

# Follow-up Report

University of Iceland  
*(Former) Faculty of Humanities*

Expert Committee Report

June 2010

Ministry of Education, Science and Culture in Iceland  
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## **1. Introduction**

This is a follow-up evaluation of the implementation of the 2005-2006 External Peer Review Group (EPRG) final report concerning the quality of teaching and organization at the (then) Faculty of Humanities, University of Iceland. The follow-up evaluation was conducted by two members of the original EPRG, Fred Karlsson (professor of general linguistics, University of Helsinki) and Sigrún Svavarsdóttir (associate professor of philosophy, Ohio State University). Magnús Lyngdal Magnússon, Head of Research and Deputy Director at RANNIS, acted as a secretary for the group.

For the purpose of this follow-up, the Rector of the University of Iceland appointed a five-member self-evaluation group (SEG) under the chairmanship of professor Höskuldur Þráinsson. The group has submitted a 40-page report titled Follow-up of Review Of Faculty of Humanities, University of Iceland, 2005-2006. Internal Review Group Self-evaluation Report, Reykjavik, 3 February 2010, henceforth referred to as Self-evaluation Report. This is our basic material, on top of the text originally submitted by the 2005-2006 EPRG.

May it be stated at the outset that the Self-evaluation Report is an impressive document, bearing witness of penetrating analysis of the original suggestions and remarks made by the EPRG in 2006, as well as of a profound commitment to improving both curriculum, teaching and study on all levels (BA, MA, PhD). We find it particularly commendable that large bodies of faculty as well as student representatives have been involved in these developments. This is a remarkable improvement since the 2005-2006 External Peer Review. Sustainable academic change only comes about when the grass-root level takes a positive attitude and is directly involved. What counts are the real practices in class, libraries etc., not the amounts of administrative documents or statements by responsible (academic or administrative) leaders. It should always be borne in mind that real change in academia is a slow process. Five years, as now is the case, might be regarded as the minimum time check-point. The ultimate impact of the measures taken is clearly visible only after 10-15 years.

The conditions during the past five years at the (former) Faculty of Humanities have been challenging, to say the least, for two obvious reasons: the administrative

transformation into a School of Humanities, effective July 1, 2008, and the fiscal and political problems faced by the whole Icelandic nation since the fall of 2008.

Terminologically, we are henceforth talking about the Faculty of Humanities (FH) despite its evolutionary change in 2008.

The final version of the report was sent to University of Iceland for a check of factual errors and misinterpretations on 1 June 2010. The university replied on 10 June 2010 not making any formal comments.

## **2. Implementation of the EPRG proposals to the FH**

Despite the challenges of the overall situation, several measures of implementation of the EPRG proposals have been taken. In its report SEG evaluates the extent to which the main recommendations of EPRG have been implemented. Below are our comments on these implementations as summarized and evaluated by SEG.

**2.1** First and foremost, EPRG called for FH to be more explicit in its objectives and policy formulation.

Attention was paid to this issue in the policy development initiative in FH in 2006, and it was also a part of the University of Iceland's policy decisions at that time (Stefna Hugvísindadeildar Háskóla Íslands 2006–2011). This policy statement was approved at a faculty forum of FH in May 2006. Its influence is also seen in the mission statement which the new School of Humanities approved in 2009 (Hugvísindasvið: Staða og stefnumál 2009-2013).

This is a thoughtful document that takes stock of the current state of the School of Humanities, records recent improvements in the conditions for study and research at the School, lays out a vision for the School, and states specific projects to be undertaken in the coming years. The objectives stated are considerably more specific than those which the EPRG could discern from the 2005 self-evaluation report.

**2.2** Second, EPRG called for FH to form a long-term and well articulated policy regarding new subjects or programmes of study. Furthermore, it suggested that, given

limited financial resources, attention be paid not only to expansion but, also, to retrenchment and build-up of existing areas of excellence. Areas of excellence as well as unsustainable areas had to be identified and clear priorities set. Post-graduation employability should, to some extent, be taken into consideration in developing new programmes.

Given the financial reality of the past two years it comes as no surprise that the possibilities of expansion have been meager. Still we must point out the negative consequences of the principle that contracts between the University of Iceland and the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture make no allowances for specially earmarked funding for initiating new projects. This will hamper innovative curriculum development once times change for the better. Moreover, we second SEG's assessment that it is deplorable that the development of new programmes is largely controlled by which projects are lucky enough to find funding within or outside the University. This undermines the ability of FH to implement the EPRG recommendation that it form a long-term and well articulated policy regarding new subjects.

