

# **Standards and Requirements for the Quality of Master's Programmes at the University of Iceland**

Approved by the University Forum on 14 November 2013  
and by the University Council on 5 December 2013

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Quality Assurance System of the University of Iceland**

The Minister of Education, Science and Culture granted accreditation to the University of Iceland to offer curricula leading to Bachelor's, Master's and Doctorate degrees in all of its Schools, in accordance with The Higher Education Institutions Act No. 63/2006, Rules on the Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions no. 1067/2006 and Rules on Doctorate Programmes in Higher Education Institutions no. 37/2007. The accreditation was granted following an expert evaluation by foreign specialists in quality assurance.

The University of Iceland strongly emphasises that a curriculum shall be in accordance with internationally recognised quality requirements, and the University operates under a formal quality assurance system covering all aspects of activities, curricula and teaching, research and innovation, administration and support services. In 2004 the University Meeting (now University Forum) and the University Council approved formal *Standards and Requirements for the Quality of Doctorate Programmes at the University of Iceland*, which were reviewed in 2012. In 2006 the Quality Assurance Committee of the University Council was established and in 2009 the Graduate School at the University of Iceland. Its function is to ensure and strengthen the quality of the graduate curriculum at the University and follow up on the standards and requirements set for the curriculum, cf. Art. 66 of the Rules of the University of Iceland, no. 569/2009. The University of Iceland's rules on the graduate curriculum have since been revised, and all of the University's schools have elaborated on them with further rules. Finally, the *Policy of the University of Iceland 2011-2016* stipulates that, during the policy period, the *Standards and Requirements for the Quality of Master's Programmes at the University of Iceland* shall be defined, and this document is the outcome of that work. The standards and requirements do not specifically deal with postgraduate diploma programmes at the Master's level although many items covered here also apply to such a curriculum.

### **1.2 Relation between rules and standards and requirements**

The above act and rules discuss in detail various formal conditions of a Master's curriculum, such as the deadline for applications, handling of applications, admissions requirements, length and composition of a curriculum, relationship between a Master's and Doctorate curriculum, supervisors, submission and finishing of final projects, ties with other higher education institutions, academic degrees and monitoring of rules and standards. The act and rules constitute the *formal* framework for a Master's programme, which specifically stipulates the standards and requirements for the *quality* of the programme, such as what is required of supervisors, schools, faculties and majors. These *Standards and Requirements for the Quality of Master's programmes at the University of Iceland* are the University's approved policy on what is deemed a desirable goal, based on professional and quality premises. Requirements have to be supported in the rules set by the University Council, i.e., Rules of the University of Iceland no. 569/2009, or special rules of individual schools and faculties on graduate programmes.

### 1.3 Organisation of a Master's programme

Schools and faculties at the University of Iceland organise and bear professional responsibility for a Master's programme at the school, its gist, organisation and implementation. Under The Higher Education Institutions Act no. 63/2006 and The Public Higher Education Institutions Act no. 85/2008, the University Council sets general rules on graduate programmes, and they are in Chapter VI of the Rules of the University of Iceland no. 569/2009. It states therein that the University's schools and faculties may organise graduate programmes, Master's and Doctorate programmes, in accordance with the framework set out there. More detailed provisions on graduate studies are found in the special rules of schools and faculties regarding such programmes, which are confirmed by the University Council. Academic titles, conferred upon completion of a programme, are listed in Art. 55 of The Joint Rules of the University of Iceland.

## 2. Standards and Requirements for the Quality of Master's Programmes<sup>1</sup>

These *Standards and Requirements for the Quality of Master's Programmes at the University of Iceland* are part of the institutions formal quality assurance system. Emphasis is placed on their being comparable to what is commonly found at the foreign higher education institutions to which the University of Iceland compares itself. The standards and requirements are a general framework applying to all Master's programmes at the University and defining the minimum requirements for the curriculum. In addition, schools and faculties can set further requirements, as relevant, which must also be supported in special rules for the relevant units, cf. Art. 1.2 above.

Below are the distinctions between general, academic and material standards and requirements.

