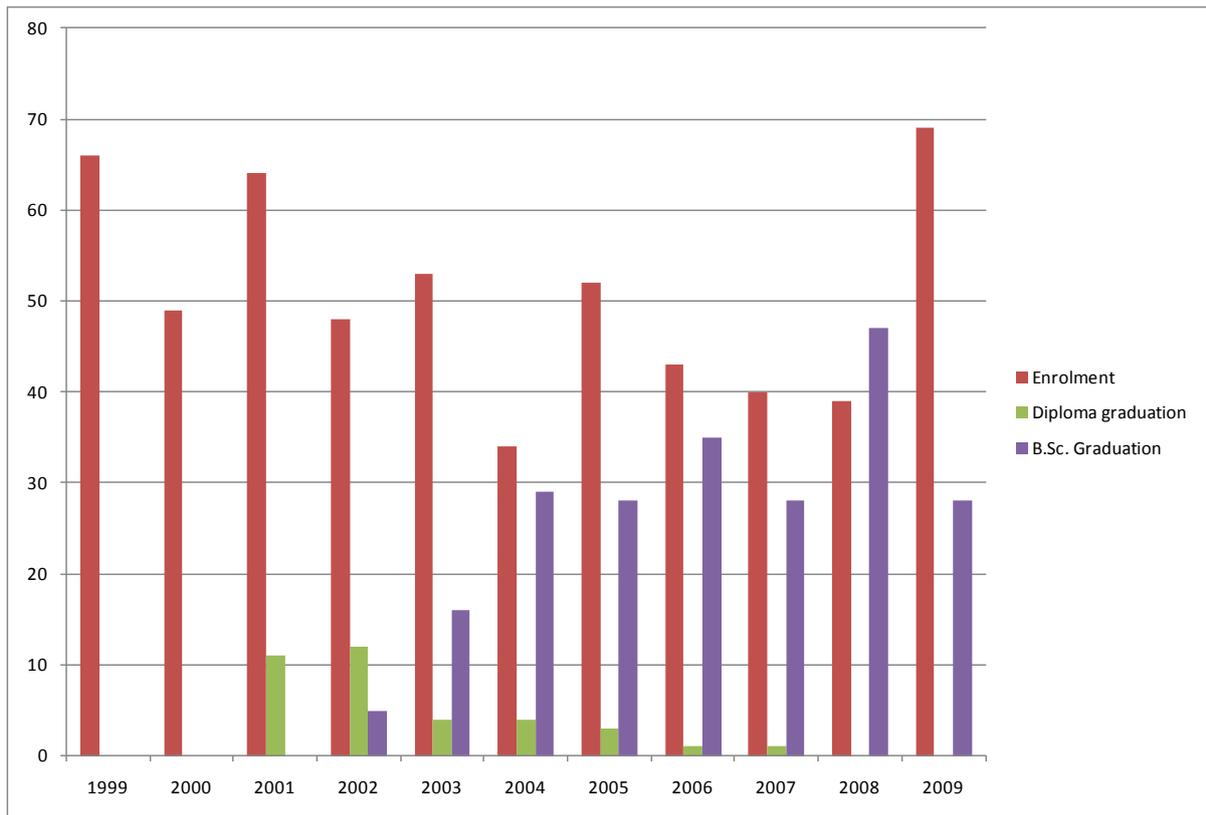


Figure 1: Enrolment and graduation from the tourism programme at the University of Iceland, based on figures in the SER

The comparatively high rates of drop-out may, in part, be a consequence of the fact that apart from the registration fee, there is currently no charge for tuition. But it may also be a consequence of some lack of close attention on the part of the Faculty, School and University to the monitoring of student progression, together with the impact of high student to staff ratios which affords teaching staff little time to undertake such tasks. In discussion with staff it became clear to the panel that there was little in the way of formal monitoring of attendance, or any clear, formal process for counselling students whose attendance and engagement with their studies was poor. Senior managers agreed that the University, as a whole, needed to address the issue of student progression, but it was not clear to the panel that there was a consensus on this issue or that practical steps to address the matter were actually in place.