SEG observes that “[d]ue to the current economic situation most faculties are battling with keeping their current programmes going and reducing the effect of financial cuts as best as they can, and the general atmosphere hardly encourages the making of long-term plans for expansion”. We would like to emphasize that even during such difficult times, it is important that the School of Humanities collectively set and articulate its priorities. Areas of excellence as well as unsustainable areas need to be identified, the former protected, if not built up, and the latter sacrificed. Desirable areas of expansion need to be identified for development once times change for the better.

**2.3** EPRG called for FH to strengthen its mechanisms for quality assurance and had various specific suggestions regarding this matter.

Importantly, a first step forward has been taken in regard to elucidating the requirements for individual courses by defining the learning outcomes for courses and programs, in the direction of the objectives of the Bologna process. This is important knowledge not only for the students but also for FH in view of the possible future rapprochement of Iceland and the European Union.

A number of other steps have been taken to improve quality assurance at FH. A pedagogical committee is working on an assessment of course requirements and course evaluations within FH with the ultimate aim of setting standardized rules for the entire faculty. It is also developing a standard reference scheme to improve consistency in grading, which will hopefully help to stem grade inflation. Clear guidelines regarding reference work and academic integrity have been posted on the website of the new School of Humanities. The EPRG's concern about a weak administrative structure for quality assurance has been addressed by establishing the positions of a director of pedagogy, a graduate project director, and (anticipated) a director of research. Various improvements have been made on the student evaluation system and we are particularly pleased to note that in this context FH has heeded EPRG's recommendation that dissemination of good-practices be improved within the faculty.

We would like to take the opportunity to reiterate the EPRG recommendation that monitoring of the quality of instruction be not only based on student-evaluations. For example, a system of peer reviews and self-evaluation reports on teaching should be explored. A record of placement of graduates should also be compiled and used as a quality indicator.

In sum, although there is still room for improvement, we are overall impressed by the steps that have been taken towards strengthening quality assurance.

**2.4** Five years ago the EPR group was struck by the loose degree of adjunction of sessional teachers to FH. Closer bonds were found to be vitally important, especially in a small university in a small country where it simply is impossible to establish full academic subjects (not to mention departments) in many important fields. This need is even more acute in the present economic situation.

We are now happy to take notice that this problem has been seriously addressed – which does not mean that it has been conclusively solved. Especially important are the working premises that now are offered to sessional teachers, the general guidelines set up on the internet, and the (admittedly small) pay raise. More remains to be done, especially as concerns the pay, including financial compensation for attending teaching workshops. We would, also, like to express our support for sessional teachers' call for improved flow of information (e.g., a databank containing past syllabi and teaching

material) as well as more organized guidance (e.g., supervision by a tenured faculty member).

**2.5** One of the recommendations of EPRG was that FH pay increased attention to the relation between levels, credits, and grades both within BA programmes and MA programmes. In this context, serious concerns were raised about the connection between instruction at the BA and the MA levels because, five years ago, it was a common practice that MA students took BA level courses for ‘discounted credits’ (3 MA credits were awarded for a 5 credit BA course). The EPRG pointed out that level of study should not be directly related to the quantity of work expected (measured in credit for a course) but rather to the academic demand placed on students.

There is no evidence in the SEG report that attention has been paid to the relation between levels, credits, and grades within BA programs or within MA programs, but the serious concern about the linkage between undergraduate and graduate levels has been well addressed, given financial constraints. We applaud the development of rigorous intermediate level courses, open only to advanced BA students and MA students, though each such course is officially designated as either an undergraduate or a graduate level course. When these courses are offered at the undergraduate level and extra work is required for MA students, we urge that emphasis be placed not on increased quantity of work but, rather, on higher academic level of work. The opportunity for ambitious undergraduates to receive a permission to attend such courses, when offered at the graduate level, is an important step towards maintaining the strength of the BA programmes in spite of pressure to provide mass education, given the open enrollment policies of the University.

At the same time, we lament that there is still an insufficient number of distinct graduate seminars in many programmes of studies and we are disturbed by the SEG’s admission that increased emphasis on doctoral studies has come at the cost of MA programmes. We address this concern further in 2.11 below.

**2.6** The EPR group made some quite emphatic statements to the effect that the requirements for and the implementation of the BA thesis be made more transparent and level appropriate.



