

# Follow-up Report

University of Akureyri

Expert Committee Report

April 2010

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

### **1.1 The Expert Committee**

- Dr. Christian Thune, Past Executive Director of the Danish Evaluation Institute, Denmark (Chair)
- Dr. Frank Quinault, formerly, Director of Learning and Teaching Quality, University of St. Andrews, Scotland
- Dr. Rita McAllister, formerly, Vice-Principal of the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama.
  
- M.A. Magnús Lyngdal Magnússon, Head of Research and Deputy Director, The Icelandic Centre for Research – RANNIS, Reykjavik, Iceland (Liaison Officer).

### **1.2 Terms of Reference**

The Expert Committee 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 Committee received a *Natural Resources and Agriculture, Social Science and Health Sciences – Accreditation Follow-up Self-assessment Report* and further documentation

on 25 January 2010 by email. Two members of the Committee – Drs. Christian Thune (Chair) and Frank Quinault –met on 15 February, for a first discussion about the exercises. Due to illness Dr. Rita McAllister was unable to travel but she corresponded with other members by phone and e-mail.

The Expert Committee made a site visit to University of Akureyri (hence referred to as UNAK) 17 February during which it had the opportunity to discuss with management, faculty, students and external representatives and look at facilities (see agenda in Appendix 1). The Expert Committee then discussed among itself and wrote the first draft of observations during a meeting on 18 February. Interim conclusions were then communicated at a meeting with representatives from the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture on 18 February.

Further versions of the report were then drafted after the Iceland visit and circulated amongst Committee members by email correspondence.

The descriptive parts of the final version were sent to UNAK for a check of factual errors and misinterpretations on 15 March 2010. The Committee received some factual corrections on 26 March 2010 and revised the report accordingly. However, the Committee received also a seven page document on “Comments and explanations from UNAK on the EC report”.

This document contains a large amount of supplementary or even new argumentation and documentation. The Expert Committee has done its best in a revised report to comment on these new points, but still wishes to stress that the follow up process would have benefited if these points had already been included in the UNAK SAR or brought up by UNAK participants in the site visit sessions.

#### **1.4 Short evaluation of the work process**

The Expert Committee had initially not been informed that the follow up review of UNAK would not only involve the accreditation report on social sciences, but also the reports on

natural sciences and health sciences in which the present Expert Committee members had not had any involvement. However, the Committee did not find it problematic to understand the nature of the recommendations in all three reports and evaluate the UNAK follow up.

The Expert Committee received the UNAK self assessment report (SAR) 26 January, well beyond the deadline of 15 January. Further documents arrived up until the last home working day of the Committee before departure for Iceland.

The self assessment report (SAR) has been drafted by a self-assessment committee appointed by the new Rector from summer 2009, Dr Stefán B. Sigurðsson. Members were the Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dr Sigurður Kristinsson, the Dean of the School of Health Sciences, Dr Árun Sigurðardóttir, the Dean of the School of Business and Science, Dr Hans Kristján Guðmundsson and the Director of Quality Management, Sigrún Magnúsdóttir. UNAK's records manager, Ingveldur Tryggvadóttir, assisted the committee.

The report is well organised and covers all the recommendations in the three 2008 accreditation reports, but it is obvious that the work process has been perceived as difficult, because of the clear differences between the three reports in terms of focus and priorities. The three different reports offer recommendations, some of which overlap and relate to similar issues often with regard to the University as a whole.

The SAR would have benefited from an overview on the process of follow up on the accreditation report. Who were involved at what organisational levels? Were staff and students in general involved and how? What priorities were set in the work and was there a selective element towards the recommendations in the three reports?

During the site visit the Expert Committee had open and frank discussions with the new Rector, university and faculty leadership and representatives of staff and students. However, the Expert Committee's impression was during the site-visit that basic familiarity with the content of the self assessment report is confined to university and faculty

leadership even if the report had in principle been subject to broader dissemination and discussion in the university.

The Expert Committee was given excellent and professional assistance from the Rannis Head of Research and Deputy Director Magnus Lyngdal Magnusson in setting up and conducting the visit and most recently during the finalization of this report.

#### *General comments*

The SAR makes it clear that even though it is only two years since UNAK's accreditation a number of changes have taken place. A new *Act on Public Higher Education Institutions No. 85/2008* was passed and following that the new *Regulations for the University of Akureyri No. 387/2009*. This brought with it changes to the organizational structure of UNAK as the four Faculties were organized into three Schools. The former faculties were Law and Social Science, Faculty of Business and Science, Faculty of Education and Faculty of Health Sciences.

It was stressed during the site visit that the reorganisation was considered a follow up on legal obligations. There were therefore no clear-cut answers to the Expert Committee's questions on the rationale for the new organisational structure and the expected value-added. Still the reorganisation constitutes a major change. Some of the authority of the Rector has been passed down to the Schools and faculties. And compared to the University of Iceland (UI) some of the schools and faculties are now bigger than similar units at UI. Deans are part of the administration now, not only part of the teaching staff.

It is important to note that at the time of accreditation UNAK had recently (December 2007) signed a contract with the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture on teaching and research. The contract was based on UNAK's strategy 2007-2011 and was a plan of action for the University to realize the strategy and a promise from the Ministry to provide the financial means required to do so. Following the contract UNAK was able to write a three-year budgetary plan and an articulated plan of action for teaching and research. In December 2008, following Iceland's economic crisis, the contract was annulled. The SAR tells its readers that this annulment needs to be kept in mind when reading the document



as reference to its effects is made in numerous places. The Expert Committee can only confirm that this is indeed and not surprisingly the case.

During the site visit sessions the prevalent theme was the current economic situation and the Expert Committee would note that in general terms UNAK follow up on the Accreditation Report had been decisively influenced by the impact of the economic crisis and the resulting budget cuts.

The self assessment report has thus very frequent references to the economic situation and resulting budget costs. According to the self assessment report “work on policy and strategy at UNAK has since Autumn 2008 been dominated by the need to react to the massive cuts in funding that followed the economic crisis that started in September-October 2008”. It is, however, not completely clear how UNAK’s reaction can be presented in terms of redefining goals and priorities. Have all areas and activities been subjected to the same level of budget reductions or has there been a process of identification of core areas that should not suffer from budget cuts and of other areas that could to some extent be sacrificed?