Students, of course, have a duty to represent themselves in any discussions with the University. The panel was informed that a staff-student committee was in place within the Faculty to enable dialogue between staff and students. The students agreed that this committee served a very useful purpose and generally worked well, although

sometimes no discernable action followed from issues that students had raised. Students are also encouraged to complete course evaluations at the end of each semester and that this was also a useful way for students to comment on their courses of study. The panel endorses the value of formalised processes of this nature.

II.1.f. Facilities and Services Provided to Teachers and Students

The provision of facilities to support staff and students in Tourism Studies is generally good and at a level that would be expected of a degree programme in a modern university. The panel had the opportunity to visit the building in which the Faculty of Life and Environmental Sciences is located. Lecture rooms, laboratory spaces, staff offices and communal areas were all of a very good standard and clearly fit for their intended purposes. Postgraduate students were particularly complimentary about the provision of office space in which to work.

The panel did not have the opportunity to visit the National Library and review the range of books and journals that are available to support Tourism Studies. The undergraduate students were broadly satisfied with the books and journals that are provided, although the need to access an international literature that is generally published in English is sometimes an issue. Increasingly, of course, journals are being made available electronically through on-line access systems, although the panel were advised that the system that is currently used by all Icelandic universities is not particularly well-provided with the major international tourism journals.

The panel recognises the significant cost of accessing major journals but urges the Faculty and the University to consider ways in which access to key tourism journals might be improved. Access to specialist, research journals is an essential requirement for providing support to postgraduate students – whether on taught Masters programmes or undertaking PhD research programmes – as well as to academics undertaking cutting-edge research.

The teaching of tourism generally benefits from the provision of fieldwork opportunities as part of the learning programme. Currently the financial cost of fieldwork is borne by the Faculty and the tighter financial position following the financial crisis has led

naturally to some reduction in the funding for this key element of the curriculum. This is a concern that is clearly signalled in the SER. Students commented that fieldwork was a valued part of their learning but felt that some fieldwork courses were too long. It may be appropriate, therefore, to review the pattern of delivery and the funding of fieldwork, perhaps to include student and/or industry contributions to meet part of the costs.

As is to be expected of a major HEI, across the University as a whole there is a very good level of provision of general services, including IT support and open-access computing laboratories; student counselling; careers advice; student housing services; and a Student Council that plays a key role. The meetings with managers, staff and students identified no areas of concern in relation to these general services.

II.1.g. Internal Quality Management System

The over-arching responsibility for quality management is vested in the hands of the Rector and her University Council. The Council operates a number of sub-committees of which the work of the Quality Committee and the Teaching Committee has most relevance to quality assurance. A designated Division of Academic Affairs exercises a remit relating to teaching issues including teaching evaluations and the professional development of staff with regard to the development of teaching methods.

Although the financial crisis has curtailed some of its ambition, the University of Iceland continues to work towards achieving the objectives set out in its Strategy 2006-11 which contains important provision for the enhancement of quality assurance processes. This includes the adoption of a teaching assessment system; the identification on a Faculty-by-Faculty basis of published teaching objectives; the use of published module specifications with related learning outcomes; and the wider use of student feedback surveys to assess teaching quality.

The University's intranet service UGLA appears to provide an effective on-line platform through which programmes of study, student support systems, distance learning and communications may all be effectively managed. Staff and students confirmed in discussions with the panel that UGLA is a widely used and a very valuable support system.

In the view of the panel, these structures and related processes are broadly in line with good practice elsewhere and discussions with senior managers and Faculty staff did not identify any areas of significant concern.

II.1.h. Description of Learning Outcomes

As a consequence of the Higher Education Institution Act (63/2006), the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture has produced a National Qualifications Framework and a related requirement that universities should produce learning outcomes that demonstrate the expected level of attainment of students as they progress through their programmes of study.

Scrutiny of the published learning outcomes for both the undergraduate and postgraduate awards in tourism at the University of Iceland confirmed that the stated outcomes are broadly aligned with the expectations normally attached to the different levels of learning. There is an appropriate balance of theoretical, practical, knowledge-based, communicative and learning skills in evidence across the programme of study and within the overall structures of the programmes there is an acceptable degree of progression from basic to advanced levels of learning.