Some headway has been made in the intervening five years. We welcome in particular that norms for the BA theses have been posted on the School of Humanities web site, that the expected length is now explicitly stated, and that meetings are being held in various subjects to explain the BA thesis requirement. Nevertheless, we must state our overall impression that the measures taken have not been of the magnitude nor of the quality intended. Our conviction is that a properly working system for BA theses should involve an obligatory (pro)seminar where the instructor makes clear the expectations, and all participants contribute intermediate versions of their evolving text, getting appropriate feedback during the writing process. Certainly, as hinted at in the self-evaluation report, neither the EPR group (nor we now) would propose that the BA thesis be abolished. It should just be clear to everybody that one cannot expect true scholarly results to be achieved in BA theses, nor even systematic full-scale mastery of advanced methods. The BA level is introductory. As EPRG noted, the BA thesis should not be envisaged as more demanding than a research project that would be done for a single course/seminar at the first graduate level.

**2.7** EPRG recommended that channels of communication within FH be improved and good practices in one unit emulated by other units.

We are pleased to learn that improved facilities and administrative structures have facilitated cooperation and collaboration within the various units of the new School of Humanities. Internet resources have, also, been used in an effective way to enhance internal as well as external relations. Moreover, while reading other parts of the report, we noted two examples of improved communication: (1) In the section on quality assessment, it is noted that a pilot study conducted within the Faculty of History and Philosophy is being emulated in other faculties. (2) In the section on administration and support services, it is noted that a new pedagogical committee is an important venue for comparing experiences.

**2.8** Five years ago it was apparent that a lack of administrative support and proper facilities was putting undue burden on faculty and students. The EPRG report noted that the inadequate administrative assistance weakened the ability of the Dean to serve as an effective leader. It expressed concern with the lack of space for administrative centers as well as space for students to gather and exchange views. Study spaces and

library resources were seriously inadequate. The language laboratory did not provide sufficient services for some language students.

Impressive steps have been taken to address most of these problems, though serious concerns remain about library resources and the SEG makes no mention of the state of the language laboratory. Administrative staff has been increased, creating better working conditions for both the Dean of the School of Humanities and the Heads of Faculties. A new support service office provides valuable office assistance not previously available to FH. Office facilities for administrative as well as teaching staff have already been improved and are expected to continue to improve. Doctoral students have been secured a work space and steps have been taken to significantly increase the work space allotted to MA students. The space available to BA students for study as well as informal exchanges has, also, been radically improved.

Good physical facilities are important insofar as they provide settings that promote education and research, but good library resources are absolutely essential for quality work in the humanities. We remain gravely concerned about the lack of range of academic texts available in the library as well as the limited number of individual texts. Five years ago, EPRG reported that there were examples that this lack of library resources had delayed work e.g. on BA theses. There is no evidence in the SEG report that adequate steps have been taken to fix this serious problem. We reiterate the EPRG's assessment that this is an unacceptable state of affairs. Moreover, whereas we are pleased to learn that doctoral students can partly overcome this hindrance to research by having inter-library loan fees waved, we are concerned that BA- and MA-students do not enjoy the same privilege. We regret that this problem with access to adequate library resources was not fixed during times of prosperity. Although we realize that it is difficult to address this problem during hard economic times, we urge that this project be at least prioritized.

**2.9** EPRG recommended increased cooperation with the Continuing Education Institute because it was concerned that the extant financial model, which bases funding on the number of students completing exams at a Faculty, may be creating financial incentives to keep, within the Faculty of Humanities, programmes that do not conform very well

with the University's aspiration to be a research university and might even better belong within the Institute for Continuing Education.

Given this, we are a bit concerned that the Language Center with its emphasis on “short practical language courses” has been placed within the School of Humanities rather than within the Continuing Education Institute. Like the EPR group, we worry that the financial model is giving incentives that are not supportive of aspirations befitting a research university.

**2.10** EPRG was in a limited position to assess the quality of research conducted at FH and was perturbed by the complete absence, in the 2005 self-evaluation report, of quality indicators for publications. Having made this caveat, it noted that research activity at FH seemed to be of respectable level. EPRG was particularly impressed by Faculty members' participation in international collaboration on research, often involving students, and encouraged FH to continue this effort as well as exchanges of students and scholars with foreign universities.

We are pleased to see that international collaboration on research, as well as exchanges with foreign universities, continues to flourish at the School of Humanities. The SEG report notes some impressive new collaboration projects which indicate that good research is conducted at the School, although other quality indicators, such as publishing venues, are still missing.

The Centre for Research has reportedly gained strength and is providing important research support, ranging from providing work spaces for graduate students and visiting scholars to assisting faculty members with grant applications as well as organization of conferences, academic meetings, and workshops. The Centre now has some funds for supplementing outside grants, providing start-up grants for new scholars at the School of Humanities, and supporting publications, conferences, etc. We urge that, during the current economic difficulties, priority be placed on safeguarding this improvement in conditions for research. It would be short-sighted to cut relatively small funds earmarked for a Centre which helps to generate outside funding for research.