Accordingly the Expert Committee cannot on the basis of the SAR and the visit find fully substantiated the assertion of the SAR that UNAK has been able to follow most of the Expert Committees’ recommendations and that others are in process. A significant number of initiatives and proposals for follow up on recommendations in the three accreditation reports are listed that have not been implemented and lack of resources is as a rule provided as the explanation.

The present Rector has had less than a full year in this position. The Rector stressed during the site visit that he came into the picture rather late and had to make a seven per cent cut at that time. He realised that there were many issues to cover from the last reports but the budget cuts were a priority and affected everything. The Rector started his process by having meetings with all the schools within UNAK and asked for ideas for ways to cut the budget. The staff union collaborated and in September a proposal for a budget cut was ready, based on an input from the staff (incl. postponement of sabbaticals, slashing courses, merging courses), and in total the cut was around 100 MISK. The Expert Committee finds it

noteworthy that the group of professors, who constitute around 10% of the staff, have not joined the effort and are not yet a part of the budget cut. According to the Rector this is because they cannot support the postponement of the sabbaticals.

In this context the Expert Committee found very encouraging the statement of the Rector that the reaction to the next cut in 2010 will not be a repetition of cutting salaries, sabbaticals etc., but instead to go through and prioritize what UNAK is offering.

The University leadership demonstrated thus a serious and committed attitude towards the present challenges confronting UNAK. Still the Expert Committee is surprised that the leadership's reaction to the new economic situation has evidently not yet led to any clear considerations of corresponding new priorities. It is not completely satisfactory that follow up on any resource demanding recommendations seem to have been brought to a halt if at all initiated. One major reason for this situation is the lack of a clear strategy on key priorities that must be upheld or furthered at the cost of other elements that must suffer reductions. But of course it is evident that one key priority is in place, which is upholding the staff at the cost of a hiring freeze, postponement of sabbaticals and other staff related instruments.

## **2. Role and objectives**

### **2.1 Field of National Resources and Agriculture**

The 2008 Accreditation Report did not provide any specific recommendations under this heading, but concluded that institutional roles and objectives could be more clearly articulated, that academic staff are aware of the need to specialise and focus with the goal of creating critical mass in research and that it is clear that the objective is to improve the quality of education and make students aware of the research findings and their applied use in the local community.

UNAK responds to the point on institutional objectives that the University Council has passed specific regulations for the School of Business and Science containing clear objectives and roles for the School and its two Faculties. The SAR states that during 2008 and 2009 the School has gone through a strategy-defining process, which is still ongoing, focussing on excellence in education and research, enhancing transparency of processes, clarifying responsibility and cooperation nationally and internationally. During the session with the dean and members of the School of Business and Science the Committee was told that the strategy committee had been set up to identify the strength areas and with the aim of discussing what to keep and what to throw out. However, the strategy committee was not operational due to work on the budget cuts.

It is evident from the SAR and the session with the School that there is full awareness of the recommendations and the Expert Committee takes note that there is now a growing collaboration with UI so that UNAK students can take courses there. There is also a focus on cutting lines, for instance computer science.

The Expert Committee acknowledges the ongoing process to consider adequate reactions to the budget cuts, but this process has not been presented in explicit strategic terms, either in the SAR or in discussions during the site visit. The Expert Committee's impression is therefore that the strategy process is not moving forward at the moment when immediate reactions to the budget cuts are in the forefront. The implication is that there has been a corresponding halt in the consideration of priorities following from the 2007 SAR.

## **2.2 Field of Social Science**

The Accreditation Report recommended that UNAK considers carefully whether the strategic process should include priorities or phases, where one or two objectives are given a high priority, and further that UNAK would benefit from profiling in strategic terms even more the challenges of the regional role and of the size of the University.

The Report pointed out that UNAK has several important focal points for its strategies, reflecting the agreement with the Ministry and ranging from internationalisation to increased priority on research. However, for a small University with limited resources and a certain lack of critical mass it could prove difficult to advance over such a relatively broad front as is outlined in the strategies.

At the time of the 2008 report the Faculty of Social Sciences was in fact two faculties which were merged later in 2008 into the School of Humanities and Social Sciences with positive results. Still, the 2008 recommendation was a positive platform for the new faculty. The motivation for the structural change was mainly for a legal reason. The value added issues were therefore secondary.

The panel was told during its meeting with the dean and staff that the overall reaction to the comments in the 2008 report was positive, although the recommendations were more directed at the university itself, rather than the Faculty of Social Science. But the crash in 2008 has changed all priorities.

Accordingly the SAR response is that the formal strategy documents for the University and its faculties (for 2007-2011) have not yet been altered, because work on policy and strategy at UNAK has since autumn 2008 understandably been dominated by the need to react to the massive cuts in funding that followed the economic crisis.

Thus it follows from the discussions with the School during the site visit that a budget cutting committee formed by the new Rector is making suggestions about how costs can be reduced. This includes teaching bigger numbers of students together. Further the concern that too many courses are taught has led to the decision to better focus the curriculum and now offer two study programmes instead of four in Business Administration. Also the two Masters' programmes in Business Administration were combined into one. It must be added here that the Faculty of Business Administration is now part of the School of Business and Science, but in these discussions the Faculty of Business Administration was included as it was accredited under the Field of Social Sciences.

The undergraduate line related to Tourism has been abandoned. Simultaneously a new programme at Masters' level has been developed in cooperation with UI and Hólar University. This programme will lead to an administrative Masters degree, Master of Tourism Administration, with possibilities to extend the study into an MSc degree. The programme will be coordinated from UNAK. Plans to start this programme in the autumn of 2010 have been put on hold, however.

The new School of Humanities and Social Sciences plans further to work on formal strategies in 2010 and to profile in strategic terms among other issues the challenges of the regional role. The size of the University will be an important consideration for that work. The Expert Committee must note, however, that no substantial follow up is yet evident.