However, once again there are some concerns on the part of the panel that the shortage of specialist tourism staff risks some dilution of the focus of the awards on tourism and may affect the overall learning outcomes. Many of the elective modules that are available to students, where the year of study is unspecified, have little, if anything, to do with tourism in the strict sense. Consequently, students who use elective choices in particular ways risk graduating with only a partial understanding of the field of tourism, in comparison to others who make different choices. This problem is compounded by the fact that students reported that they often received insufficient advice from staff on which of the elective modules that are available to them would be the most appropriate modules to study. Students also voiced the opinion that too many of the courses that are offered as part of the Tourism Studies programme are actually geography modules, which make little or no concession to any other specific interests of tourism students.

A key test of the learning outcomes are the views from University of Iceland graduates and from their employers (some of whom are themselves graduates) relating to the overall value of the Tourism Studies degree. The views of graduates were broadly positive and most of the people whom the panel met stated that the course had strengthened their employability within the tourism industry. Former students acknowledged an enhancement in both their theoretical understanding of tourism and their transferable skills – such as literacy, numeracy and communication.

As was noted above, the one major criticism of the degree programme that emerged from both former students and, particularly, the employers and representatives of the industry, was the need to have a stronger focus within the curriculum centred around the business of tourism, beyond the minor elective already offered. The present curriculum offers a sound, general education in the theory and nature of tourism, but the course might be strengthened – and the employability of the graduates enhanced – if more specialist programmes of study (such as is suggested in Section II.1.c above) were to be developed. Such a development would go some way to meeting concerns expressed by employers that there are sometimes mismatches between the skills and competencies offered by graduates from the Tourism Studies programme, and the needs of the industry itself.

II.1.i. Finances

The expert panel was not provided with specific financial information relating to the delivery of the Tourism Studies programme. However, it is clear to the panel that the delivery of Tourism Studies is suffering from a significant level of under-funding, which is most evident in the shortage of staff and the high student to staff ratio that the shortage creates.

In this respect, the panel is concerned that Tourism Studies is suffering from a lack of flexibility in the way in which the University allocates its resources. Senior managers explained to the panel that government funding is assigned to the University on the basis of a classification of subjects into different funding categories. However, managers also explained that it is the policy of the University to fund Faculties in direct proportion to the income that is assigned according to the Ministry's funding model, rather than

treating the income as a consolidated resource to be re-distributed strategically and in relation to the needs of particular areas at any one time. In the absence of such flexibility, it is hard to see how the University can manage change and use its financing as a strategic tool, to develop new areas of provision, such as tourism.

Part III – General Findings and Recommendation

III.1. Summary of Findings

The expert panel is satisfied that the provision of tourism degree programmes at the University of Iceland meets the requirements of such programmes of study, as set down in the relevant legislation of the Ministry, and in the wider expectations of the international academic community.

Within the limited resources that are available to it, the Faculty has produced viable programmes of study – particularly at undergraduate level – that provide a sound basis of understanding of contemporary tourism. The core teaching team, although small in number, are clearly dedicated to the development of the degree programmes and both current and former students report positively on their experiences of studying tourism at the University. The expert panel views this as a sound basis on which to build and has, within the body of this report, made a number of suggestions as to how this process might be advanced, particularly through closer collaboration with other Faculties in the University and with the industry.

However, the expert panel is concerned that the level of staffing is well below that which is required to enable the staff to match the University's aspirations to develop high quality teaching and research in this field. Furthermore, there is evidence that the high work loads that staff currently bear, is having some negative effects on the delivery of the awards, their curriculum, and the related student experience.

Beyond the narrow confines of the awards themselves, the expert panel is satisfied that the general resources to support the Tourism Studies programme are very good. It is satisfied that the structures of governance are appropriate and the supporting infrastructure of facilities, services and buildings are all of a high standard and fit-for-purpose.