- *The general* standards are a framework referring to internationally recognised prerequisites for the quality of Master's programmes.
- *The professional* standards specify minimal requirements for the qualifications and experience of teachers, supervisors, those evaluating the programme and final projects, external examiners and Master's degree committees.
- *The material* standards entail the minimal requirements for study facilities of Master's students.

### 2.1 General standards

- *Goals and learning outcomes of Master's programmes.* A Master's programme builds on a preceding undergraduate curriculum, and it forms a logical continuation of it by deepening scholarly knowledge and skills within a certain discipline of a scholarly or vocational area, increasing facility in applying methods and work procedure and facility in work and/or further studies. The goals of a Master's programme are described generally in standards of higher education and degrees, published by the Minister of Education, Science and Culture [Annex 1] and are further defined in learning outcomes of individual majors and courses.

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<sup>1</sup> These *Standards and Requirements for the Quality of a Master's Programme at the University of Iceland* take into account, for example, the policy formulated by the European University Association (EUA) and instructional writings of the Council of Graduate Schools in the United States, of which the Graduate School at the University of Iceland is a member, and The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in the British Isles.

- *Establishment of majors at the Master's level.* The preparation and organisation of new majors at the Master's level shall be carefully done, and care shall be taken that they fulfil the *Standards for Higher Education and Degrees* [cf. Annex 1] and these *Standards and Requirements for Quality of Master's Programmes at the University of Iceland*. In other respects, the establishment of majors in a Master's programme follows *Rules on the Work Procedure for Preparing and Establishing New Majors at the University of Iceland*.
- *Admissions Requirements and Admissions Process.* For a Master's programme at the University of Iceland, students shall be chosen who have done well in an undergraduate programme and are likely to achieve results in further studies and work. The selection of Master's students shall proceed on the basis of academic achievement in undergraduate studies, professional qualifications, equality and fairness. Requirements for degrees and preparation for a Master's programme shall be clear and transparent and published accessibly on the University of Iceland's website. Further stipulations on necessary degrees and minimum grades are found in the Joint Rules of the University of Iceland and the special rules of faculties.
- *Limitation of Admissions.* Schools, in accordance with proposals from individual faculties and as required, make reasoned proposals to the University Council on limiting the number of students in individual majors. Proposals on limiting the number of Master's students admitted to individual majors shall be made, taking into account the conditions for teaching the relevant major, cf. Art. 18 of Act no. 85/2008 on Public Higher Education Institutions.
- *Reception of Students and Provision of Information.* What is expected of students registering for Master's programmes at the University of Iceland, and what students can expect of the University shall be clear. Schools and faculties shall have a process in writing for receiving new students and providing information on the goals, organisation and arrangement of the programmes, course assessment, what is required of students, the support and services offered, students' social activities, etc. This information shall be accessible on the university's website, and students are responsible for acquainting themselves with it.
- *Duties of Students in a Master's Programme.* Master's students shall work professionally and avoid doing anything, in their studies or conduct within or outside the University, that discredits them or diminishes their reputation or reflects badly on their programme or the University. They must acquaint themselves well with the rules and customs to which academic work adheres and in all ways customarily apply meticulous methods of research and handling of references.
- *Programme Organisation.* Majors in a Master's programme shall be well organised and in accordance with defined learning outcomes. Students' workloads shall be suitable and equally distributed throughout the program. For each major in a Master's programme, there must always be a sufficient number of courses and facilities for training so that students can engage in a full programme. Faculties shall only offer professional specialisation at a Master's level for the fields having satisfactory study facilities and a sufficient number of courses and qualified teachers.
- *Number of credits and programme length.* Upon concluding undergraduate studies, a Master's programme is 90-120 credits (ECTS). Based on full-time study, it takes 1½-2 years on average to complete a programme; however, the maximum time to complete a Master's degree shall be 2 years on average for a programme involving 90 credits and 3

years for a programme of 120 credits. A faculty may specify in its rules that a student can be registered for part-time studies from the beginning, and this assumes that the student will complete 30 credits each university year and the programme in 4 years.