#### *Exchange of students*

The Accreditation Report noted that the level of international exchange and project sharing at staff level was satisfactory, but that the exchange rate for students stands very low. UNAK was therefore recommended to increase the number of students on international exchange programmes.

The SAR responds that the crash of 2008 had a paralyzing effect on travel and expenditures in foreign currency by Icelanders. The number of Icelandic students in exchange studies has therefore decreased even further. It also asserts that, perhaps for the same reason, the number of foreign exchange students studying at UNAK has on the other hand increased.

The Expert Committee noted from the table in the SAR that the number of UNAK students abroad has been in 2006 14, in 2007 24, in 2008 23 and in 2009 19. These figures did not indicate any notable decrease in numbers and the same is actually the case for the increase of foreign students at UNAK which were in 2006 45, in 2007 37, in 2008 36 and in 2009 49. So the Expert Committee concluded that the exchange numbers were and are low and the Committee missed reflections on the part of UNAK on how these numbers may be increased even in the face of the economic situation. However, in the UNAK hearing response exchange figures were listed according to academic year. The number of Icelandic

students abroad in 2009-10 was 16, which is a clear reduction from the 25 and 26 of the two preceding academic years, though still above the 14 in 2006-07. For foreign students at UNAK the 2009-10 the figure is 58 compared with 30 in the preceding years. The Expert Committee acknowledges that the new figures clarify the exchange situation, but only in relative terms. In absolute terms the exchange rates still seem modest. The Expert Committee is therefore pleased to learn from the hearing response about the elaborate efforts to provide improved conditions for exchange of students.

### *Distance learning*

The Accreditation Report noted that UNAK has a very strong record role in distance learning, but found it at the same time surprising that the visions and challenges connected with a strong distance learning effort were not more visible in the strategic documents. The Report recommended that UNAK gives more evidence at the strategic level to its work on distance learning, including the development of methodologies and techniques, special activities and counselling for distant learners and implications for staff.

The Expert Committee was told during the site visit that distance learning is such a strong part of UNAK that no need is felt to specially stress this fact in the SAR and other places and further that leadership and staff share a disinclination to make any distinction between distant and in situ students. Still a workgroup was appointed by the Rector in November 2008 with the mandate to identify ways for the University to fulfil its aim of being a leading university in the development of distance education in Iceland, in co-operation with learning centres and university centres in rural areas. The workgroup delivered an interim report in May 2009 suggesting that a stop should be put to differentiating between face-to-face education and distance education, that schools should organize courses with maximum flexibility without sacrificing quality and that next autumn and spring an experiment with development of specially selected courses with the new ideology as a focus will be carried out. The interim report was sent to all faculties for discussions and comment. Following that the Quality Council decided to ask the workgroup to plan a seminar in March 2010 for UNAK's teachers and other staff inviting foreign experts to talk

and introduce their distance education model. After that the workgroup will continue its work and deliver a full report.

The Expert Committee acknowledges that serious and extensive work on distance learning has indeed taken place, but also that this work is not yet finalised and that no results are therefore available for the comment of the Expert Committee. The Committee expects the process to be finalised as planned this year and the results to be implemented in a new strategy for distance education.

### **2.3 Field of Health Sciences**

The Accreditation Report recommended that what is now the School of Health Sciences should have a partnership with at least five foreign universities and actively participate in research in two defined areas before 2011. It follows from the UNAK SAR that this recommendation is largely fulfilled.

The Expert Committee was further told during the meeting with the dean, other leadership and staff that these all agree on the challenge to prioritise. The School is working on quality issues and focus on both undergraduate and graduate level. In the graduate programme the focus is on consolidating present activities and not adding anything on. Students should therefore go either to UI or abroad for additional courses. Clustering and networking are considered important and more collaboration with UI is a priority at the graduate level. This is a positive development even if it did not become quite evident during the site visit what was accomplished and what was in the planning stage.

### **3. Administration and organisation**

#### **3.1 Field of Natural Resources and Agriculture**

The Accreditation Report gave two recommendations that both focus on changes in the governance structure of the university, but the response from UNAK that current legislation prevents any follow up must be accepted.

#### **3.2 Field of Social Sciences**

The Accreditation Report had the following two recommendations for the university as a whole:

- The University should check its organization in view of the need firstly to make levels and lines of authority more clearly visible, secondly to be sure that there are no unnecessary duplications of political and administrative roles and functions among the various councils and committees.
- The University should also look carefully into the manner in which top down leadership and unified governance may be combined with Faculty freedom.

It is difficult to identify in the UNAK SAR precisely what follow up there has been on these two issues. The UNAK Hearing Response accepts this point, but provides the explanation that the recommendations themselves are directed toward UNAK as a whole and its organization. Therefore, no single faculty or school within UNAK felt addressed by these recommendations. The Expert Committee is surprised by this argument, because it understands the university leadership and not only the faculty or school leadership to be responsible for the follow up. Further, the Committee must point out that the quality of the functioning of a faculty or school is surely dependent on the quality of the functioning of the whole university of which they are partial elements.

Anyhow, the UNAK SAR identifies a number of organisational changes, merger of faculties, changes in the University Council, establishment of a University Assembly and does state that in 2008 and 2009 the Management Board and Quality Council have sharpened their division of labour considerably in practice, if not in documented policy.



At the same time the newly established regulations outlining the structure and organization of the three Schools make explicit the roles of each Faculty (e.g. the Faculties of Education, Social Science, and Law within the School of Humanities and Social Sciences; the Faculties of Business and Natural Resource Sciences within the School of Business and Science; and the Faculties of Nursing, Occupational Therapy and Graduate Studies in Health Sciences within the School of Health Sciences). According to the SAR responsibility and authority in academic matters have thus been clarified and situated closer to individual Faculty members.

The Accreditation Report emphasised also that UNAK could benefit from surveying the students at regular intervals in order to secure knowledge on the extent to which students consider themselves to be acknowledged participants in the political and administrative process. However, the Expert Committee must note that no such surveys have yet been implemented and strongly recommends that this now takes place.

### **3.3 Field of Health Sciences**

The Accreditation Report had no recommendations under this section.