**2.11** EPRG took as given the University's policy of offering “increasingly more advanced-level programmes” and the correlative Faculty's policy of placing special

emphasis on promoting graduate studies. While applauding the general sentiment among Faculty members that a priority be given to strengthening MA programmes, EPRG raised concerns about the implementation of University and Faculty policies on promoting graduate studies. It suggested that more analysis and reflection (for example regarding resource requirements) take place concerning the build-up of the MA level and that admission requirements for MA programmes needed to be reconsidered and clear objectives set regarding the FH's ambition regarding the quality of the MA programmes. Repeatedly, in commenting on the proliferation of areas of studies, EPRG expressed the worry that resources were being spread too thin.

In light of this, we are surprised to learn from the SEG report that in the intervening five years emphasis has been placed on building up doctoral programmes rather than the MA programmes. During the EPRG visit in the fall of 2005, there was little mention of the doctoral programmes and they are not discussed in the EPRG report aside from the remark that, at the time of the review, there were doctoral students in the fields of Icelandic Literature, in Icelandic Language, in History, including Archaeology, and in Comparative Literature. The tables in the appendix to the SEG report reveal that the number of doctoral students in the School of Humanities has grown over 85% in four years: up from a total of 28 in October 2006 to a total of 52 this year. English and Philosophy now have doctoral students (5 and 6, respectively) in addition to the fields listed in the EPRG report.<sup>1</sup> During the last four years the MA programmes have, also, grown in size. The total number of MA students has increased over 14%: up from 285 in October 2006 to 326 in 2009.

This large increase in the number of graduate students at the School of Humanities is of great concern given that, due to financial restrictions, an insufficient number of distinct MA-courses is on offer (SEG, p. 11 and 19); an increased emphasis on doctoral studies has resulted in neglect of the MA programmes (SEG, p. 11); library resources continue to be weak and MA-students do not have free access to the interlibrary loan system (SEG, p. 19); only a limited number of study grants is available to graduate students (SEG, p. 18) and funding for teaching assistants is still weak (SEG, p. 19); the basic

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<sup>1</sup> There is a discrepancy between the numbers given on p. 17 of the SEG report and the numbers in the appendix. We assume that the tables in the appendix provide the correct data, although the tables are, also, confusing given a discrepancy between the 'new student' and 'old student' columns.

design of doctoral programmes within the School of Humanities is not uniform and still in flux (SEG, p. 21); completion rates are low (SEG, p. 17-18 and appendix).

We are deeply concerned about these developments. It is seriously misguided to radically increase the number of MA and doctoral students without adequate resources for building up the infrastructure needed to serve these students and strengthen research at the School of Humanities. Large but weak graduate programmes will not strengthen the research profile of the University but, rather, place undue strain on the limited financial and faculty resources at the School of Humanities with subsequent threat to its research and educational stature. We wonder about the source of the pressures to increase the size of the graduate programmes. The SEG report suggests that some pressure comes from the “growing demands from society for further education beyond completing a BA-degree” (p. 18) and some from the University’s policies (p. 17). We speculate that, in addition, some pressure comes from ambitious faculty members, who would like to have highly motivated, mature, and research oriented students. Rather than caving into such external and internal pressures, the School of Humanities needs to make difficult decisions regarding the graduate programmes. Quality rather than quantity/size should be emphasized.

Non-vocational academic graduate programmes should be offered only in fields in which faculty members have established a strong record of research (as measured not only in quantity of publications but, also, by quality indicators such as the publishing venue) and the graduate programmes should be kept small with high standards of admission into the programmes as well as high standards of performance within the programmes. Because the MA programmes feed into the doctoral programmes, the strengthening of MA programmes should be prioritized over expansion of doctoral studies. And since the BA programmes feed into the MA programmes, preserving the strength of the BA programmes should be prioritized over the expansion of MA programmes. (For example, resources need to be committed to safeguard small class sizes at the BA level.) Given the context of a small national university in a small country, it makes most sense to build the strength of the School of Humanities from the bottom. We reiterate the recommendation of EPRG that more analysis and reflection (for example regarding resource requirements) take place concerning the build-up of the MA level and, we now add, the doctoral level. We also reiterate the recommendation of

EPRG that attention be paid to retrenchment and consolidation as well as innovation and expansion.

### **3. Implementation of the EPRG proposals to the University of Iceland and the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture**

EPRG formulated a handful of proposals directed at the administration of the University of Iceland and the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. For the purpose of our current task it had been beneficial to have some commentaries directly from these authorities. In the absence of such original material, SEG has attempted to review the effects of the EPRG proposals on recent university- and ministry-level policies. This is what we have as underlying data for the ensuing comments.