- *Programme's composition.* In their rules schools and faculties shall specify the minimum credits in courses and a final project/thesis.
- *Boundary between undergraduate and Master's programmes.* The expectation shall be that the course part of a Master's programme shall be based on specialised graduate courses. There can be two kinds of deviation from this: On one hand, faculties can offer special courses (so-called M-courses) that are for both Master's students and undergraduate students who are well advanced in their bachelor's programme. Schools shall set separate rules for such a programme, the allowed number of course credits, etc. On the other hand, schools can permit a specified number of credits from courses in an undergraduate programme to apply as a part of a Master's programme, and schools and faculties shall specify this in their rules. It shall be stated there whether such undergraduate courses are rated as being worth fewer credits at the Master's level than in an undergraduate programme, or whether more stringent requirements are made for Master's students, e.g., regarding higher minimum grades, if they earn the same number of credits for the courses as undergraduate students. However, undergraduate courses may not previously have been counted toward a student's degree. At most 10 out of 90 credits in a Master's programme and 15 out of 120 credits in a Master's programme shall be from undergraduate courses.
- *Supervisors.* Supervisors in Master's programmes shall promote good and constructive collaboration with their students since mutual trust between supervisors and Master's students is an important prerequisite for a successful Master's programme. Supervisors shall not only provide their students with academic counselling but also endeavour to assist them in acquiring the general and professional skills dealt with in these standards. In order to ensure the quality of supervision, each supervisor, shall generally not supervise more than 10 Master's students at a time.
- *Teaching Methods.* An effort shall be made to employ diverse teaching methods in a Master's programme, and teaching methods in a relevant course and major shall be explained in the curriculum.
- *Research training.* All Master's students shall receive training in different methods of research, analysis and interpretation in a relevant subject area. Every effort shall be made to give Master's students opportunities to participate in teachers' research work and engage in their own research under a supervisor's guidance.
- *International Experience.* Insofar as possible Master's students shall have opportunities to acquire international experience, among other things, by making it easy for them to spend part of their time during studies at foreign higher education institutions or attend international courses and conferences.
- *Teaching assistance.* Depending on circumstances, Master's students can provide assistance with teaching at the undergraduate level. However, care shall be taken that the workload is within moderate limits and does not delay normal progress of the programme.
- *Joint Master's Programmes.* If a Master's programme is organised jointly with another university or other universities, a special agreement shall be entered into, and care shall be taken that the programme fulfils quality and programme requirements comparable to

those at the University of Iceland, and that responsibility for the quality and organisation of the programme is clear. In making such agreements, the Division of Academic Affairs and the Graduate School shall be consulted.

- *General skills and professionalism.* A Master's programme shall promote students' acquisition, in addition to specialised academic knowledge, of general and practical knowledge, for example, in the field of methodology and ethics of science, written and oral presentation of projects to fellow students, the academic community and the public as well as practical application of intellectual works, and they shall acquire the professional and social skills they need for future work. Efforts shall be made to inform Master's students of possibilities for work and further studies open to them after completing their programmes and provide them with appropriate support in utilising their education.
- *Assessment.* Studies, teaching, credit system and assessment shall form a logical whole and take into account defined learning outcomes. Assessment shall give students opportunities to show to what degree they have acquired and adopted the knowledge, skills and competences specified in the qualification criteria of the relevant course and programme. Assessment shall be diverse, based on clear and transparent standards, and shall encourage diligence in studies.
- *Presentation of final projects.* It is desirable that Master's students publicly present their final projects. In accordance with the nature of university work and the policy of the University of Iceland on open access to research findings, final projects shall generally be published in Skemma (the online institutional repository for higher education institutions in Iceland).
- *Code of Ethics.* All parties involved in a Master's programme at the University of Iceland shall acquaint themselves with and hold paramount the school's Code of Ethics and, as relevant, the statutes and rules of The Data Protection Authority, animal welfare and conservation, the ethical criteria for research from the University of Iceland's Bioethics Committee, the National Bioethics Committee and the Bioethics Committee of the National University Hospital.
- *Competence.* The general rules of competence in Administrative Act no. 37/1993 shall be paramount for all parties involved in a Master's programme at the University of Iceland. Here, for example, competency pertains to a supervisor, tutor, members of Master's degree committees, an external examiner or a student having no ties that could tend to influence the procedure and conclusion of a matter.