## **4. Structure of teaching and research**

### **4.1 Field of Natural Resources and Agriculture**

The Accreditation Report has a number of very positive points on the organisation and facilities for teaching and research. However, the report also concludes that providing critical mass and focus on a limited number of specialized research programmes is an issue that must be addressed. This conclusion leads to a number of specific recommendations.

The UNAK SAR provides a comprehensive and in the view of the Expert Committee satisfactory account of the extent of follow up, related of course to the constraints set by the present financial situation.

#### **4.2 Field of Social Sciences**

The Accreditation Report acknowledged that at the strategic level UNAK emphasized the importance of building up a strong research base, but recommended at the same time that the University took steps to assure staff and students that the implication is not less priority on teaching, but that teaching and research have an equal priority and mutually must support each other. In the same vein the University should take care that those mechanisms for strengthening research do not detract at the same time from the quality of teaching.

The SAR agrees in principle, but the economic crisis put a stop to the Quality Council's one year plan of workshops and seminars to enhance the quality of teaching at UNAK and offer the teachers opportunities to meet across Schools, Faculties and Departments to discuss teaching and related issues. Nevertheless the Expert Committee understood from the session with school leadership and staff that a balance is still sought between research and teaching linking in some cases the research to local or regional issues. Especially in the field of educational research the attempt is to link the research to the regional area as well as training teachers to work in the same regional area.

The Expert Committee must, however, stress that the focus of the 2008 recommendation should still be considered a relevant challenge and that further work in this direction needs to be encouraged.

#### **4.3 Field of Health Sciences**

The Accreditation Report focuses on the tensions created for students by the numerous clausus system in place. The report recommended specifically that selection occurs prior to

the entry to the programme and further that consideration should be given to equalizing the pass grade in UNAK and University of Iceland.

The SAR response recognises this problem, but points to the increasing limitations in clinical placements as the explanation for the system. The School of Health Sciences is working on reducing the tension level, but the response does not indicate any follow up on the recommendation that the pass grade in the two universities should be equalized. Prior selection has been debated in the School Assembly, but the conclusion was that this was not practical and could be biased. The dean pointed out during the site visit that even if the numerus clausus might be substituted with a threshold in an average grade, it would still be difficult to compare average grades from different high-schools in Iceland.

The Health Science report also recommends that workload in the graduate programme be more spread out as there are significant peaks of assignment deadlines that affect study schedules.

The SAR response informs that proper follow up has taken place. However, the interview with nursing and occupational therapy students indicates that the problem does still to an extent exist.

## **5. Competence requirements of personnel**

### **5.1 Field of Natural Resources and Agriculture Report**

The Accreditation Report has a number of recommendations, which focus on strengthening the recruitment processes and the incentives for applicants. The SAR response accepts the spirit of these recommendations as a basis for future strategic development, but points to the fact that in the present economic situation recruitment and expansion is not possible. The economic situation does also prevent UNAK from proceeding towards a system of incentive and awards.

Basically this response is understandable considering the present economic context. On the other hand the Expert Committee must again point to the lack of any evidence that a process of setting priorities takes place.

## **5.2 Field of Social Sciences**

The Accreditation Report recommended that in order to fulfil UNAK's ambition to become a strongly recognized University at the national and international level, open advertisements must be given a priority and UNAK staff encouraged to compete on even terms with outside applicants.

The SAR response is that all positions of lecturer, senior lecturers and professors are advertised nationally. International advertising is not mentioned in the response, which stresses instead that due to the present hiring freeze there has been no further development in recruitment practices. The Expert Committee assumes therefore that no international advertising has taken place.

The Accreditation Report recommended further that UNAK gives a priority to the requirement that application committees shall take into account the qualifications required of applicants for comparable positions by respected scientific institutes in this country and abroad.

The SAR response indicates in a satisfactory manner that this practice is established for lecturers, senior lecturers and professors at UNAK and that the regulations for hiring and advancement are currently being revised in line with the same kind of regulations for UI with the aim of using the same assessment criteria for academic positions at both universities. Uniform rules for quantifying academic staff output (research, teaching, and service) have now been adopted by both universities.

Finally the Social Science report pointed to the fact that part time teachers carry proportionally a significant part of the teaching and recommended introductory courses in

teaching techniques to be obligatory for this staff group, perhaps with the exception of those who are established in teaching positions in other universities.

The Expert Committee understood during the site visit that there are concerns and discussions throughout the university about the extent of support for teaching and the need for more emphasis on teaching and not only research, while at the same time there is an awareness that there are very limited funds for offering support for new teachers or training for permanent staff.

The SAR responds along the same line that plans for courses for teachers (part time or full time) have had to be cancelled because of lack of funds. The SAR terms this a worrying fact and indicates that every effort will be made to enable the Quality Council to annually set up a plan of courses, seminars and workshops on teaching techniques. However, it was made clear at the site visit that the Management Board and University Council had indeed decided to postpone teacher training in light of the economical situation. On the other hand the UNAK hearing response conveys the information that this decision will now be seriously reconsidered.

The Expert Committee agrees that lack of follow up on this recommendation is indeed worrying and is also surprised, because setting up an introductory course in teaching pedagogics need not be excessively costly. And once again the Expert Committee wonders about the priorities of UNAK or lack of same. However, on the positive site the SAR response informs also that general introductory courses for new teachers do not now take place because of low attendance, but instead introductions are tailor-made for new staff.

### **5.3 Field of Health Sciences**

The Accreditation Report had no recommendations under this section.

## **6. Rules regarding admission requirements and rights and duties of students**

### **6.1 Field of Natural Resources and Agriculture**

The Accreditation Report recommended firstly that a detailed strategic education plan is developed in order to reflect the needs of Icelandic society for academic education in the academic specializations offered and that the desired and associated sustainable student numbers are linked with instructional, research and staffing needs. Secondly the report recommends that a systematic identification is conducted of the complementarities of educational programmes with those at other academic institutions with the objective to develop additional cooperation, including joint and complementary course offerings. Finally the report recommends that the University promote and articulate clearer and higher admission standards that seek to improve programme quality, improve cost-effective delivery of instruction and provide more applied research opportunities.