As for the university, our review above provides ample evidence that many of the original proposals have been taken seriously. The position of humanities within UI has been consolidated and is clearly visible within the organizational structure. There are concrete plans for reinforcing the requisite humanistic infrastructure by erecting a new Icelandic Studies building. Such an integrational step would be extremely valuable, not least as a symbol of the vitality of Icelandic culture in times both good and bad.

The principle of unlimited student access remains moot, both at university-, ministry- and the highest political level. This is the law of the land and we certainly understand the societal motivation behind the university's decision to admit an additional unlimited cohort of new students in the middle of the academic year 2008-2009. This influx is clearly seen in the statistics appendix to SEG's report. To pick an extreme example, the total number of students enrolled in undergraduate studies in the Faculty of Icelandic and Comparative Cultures was 262 in the fall of 2008 but 418 a year later, a baffling annual growth of +62%. It goes without saying (and was said in the EPRG report) that inevitably drop-out rates will grow and general study conditions (personal contacts with teachers, access to libraries and computers etc) deteriorate. This runs counter to the very purpose of simultaneous quality assurance efforts.

The EPRG proposals to develop faculty- and department-level administration have been implemented and especially the position of the heads of faculty has been strengthened.

We welcome these changes and hope that, save for minor adjustments, sufficient time is now given for the new structures to mature. Too frequent organizational changes are of course detrimental for the quality and success of teaching and research.

The ministry was urged by EPRG to oversee the principles of the system of university funding, especially concerning the incentives for choosing between various basic activities and future lines of development. The current system encourages formation of study programs attracting large numbers of students. We have not observed any obvious positive developments in this regard.

Proper attention has been paid to institutionalizing quality assurance and making it an integral part of all central activities, especially in the domain of teaching. This surely is important. On the other hand one should beware of overdoing it, making it a burden for those involved. We note that the task of assessing the quality of research has been left somewhat diffuse, both in the task formulation for EPRG five years ago, and for our present task. Especially the connection between research and teaching is an important matter that would require clearer illumination than presently is at hand.

#### **4. Enrollment and flowthrough**

The statistics in section 5 (the appendix) of the Self-evaluation Report show some distressing developments over time. We already commented on the rapidly growing number of students, especially undergraduates, and some of its consequences. On the other hand, the numbers of students graduating alarmingly go down in several subjects. E.g., in the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Literature and Linguistics, the yearly sequence of graduation numbers since 2006 is 103 – 69 – 80 – 65. The same sequence in German, Nordic and Asian Languages is 33 – 19 – 22 – 10. Such figures would certainly have called for analysis by SEG but we fail to find any such discussion. The overall conclusion is that many undergraduates study far longer than a stream-lined Bologna model BA curriculum would presuppose. Drop-out rates are not reported but they can be surmised to be high.

The influx of new MA and PhD students must be counted by guesswork and hand as the leftmost columns “new students” in almost all tables starting on page 30 contain plain zeroes in the cells for MA and PhD even if the column “old students” often grows from year to year. The impression is chaotic. For example, the Faculty of Icelandic and Comparative Cultural Studies reports the presence of 15 “old” PhD candidates in 2008, but no less than 25 in 2009. Such a leap certainly raises questions. Were all these newcomers sufficiently motivated and qualified? Will they get appropriate guidance? Are there clear curricula for PhD course work? Will the candidates find jobs after the defense of their PhD theses?



## **Central recommendations**

- Expansion (new subjects, new levels) should not come at the cost of existing strengths; retrenchment and consolidation is needed as much as innovation and expansion; clear priorities need to be set.
- Quality should always trump quantity when developing MA and doctoral programmes; there should be high standards of admission into, and of performance within, MA and doctoral programmes; more MA courses are still needed.
- Priority should be given to building library resources and free access to interlibrary loans for all students engaged in major research projects and thesis work.
- Small class sizes at the BA level should be safeguarded.
- Proseminars are recommended for students writing BA theses.
- Quality assurance of teaching should not be solely based on student evaluations.
- Reasons for drop-out and decreasing flowthrough should be analyzed on the basis of properly kept cumulative statistics.

## **Appendix: List of documents received**

*Follow-up of Review of Faculty of Humanities, University of Iceland 2005–2006. Internal Review Group. Self-evaluation Report, School of Humanities, University of Iceland. Reykjavík, 3 February 2010.*

*External Peer Review Group: Final Report. Faculty of Humanities, University of Iceland. Reykjavik, January, 2006.*