## **2.2 Professional requirements for supervisors, teachers and part-time teachers in a Master's programme**

- *Requirements for teachers in Master's programmes.* Teachers in a Master's programme shall have at least completed a Master's degree or another equivalent degree and be recognised specialists in the relevant field. Faculties shall promote providing teachers in a Master's programme with relevant training and lifelong education in the field of teaching Master's students, for example, in cooperation with Centre of Teaching (Centre for Academic Development) and the Graduate School at the University of Iceland. Part-time teachers teaching in a Master's programme shall fulfil the same professional requirements as permanent teachers. Faculties shall ensure that part-time teachers are informed of these *Standards and Requirements for the Quality of Master's Programmes at the University of Iceland*.
- *Requirements for tutors, supervisors and Master's degree committees.* Each and every

Master's student shall have a tutor and/or supervisor as an adviser on the organisation of the programme, curriculum, choice of courses, programme development, professional quality of research, final project and other things related to the programme. When Master's degree committees are appointed, the rules of faculties shall stipulate on their organisation and purview. Tutors, supervisors and members of Master's degree committees shall fulfil the same requirements as permanent teachers in a Master's programme.

- *External examiners.* A faculty or a standing committee under its auspices nominates an external examiner for each Master's student. An external examiner shall always evaluate the final project of a Master's student along with a supervisor and/or a Master's degree committee, where relevant. External examiners shall generally not come from a faculty's group of academic employees, and care shall be taken that they are informed of the professional requirements for external examiners. A school's dean appoints an external examiner.

### **2.3 Substantive requirements for schools and faculties in a Master's programme**

- Master's students shall be offered research and work facilities satisfactory for their programmes and final projects.
- Master's students shall be assured of having regular access to supervisors and/or their tutors.
- Master's students shall have available symposia or other appropriate forums for discussing and presenting their projects.

### **3. Responsibility for and monitoring of the quality of a Master's programme**

- *Policy of schools and faculties on issue areas of Master's programmes.* Schools and faculties shall have a clear policy on the quality of studies and teaching at the Master's level, which builds, for example, on these *Standards and Requirements for the Quality of Master's Programmes at the University of Iceland*. The policy of schools and faculties shall contain goals and standards for results and be set out in writing and be published on the websites of the schools and faculties. The policy of schools and faculties on Master's programmes shall stipulate, for example, the goals of the programme, integration of teaching and research, teaching methods, students' issues, study facilities and support services, teachers' training, improvement projects, etc., that a school decides.
- *Gathering, analysis and dissemination of data.* Schools and faculties shall, in an organised manner, gather, analyse and disseminate information about studies and teaching on the Master's level, such as the number of applications, proportion of applicants being admitted, retention rate and graduation rate. The opinions of Master's students of the main parts of the programme shall be checked while it is going on, as well as the circumstances and job participation of Master's graduates after concluding their programmes. Schools and faculties shall analyse this information, for example, with respect to the perspectives of gender equality, and discuss the information regularly with the active involvement of student representatives and utilise it in their quality assurance efforts and reforms. Faculties shall hold a meeting with Master's student representatives at least once a year to discuss issues of the programme and ways to strengthen its quality. Schools and faculties shall provide the Graduate School with data regarding the issues of Master's programmes that the Graduate School requests.
- *Monitoring the progress of programmes and dropouts.* Schools and faculties shall

regularly monitor students' progress in their studies, systematically promote measures to lower dropout rates and take appropriate measures if there are unexpected changes in students' progress in their programmes and intervene so that they get necessary support or assistance.

- *Monitoring of the quality of a Master's programme.* Standing committees of faculties and schools on a graduate programme's issues monitor that the general rules of the University of Iceland, special rules of schools and faculties and these *Standards and Requirements for the Quality of Master's Programmes at the University of Iceland* are enforced in faculties and schools.
- *External quality assessment and certification.* Schools and faculties shall regularly and formally assess the quality of their majors and degrees on the Master's level. This shall be done in accordance with the *Icelandic Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF)*, which is published in the *Quality Enhancement Handbook for Icelandic Higher Education*, and the University of Iceland's *Institution-led review at the subject level*. Schools and faculties shall systematically utilise the findings of internal and external assessments to strengthen their programme's quality so that plans, measures, monitoring and improvements form a continuous improvement process. Faculties are also urged to become internationally accredited or certified, as relevant.