The SAR response to the first recommendation is that the degree lines offered and accredited within the Faculty have all been developed with the aim of meeting needs in the society for skills and knowledge in the fields concerned, combining fundamental and applied research in frontier science and technology with cooperation with industry in the innovative utilization of marine resources as well as renewable energy applications. The Expert Committee understands this response to imply that UNAK has not considered follow up necessary on this recommendation.

Concerning the second recommendation UNAK points to a three-year project which has now entered its last year, carried out in cooperation with the Federation of Icelandic Fishing Vessel Owners (LÍÚ) and the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture with the objective to develop the strategy for and revise the contents of the Fisheries Science degree. Active discussion has been going on to identify complementarities and to further develop cooperation with other universities and institutions, developing existing cooperation and identifying new opportunities. This work has been intensified in an attempt to combine the added value of cooperation with the cost cutting needed in the

whole national university system. The ongoing collaboration with Hólar University mentioned in the recommendations is one of the obvious opportunities being further developed. Discussions are also ongoing with UI on possibilities for complementary course programmes to a larger extent. The Expert Committee accepts this response as an adequate follow up to the recommendation, which has a comprehensive focus that goes beyond the Fisheries Science degree, however.

The report also has recommendations that more internal research funding opportunities for graduate students are developed and that special consideration should be given to reward Faculty members for successful research proposals in priority areas, especially those that address important societal needs, that are multi-disciplinary or could lead to processes and outcomes that can be patented and provide a future revenue stream for the institution. The SAR response points once again to the present financial situation and the annulment of the December 2007 agreement with the Ministry, which have meant that “excellent ideas such as rewarding researchers and developing more internal funding opportunities” must be put on hold. It is, however, also said that external research funding has to some extent given graduate students better opportunities. The Expert Committee must for its part stress that further specific follow up on this should still be in focus.

## **6.2 Field of Social Sciences Report**

The Accreditation Report concludes under this section that though procedures and requirements for admission of students comply with Article 19 of the HEI Act 2006, the University Council had not at the time of accreditation issued a regulation about students’ rights and obligations. The report expected the University to take immediate steps to finalize this process now in preparation.

The Expert Committee cannot consider satisfactory the SAR response that only a Code of Ethics has in August 2008 been decided by the University Council. The specific work relating to rules on students’ rights and obligations is still in progress by the University Council. The Expert Committee does not consider it satisfactory that the formally required

regulation on students' rights and obligations is at this point still not in place, but it takes note of the point raised in the UNAK hearing response that there are a number of articles in the Regulations for UNAK pertaining to students and their rights.

The Accreditation Report recommended also that UNAK should work towards fulfilling the expectations of the European Standards and Guidelines to have in place credible and transparent information on student progression and success rates, employability of graduates, and a profile of the student population.

The SAR response is that a committee appointed by the Quality Council is currently working on defining the information needed for the governance of the University and what information it shall publish in fulfilment of the European Standards and Guidelines. This committee made a halt in its work in 2009 as a consequence of the announcement of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture that it intended to publish guidelines on the information that it requires from Icelandic universities. The committee will finish its work when these guidelines are available.

### **6.3 Field of Health Sciences**

The Accreditation Report has no recommendations, but notes in parallel to the Social Science report that Rules on the rights and obligations of students have not been passed yet but they are being prepared.

## **7. Facilities and services provided to teachers and students**

### **7.1 Field of Natural Resources and Agriculture**

The Accreditation Report recommended the improvement of clerical and technical staff support to create efficiencies in the operation of a more research-intensive institution that can compete at international level. The SAR responds that one part time technical



laboratory assistant has been hired for the teaching laboratories. This follow up can be considered less than implied in the recommendation, but if UNAK had provided further explanation it would no doubt have been the economic situation.

The report recommended that more targeted funding for research is provided by improving research facilities long-term and installing incentives for research funding procurement, including international travel and publication support. The SAR response is that the financial situation regrettably hinders the desired development of a system for the much-needed incentives for research and adequate funds for improved research infrastructure, travel and publication support.

The report further recommended that intensive research collaboration is sought with foreign research institutions that may collaborate and cost-share in research and use the unique location and facilities as an applied science laboratory. The SAR response points convincingly to the many examples of international collaboration, but the response seems not to identify precisely if and how these cooperative projects can lead to cost-sharing in research and to the use of UNAK location and facilities as an applied science laboratory.

Finally the report recommended incorporating overhead charges in proposal procurement to help offset laboratory costs and improvement, and personnel support. The SAR response is that such overhead charges are being considered.

The Expert Committee encourages UNAK to look beyond the present financial situation and consider a longer term perspective on the Accreditation Report's recommendations.

## **7.2 Field of Social Sciences**

The social science report noted that developments in information technology and web-based learning make not only teachers, but also students highly dependent on access to printers and copy machines. The report recommended that UNAK considers providing not only teachers, but also students, with free access to printers and copy machines so that the students are not restricted by quota arrangements.

In the light of the present economic situation the Expert Committee accepts the SAR response that this recommendation has not been heeded, because of the possible resulting expenses.

### **7.3 Field of Health Sciences Report**

The report points to the need of new staff to be self-motivated and learn speedily and recommends better conditions and capacity for induction to their roles and responsibilities.

The SAR response is that the reception of new teaching staff has been made more obvious as UNAK has now specific forms in place to follow when a new member of staff is introduced to new roles and responsibilities.

## **8. Internal quality management system**

On the basis of the UNAK SAR and the site visit the Expert Committee arrived at the following conclusions:

The Social Science Accreditation Report was alone in making recommendations on the internal quality management system. The report voiced its doubts about the planned EFQM approach and the report recommended UNAK to consider a leaner approach to internal quality assurance at least in the initial phases of setting up the system, where it is crucial that the system is not perceived as overly ambitious and broad in its scope, and where the potential value added of such a broadly conceived effort may be questioned.

The SAR acknowledges that the recommendations in the report are “to some extent justified” and that “the reality is that not everything promised in the Quality Management System has been realized but a lot has.”