However, there is one over-arching issue that the panel wishes to highlight. In its various discussions, the panel detected a fundamental and underlying weakness in the current approach to tourism. The panel was informed by several of the groups that it met that tourism is now widely seen as an activity of growing strategic significance – particularly to the Icelandic economy and the societies that the economy supports. Yet the interest in tourism at governmental levels seems not to have fed through to either

the University (as a key provider of education and training) or, via the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture to RANNIS, (as a key provider of research support) in a consistent and structured fashion. Under the circumstances, it might be expected that the strategic significance of tourism would be reflected in an ability on the part of the University of Iceland to use its funding to invest strategically in its tourism programmes. Moreover, a more co-ordinated approach that involves both the industry and RANNIS in developing programmes of funded, focused research in tourism, would also be evident. However, the panel could find no evidence that these critical linkages were being recognised and pursued in a consistent fashion.

III.2. Recommendations

1. The University of Iceland should address, as a matter of urgency, the staffing levels in Tourism Studies, with a view to increasing the number of Faculty staff whose time is wholly dedicated to supporting the delivery of the tourism programmes. The panel views this as essential to enabling effective engagement by staff in teaching and research; to the enhancement of the student experience; and as underpinning the further development of the awards.
2. The University is encouraged to review, and where appropriate to adapt, its models for funding Schools and Faculties, enabling a more flexible and strategically-focused pattern of funding that will support more effectively the development of emerging areas of study, such as tourism.
3. The University is also encouraged to review and adjust its use of the ECTS credit scheme, with a view to ensuring consistency across the University in the relationship between credits, associated learning time, and academic workload.
4. The University should EITHER review the positioning of Tourism Studies within its School and Faculty structures to try to ensure that the programme is positioned in ways that will maximise its “visibility”, OR the University should explore ways of enabling that level of visibility to be enhanced within the School of Engineering and Natural Sciences. In the latter context, the panel notes that a positive response by the University to recommendations 1 and 2 (above) would help significantly in increasing the

prominence of Tourism Studies within the University's portfolio, without any further need to relocate the programme into a different School or Faculty.

5. The University is recommended to strengthen its processes for monitoring student attendance and progression, (and implementing agreed actions to support students showing poor attendance and/or progression) with a view to increasing graduation rates and reducing the proportion of students who choose to leave the University before completing their programmes of study.

6. The Faculty is recommended to explore the potential for producing a range of named awards in tourism that would combine core material delivered by the Faculty with specific modules delivered by other Faculties. The panel recommends this approach as one way of meeting more directly both the diverse needs of a dynamic industry in flux and the diverse interests of students, whilst also producing more focused award structures that would minimise the potential for students to take elective modules that do not relate clearly to tourism as an area of study.

7. The Faculty is recommended to review the range of elective modules that are offered to students as a means of helping students to develop programmes of study with a sharper focus on tourism.

8. The Faculty is also encouraged to review how it gives advice to students on their choice of elective modules, particularly where modules are offered by other Schools, to ensure those choices are fully informed.

9. The Faculty is recommended to explore ways of strengthening its working links with the tourism industry on an on-going basis (for example, through an employers forum). More regular dialogue would help to ensure that key areas of the curriculum are kept abreast of the developments in the industry, whilst wider use of guest lecturers from an industry background would expose students to a broader range of relevant expertise and experience. Closer links with industry might also open new possibilities for the development of collaborative research programmes.

10. The Faculty, in consultation with the relevant University services, should investigate ways of securing on-line access to a wider range of specialist tourism journals.

11. Finally, the Faculty is recommended to review the role of fieldwork in its study programmes and investigate alternative funding models (such as a student or industry contribution towards costs) that will help to sustain the provision of this important mode of learning.