#### **4. Graduate School**

The Graduate School at the University of Iceland works closely with schools, faculties, the Quality Assurance Committee of the University Council and joint administration, monitors that schools and faculties follow the general and special rules on Master's programmes and these *Standards and Requirements for the Quality of Master's Programmes at the University of Iceland*.

If monitoring reveals a serious deviation from the professional or financial premises in a Master's programme of individual majors or faculties, for example, regarding attendance, efficiency, the number of or qualifications for teachers and supervisors, learning outcomes, programme results, the offering of Master's courses and facilities for job training, the Graduate School's director alerts the relevant school and faculty director and calls for a plan for improvements, with goals and dates specified. If a plan for improvement does not achieve a specified result, the Graduate School can make a proposal to the University Council to strike the relevant major from the curriculum. It shall however always be assured that the students who have already begun a programme will be able to finish it within normal time limits.

#### **5. Complaint process for Master's students**

Master's students can submit a letter to the Graduate School if they think that the relevant school, faculty or major does not meet these *Standards and Requirements for the Quality of Master's Programmes at the University of Iceland*. Otherwise, the provisions of Article 50 of the University of Iceland's Rules, no. 569/2009 on the process of students' complaints and formal student complaints, and the provisions of Art. 51 on the rights and duties of students and disciplinary sanctions apply to Master's students.

#### **6. Revision**

The Quality Assurance Committee of the University Council and governing board of the Graduate School regularly discuss these *Standards and Requirements for the Quality of Master's Programmes at the University of Iceland*. They shall be revised no later than five years after their entry into force.

## Annex 1

Under an advertisement from the Minister of Education, Science and Culture "on the publication of the *National Qualification Framework for Higher Education*", a Master's programme is 90-120 credits in accordance with an organised major and contains at least a 30-unit research project. A Master's programme ends with a Master's degree, e.g., an MA, MS, M.Ed. or M. Pharm. degree.

According to the criteria, a student completing a Master's degree, first, shall, have *knowledge of a scholarly field or vocation*. This entails that a student

- shall be familiar with scholarly subjects and issues,
- shall have acquired knowledge through research and be capable of logically supporting his or her own solutions,
- shall be able to put the latest knowledge in a relevant specialised field into context,
- shall know research methods in his or her own scholarly field and shall be familiar with the code of ethics for the sciences.

Second, upon graduation a student shall have *facility in applying methods and work procedure in a specialised scholarly field or vocation*. This entails that a student

- shall have adopted appropriate methods,
- shall know how to analyse and disseminate statistical information,
- shall be able to understand and grapple with complex subjects in a professional context,
- shall be able to utilise knowledge and understanding in professional work or a vocation,
- shall have mastered relevant equipment, technology and software,
- shall be able to gather, analyse and assess scientific data,
- shall show originality in developing and utilising ideas,
- shall be able to utilise knowledge, understanding and problem-solving abilities under new and unfamiliar circumstances or in a cross-disciplinary context of a specialised scholarly field,
- shall be able to develop projects and put them into context with methods based on theories in a specialised scholarly field and/or experiments,
- shall be capable of integrating knowledge, dealing with complex subjects and setting forth an opinion based on available information,
- shall be capable of effectively applying research methods and carrying out smaller research projects,
- shall be knowledgeable of research and its results.

Third, upon graduation a student shall have the *ability to utilise her or his knowledge and facility for jobs and/or further studies*. This entails that a student

- shall have developed the necessary academic ability and independent work procedure to be capable of tackling further studies,
- shall be capable taking initiative on projects, directing them and shouldering responsibility for the work of individuals and groups,
- shall be capable of giving an account of complex scholarly subjects and/or logically supported findings, alone or in collaboration with others, to an audience of specialists and the public,
- shall have the ability to set out and describe scholarly points and research findings in a foreign language,
- shall be capable of taking independent, professional decisions and logically supporting them,
- shall be capable of independently assessing when different analytical methods and complex scholarly points are relevant,
- shall be capable of disseminating statistical information.