The social science accreditation report thus quoted a bulleted list of 16 items that the Quality Council intended to have addressed by spring 2008. The statement in the SAR that 14 of these items have been addressed is not entirely convincing. In fact the SAR contains a lengthy presentation on the unfinished work on the quality system and the role of the Quality Council. In contrast to the 2007 SAR there is not in the 2010 SAR any indication that the quality system seeks to be in accordance with the European Standards and Guidelines. Instead the linkage to the EFQM is still emphasised.

The Expert Committee recognises that work is ongoing and plans elaborated, but it must still conclude that UNAK has not yet a comprehensive quality assurance system effectively and operationally in place. Basically the development of a quality assurance system has until now focused on the application of the EFQM approach. The Social Science Accreditation Report considered it an open question the extent to which the EFQM approach is applicable to higher education institutions. The point made was that this model tends to focus on organisation and process and less on content and further it tends also to result in a top-down approach so that the lower levels, i.e. teachers and students, do not achieve the necessary involvement.

Nevertheless the 2007 Social Science Self Assessment Report stated as the ambition of the Quality Management System that “all people within the University, students and employees are responsible for the quality of its operations and have defined roles in the plan of operations that aims at constant quality improvement”.

This Expert Committee does not consider this ambition to be yet fulfilled. The apparent difficulties have definitely slowed a process of implementation of the quality system. The status by the time of the site visit is as stated that no comprehensive system is in place and that staff, students, service units and even to an extent university leadership could in some cases not, or only with an effort, identify elements in an overall university strategy towards systematic quality assurance. It could be added that the UNAK SAR does not follow up either on the point made in the social science Accreditation Report that UNAK University could benefit from a more focused approach to co-operation with international universities, whereby UNAK identifies a smaller number of universities which may in one

dimension or another set a credible benchmark for this university. It is therefore positive that the new Rector confirmed at the site visit that UNAK should head for international benchmarking, but there should be collaboration with UI beforehand.

Still, it is important to note that two faculties, as they were then, have undertaken self assessments and produced substantive reports, i.e. the Faculty of Business and Science and the Faculty of Health Sciences. The Expert Committee has only received copies of the report from the Faculty of Business and Science. This report provides interesting reading and the Expert Committee fully acknowledges the effort and care that must have been involved in its preparation. However, the SAR states that both self assessment reports have been based on the EFQM methodology. This is seemingly not the case, because at least the structure of the report from the Faculty of Business and Science is based on the template laid out by the Ministry and not the EFQM categories for self-assessment. Instead a brief introductory section presents the training sessions on EFQM and the results of two self assessments, one by senior management and one by a group of teachers.

The conclusions of the first group were “that despite traditions of quality at UNAK and quality work in progress, the lack of formal and verifiable monitoring, as well as insufficient recording of quality processes, result in the assessment of premise factors of success rarely exceeding the lowest quarter on the assessment scale. In addition, the lack of regular, comparable attitude assessment among staff and students, with regard to aspects other than courses and teaching, as well as the absence of a formal socially oriented assessment, leads to a similar conclusion when assessing success factors”.

The conclusion of the second group was in many respects similar and pointed out that the traceable registration of key processes within the University needs to be increased, together with more active and constant attitude assessments and surveys in society and in industry.

The Expert Committee must for its part note that there is not at this moment a quality system in place at UNAK that is sufficiently compliant with the methodological requirements of the EFQM approach. The Committee must agree with the statement made during the session with the Quality Council that the intended use of EFQM had been too

optimistic. However, it must be noted in all fairness that the session with the Quality Council revealed uncertainty about what to expect from the Ministry at a time when central initiatives on quality assurance approaches had been indicated, but not specified.

The Expert Committee received also the recent self assessment report from the Faculty of Law. This report is also very informative and detailed in its presentation. It follows the template of the Ministry and, moreover, contains no reference to EFQM. Further it must be noted that this report, like the report from the Faculty of Business and Science, focuses almost exclusively on the strengths and successes of the Faculty. Any credible quality assurance system should encourage its users to identify not only strengths, but also weaknesses. As it is, the only weakness or threat identified in this report is the present economic situation and the resulting budget costs.

The Expert Committee fully agrees with the statement in the SAR that Quality Management systems can never be written in stone, they change with their organization and so does UNAK's system. But in the view of the Expert Committee the issue now confronting UNAK is the urgent need to set up a realistic plan and a credible deadline for the implementation of a comprehensive and operational quality assurance system.

The fact that such a system is not fully in place constitutes a serious problem for a university involved in a difficult process of meeting new negative budget conditions, where a premium must be on the capacity of a quality assurance system to support the identification of eventual consequences for the quality of teaching and learning that follow from budget revisions.

The UNAK hearing response to the analysis and conclusion above is that the Expert Committee has to a large extent missed important changes in the nature of the quality assurance system. The Expert Committee cannot for the following reasons accept this argument.

The Hearing Response indicates that it is “not entirely true” that the quality assurance system is based on the EFQM approach. However, the Expert Committee must quote the UNAK SAR, which states clearly that “UNAK's Quality Management System includes plans of

action to improve the quality of teaching and research at UNAK and an identification of a methodology to realize them. This refers to plans to use the EFQM Excellence Model methodology for self-assessment ...”.

The UNAK SAR goes on to state that the Quality Management System promises that every unit of UNAK – that is the Schools and the University Office – would use EFQM for self-assessment every year. However, in the light of actual experience, the University has concluded that every two or three years is enough.

The SAR further states that “two faculties, as they were then, have used EFQM for self-assessment since UNAK got its accreditation, i.e. the Faculty of Business and Science and the Faculty of Health Sciences. The results of the self-assessment exercise were integrated into the two Faculties’ strategies and have already been, and will continue to be, used for a number of improvements. The academic staff members that took part in the exercises are quite happy with the model and recommend the use of it in the future either in full or in part.”

During the site visit meeting with the Quality Council these statements on the EFQM approach were basically not qualified by the UNAK participants.

In other words the Expert Committee does not feel persuaded by the Hearing Response to revise the observation that the EFQM approach is still the core and structure of the Quality Management System.