III.3. Signatures of the Expert Committee

Professor Stephen Williams, Chair (UK)

Professor Godfrey Baldacchino (Canada)

Dr. Edward H. Huijbens (Iceland)

Appendices

Appendix I. Agenda of Site Visit to University of Iceland 5 October 2010

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09:00-09:45 Meeting with the University Authorities

University of Iceland (Rector's Office, Main Building)

Kristín Ingólfssdóttir, Rector, Jón Atli Benediktsson, Vice-Rector of Academic Affairs, Guðmundur R. Jónsson, Director of Finance and Operations, Þórður Kristinsson, Director of Academic Affairs, Halldór Jónsson, Director of Research, Magnús D. Baldursson, Managing Director of the Rector's Office and Head of Quality Administration

10:00-10:45 Meeting with the Self-Evaluation Group

University of Iceland, Háskólatorg, Meeting Room HT-207, Ground floor

Katrín Anna Lund, Associate Professor in Geography and Tourism, Chair of the Self-Evaluation Group, Anna Karlsdóttir, Assistant Professor, Head of Programme in Geography and Tourism, Sigurður S. Snorrason, Professor, Head of the Faculty of Life and Environmental Sciences, Telma Magnúsdóttir, M.Sc. student

11:00-11:45 Meeting with the Authorities of the School of Natural Sciences and the Faculty of Life and Environmental Sciences

University of Iceland, Háskólatorg, Meeting Room HT-207, Ground floor

Kristín Vala Ragnarsdóttir, Professor, Dean of the School of Engineering and Natural Sciences, Karl Benediktsson, Professor, Acting Head of the Faculty of Life and Environmental Sciences, Hreggviður Norðdahl, Research Scholar, Head of the Faculty of Earth Science, Ólafur Pétur Pálsson, Professor, Head of the Faculty of Electrical and Computer Engineering, Rögnvaldur Ólafsson, Associate Professor, Chairman of the Board of the Institute of Regional Research Centres of the University of Iceland, Ingjaldur Hannibalsson, Professor, Head of the Faculty of Economics. Former Chairman of the Board of the Tourism Research Centre

12:00-13:00 Lunch

13:00-13:45 Meeting with Representatives of the Student Body - Undergraduates

University of Iceland, Háskólatorg, Meeting Room HT-207, Ground floor

Nanna Fanney Björnsdóttir (2nd year), Dagný Fjóla Ómarsdóttir (2nd year),
Fanney Kristín Vésteinsdóttir (3rd year), Finnbogi Kristjánsson (3rd year), Íris
Birgisdóttir (3rd year)

13:45-14:30 Meeting with Representatives of Graduates

University of Iceland, Háskólatorg, Meeting Room HT-207, Ground floor

Sigurður Valur Sigurðsson, Marketing Director Iceland Express. Berglind Guðrún
Beinteinsdóttir, Project Manager, School of Engineering and Natural Sciences,
Hera Brá Gunnarsdóttir, M.Sc. in Marketing and International Business, Tómas
Viktor Young, M.Sc. in Marketing and International Business, Björg Rún
Óskarsdóttir, Tourist Information, Visit Reykjavík

14:30-15:15 Meeting with Representatives of the Student Body - Postgraduates

University of Iceland, Háskólatorg, Meeting Room HT-207, Ground floor

Martin Nooza (Ph.D. student), Gísli Sveinn Loftsson (Ph.D. student), Íris Hrunn
Halldórsdóttir (M.Sc. student), Berglind Rúnarsdóttir (M.Sc. student)

15:15-16:30 Meeting with External Stakeholders

University of Iceland, Háskólatorg, Meeting Room HT-207, Ground floor

Dóra Magnúsdóttir, Marketing director, Visit Reykjavík, Árni Gunnarsson, Chair
of Board for Icelandic Travel Industry Association, Director of Air Iceland, Ýr
Káradóttir, Sails Manager at Iceland Travel, Cruise ships, Sunna Þórðardóttir,
Project Manager, Icelandic Tourist Board

16:30-17:00 Examination of Facilities

Askja, Háskólatorg

Appendix II. Documents Received

From Rannis:

Act no. 85/2008 on Public Higher Education Institutions (Draft Translation 2008).

Rules on Quality Control of Teaching and Research in Higher Education Institutions No. 3212009.

From UI:

Tourism Studies at the University of Iceland. Evaluation of teaching and study Self-evaluation report. January 2010.

Additional data requested by the Expert Panel (October 2010).