The Expert Committee has no ambition to campaign against the EFQM approach in itself, but has stressed that the prerequisites for successful implementation must be in place. The UNAK SAR itself indicates that “one prerequisite of efficiency is that key processes are defined and that they are subject to procedural rules that employees know and respect. As the Expert Committee emphasises earlier in this section, this is not at the moment the case in UNAK.

The UNAK Hearing Response argues also that the Quality Management System “is in fact based” on the European Standards and Guidelines. This comes as a surprise for the Expert

Committee. The 2007 handbook on the Quality Management System has over 23 pages, but only one sentence that refers to the European Standards and Guidelines.

In the UNAK 2010 SAR there is the one brief reference to ongoing work on defining the information needed to publish in fulfilment of the European Standards and Guidelines (cf. section 6.2 above). Furthermore, the Quality Council did not provide during the site visit insights into any de facto application of the European Standards and Guidelines.

The UNAK SAR states, with reference to the EFQM based system, that “it will be suggested to the Quality Council by the Director of Quality Management that the system should be reviewed in 2010, not to make big changes but more to make adjustments based on the experience of operating the system”. The UNAK Hearing Response states, rather more strongly, that “the current QMS needs revising and that revision will be done in Spring 2010”. The Expert Committee wonders about the prospects for this revision, as the UNAK Hearing Response has actually strengthened the Committee’s view that UNAK does not really at the moment know or realise where it stands in terms of implementation of a credible and operational quality assurance system.

This is still not a healthy situation for a university presented with acute challenges of priorities and decisions. Hopefully some optimism can be based on the new Rector’s statement during the site visit that quality assurance is a problem at UNAK and a problem that must be addressed.

## **9. Description of learning outcomes**

### **9.1 Field of Natural Resources and Agriculture**

The Accreditation Report recommended including, together with the general description of the courses, the curricula, the titles of textbooks and other course materials. The SAR acknowledges this recommendation and declares that the inclusion of curricula, textbooks and other course material is already in place in the course syllabi. It is noted that a new

computerized system has been introduced to make the process of including information in the curricula easier, ensuring better access for teachers and students.

## **9.2 Field of Social Science**

The Accreditation Report has no recommendations, but it views in principle the implementation in the context of UNAK of the two combined activities, internal and external evaluations, as the precondition for a credible assessment of the extent to which the University fulfils the National Qualifications Framework.

The UNAK SAR does not respond to this comment, but the Expert Committee notes that the recent initiatives of the Ministry towards external evaluation of fields such as Business and Law will over time meet the concern voiced by the 2008 Accreditation Report.

## **9.3 Field of Health Sciences**

The Accreditation Report had no recommendations under this section.

## **10. Finances**

The Agriculture Accreditation Report recognized that the financial situation was at that time somewhat difficult and a clear strategy needed to be developed to articulate programmatic priorities and ensure sustainable financial development. The Social Science Accreditation Report stated the basic unpreparedness of the then Expert Committee to take upon itself the role of an auditor of the finances of UNAK, but at the same time also voiced optimistic confidence that the financial status of this University would make it possible to fulfil its obligations according to Chapter VIII of the HEI Act 2006.

This Expert Committee must now take into account the deterioration of finances in the two years following this latter statement of optimism. The annulment of the contract with the



Ministry, the budget deficit and the expected further reductions in government funding have had serious consequences for UNAK where budget considerations have ousted an alarming proportion of initiatives whether in the planning or implementation phase.

## **11. Summary of Findings**

The Expert Committee received during 2007 accreditation a convincing impression of UNAK as a small, regional university with a strong sense of its mission not least in the regional context. Leadership, staff and students shared a positive and constructive attitude towards the progress of the university. In contrast the 2010 follow up evaluation met a university where motivation and optimism has suffered from the onslaught of the new financial conditions. As stated several places in this report follow up on the three accreditation reports has been stymied to a large extent by the current budgetary situation of UNAK with the result that follow up has in some cases not left the planning stage or has not been initiated.

UNAK must be encouraged under the leadership of the new Rector to regain full confidence in itself and its mission and redress the challenges of the economic crisis by a deliberate strategy of redefining old priorities and setting new priorities.

The present state of the internal quality assurance system is criticized in this report and it must be an urgent priority for UNAK to set up a realistic plan and a credible deadline for the implementation of a comprehensive quality assurance system.

## **12. Recommendation**

The Expert Committee has in this report outlined its reservations concerning the follow up on the three 2007/2008 accreditation reports. The Expert Committee has decided to trust the UNAK leadership to give now the necessary priority to the completion of the follow up process. On this basis the Committee recommends that the Accreditation of the three fields

of Natural Resources and Agriculture, of Social Sciences and of Health Sciences at the University of Akureyri be continued.

### **13. Signatures of the Expert Committee**

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Dr. Christian Thune, *Denmark*  
Chair

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Dr. Frank Quinault, *Scotland*

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Dr. Rita McAllister, *Scotland*

## **Appendix 1: Agenda of site visit of Expert Committee to UNAK 17**

### **February 2010**

**08:30-09:45** *Meeting with the Rector of UNAK, representatives from the University Council and members of the academic and administrative staff*

**Present:** Dr. Stefán B. Sigurðsson Rector, Dr. Árún Sigurðardóttir, Dean, School of Health Sciences, Dr. Hans Kristján Guðmundsson, Dean, School of Business and Sciences, Dr. Sigurður Kristinsson, Dean, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Sigrún Magnúsdóttir, Director of Quality Management, Ólafur Halldórsson, Managing Director, Kristín Ástgeirsdóttir, Director, The Centre for Gender Equality, representative from the University Council

**09:45-10:15** *Meeting with the Dean and members from the School Council of Health Sciences*

**Present:** Dr. Árún Sigurðardóttir, Dean, School of Health Sciences, Hafdís Skúladóttir, Head of the Faculty of Nursing, Kristjana Fenger, Head of the Faculty of Occupational Therapy, Dr. Snæfríður Egilsson, Professor, Faculty of Occupational Therapy, Dr. Hermann Óskarsson, Professor, Faculty of Nursing

**10:15-10:30** *A walk through campus (new facilities under construction) and to Borgir*

**Present:** Dr. Stefán B. Sigurðsson, Rector, Ólafur Búi Gunnlaugsson, Manager, Facilities and Maintenance

**10:30-10:45** *Coffee break*

**10:45-11:30** *Meeting with the Dean and staff members from the Faculty of Natural Resource Sciences*

**Present:** Dr. Hans Kristján Guðmundsson, Dean, School of Business and Science, Dr. Hjörleifur Einarsson, Head of the Faculty of Natural Resource Sciences, Dr. Jóhann Örlygsson, Professor, Faculty of Natural Resource Sciences, Hrefna Kristmannsdóttir, Professor, Faculty of Natural Resource Sciences, Hreiðar

Þór Valtýsson, Lecturer, Faculty of Natural Resource Sciences, Dr. Ögmundur Knútsson, Lecturer/Vice Dean, School of Business and Science

**11:45-12:15** *UNAK's Research and Development Centre (RHA) and the committee currently working on strategies in distance education*

**Present:** Dr. Guðrún Rósa Þórsteinsdóttir, Director of UNAK's Research and Development Centre (RHA), Hjalti Jóhannesson, Specialist and Vice Director of RHA, Ólína Freysteinsdóttir, Project Manager, Helgi Bergs, Head of the Faculty of Business, Kjartan Ólafsson, Lecturer, Faculty of Social Sciences, Kristjana Fenger, Head of the Faculty of Occupational Therapy, Sigrún Magnúsdóttir, Director of Quality Management, Erlendur Steinar Friðriksson, Project Manager of Distance Education, Daníel Freyr Jónsson, Project Manager of Distance Education and Examinations Manager

**12:30-13:30** *Lunch*

**13:30-14:15** *Meeting with the Deans and members from the School Council of Social Sciences and the Faculty of Business from the School of Business and Science*

**Present:** Dr. Sigurður Kristinsson, Dean, School of Social Sciences, Dr. Hans Kristján Guðmundsson, Dean, School of Business and Science, Birgir Guðmundsson, Head of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Anna Þóra Baldursdóttir, Head of the Faculty of Education and Graduate Studies in Education, Dr. Finnur Friðriksson, Lecturer, Faculty of Education and Graduate Studies in Education, Dr. Rachael Lorna Johnston, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Law, Ágúst Þór Árnason, Program Coordinator, Faculty of Law, Helgi Bergs, Head of the Faculty of Business, Dr. Ögmundur Knútsson, Lecturer/Vice Dean, School of Business and Science

**14:30-15:15** *Meeting with students (representatives from each of the three academic fields)*

**Present:** Gunnþóra Erlingsdóttir, Faculty of Law, Sunna Valgerðardóttir, Faculty of Social Sciences, Þorbjörg Ólafsdóttir, Faculty of Education, Þórólfur Ómar Óskarsson, Faculty of Business Administration, Eyrún Elva Marinósdóttir, Faculty of Natural Resource Sciences, Ástríður Ólafsdóttir, Faculty of Natural Resource Sciences, Ragnheiður Ásbjarnardóttir, Faculty of Natural Resource Sciences, Sólrún Óladóttir, Faculty of Graduate Studies in Health

Sciences, Erla Þóra Guðjónsdóttir, Faculty of Nursing, Ásta Margrét Rögnvaldsdóttir, Faculty of Occupational Therapy

**15:15-15:30** *Coffee break*

**15:30-16:15** *Meeting with academic staff (representatives from each of the three academic fields)*

**Present:** Dr. Ársæll Már Arnarsson, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Social Sciences, Dr. Guðmundur Heiðar Frímansson, Professor, Faculty of Education, Dr. Timothy Murphy, Professor, Faculty of Law (tentative), Vera Kr. Vestmann, Adjunct, Faculty of Business Administration, Arheiður Eyþórsdóttir, Lecturer, Faculty of Natural Resource Sciences, Rannveig Björnsdóttir, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Natural Resource Sciences, Dr. Steingrímur Jónsson, Professor, Faculty of Natural Resource Sciences, Guðrún Pálmadóttir, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Occupational Therapy, Sigfríður Inga Karlsdóttir, Lecturer, Faculty of Nursing, Dr. Ragnheiður Harpa Arnardóttir, Lecturer, Faculty of Graduate Studies in Health.

**16:30-17:15** *Meeting with the Quality Council*

**Present:** Dr. Stefán B. Sigurðsson Rector, Dr. Árún Sigurðardóttir, Dean, School of Health Sciences, Dr. Hans Kristján Guðmundsson, Dean, School of Business and Sciences, Dr. Sigurður Kristinsson, Dean, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Sigrún Magnúsdóttir, Director of Quality Management, Ólafur Halldórsson, Managing Director, Solveig Hrafnisdóttir, Director of Academic Administration and Student Counsellor, Helgi Gestsson, Lecturer, Faculty of Business Administration, UNAK's staff representative, Valdemar Pálsson, students' representative

**17:15-17:30** *Wrap up*

**Present:** Dr. Stefán B. Sigurðsson, Rector, Dr. Árún Sigurðardóttir, Dean, School of Health Sciences, Dr. Hans Kristján Guðmundsson, Dean, School of Business and Sciences, Dr. Sigurður Kristinsson, Dean, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Sigrún Magnúsdóttir, Director of Quality Management, Ólafur Halldórsson, Managing Director

## **Appendix 2: List of documents received**

### **From the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture**

Act on Public Higher Education Institutions 85/2008 (draft translation)

Higher Education Act no. 63/2006 (draft translation)

Rules no. 37/2006 on Doctoral Studies in Higher Education Institutions according to art. 7 of the Higher Education Act no. 63/2006 (draft translation)

Rules no. 1067/2006 on Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions according to art. 3 of the Higher Education Act no. 63/2006 (draft translation)

Article 8 of Rules No. 321/2009 on Quality Control of Teaching and Research in Higher Education Institutions (draft translation)

Accreditation Report Agriculture, University of Akureyri, 2007.

Accreditation Report: Social Science, University of Akureyri, 2008.

Accreditation Report: Field of Health Sciences, University of Akureyri, 2008.

### **From the University of Akureyri**

Natural Resources and Agriculture, Social Science and Health Sciences – Accreditation Follow-up Self-assessment Report