

Icelandic Quality Board for Higher Education

Annex to the Handbook for the Quality Enhancement Framework for Icelandic Higher Education. (Approved by the Quality Board 08 November 2013)

A note on material conflict of Interest.

Background

- 1 The Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Iceland have their own internal requirements for avoiding conflicts of interest regarding the appointment of externals to fulfill various roles. Elements of the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) involve the appointment of externals to key roles in which it is vital that conflicts of interests are avoided. Specifically, this relates to the appointment of externals to the review panels for Institution-led Subject Level Reviews and also to the panel members for Board-led Institution-wide Reviews. In general, it is expected that the requirements of HEIs for avoiding conflicts of interest in their own processes will be in harmony with the Board's requirements. However, for the avoidance of doubt the following brief note has been prepared to outline the requirements of the Board.

Description of material conflict of interest

- 2 Within the QEF, a material conflict of interest exists when there are circumstances pertaining to an individual in the context of a particular institution that may impair, or be reasonably assumed to impair, the objectivity of the individual's professional judgement. In addition, the Board will ask itself, "seen from the outside", are there any circumstances pertaining to the individual in the context of that institution which may impair, or be assumed to impair, the individual's objective professional judgement.

Factors contributing to a material conflict of interest

- 3 The following factors constitute a material conflict of interest:
 - ⌚ A family member or close relation – any close relation either through blood or current or previous partnerships
 - ⌚ A friend – a close personal friend of any individual with any significant role in the context under review
 - ⌚ A current or recent employee of the institution
 - ⌚ An ex-employee of the institution who has maintained a close formal or informal relationship with the institution or relevant individuals within the institution
 - ⌚ A current or recent research supervisor
 - ⌚ A recent, or immediately prospective, applicant for employment at the institution
 - ⌚ A recent graduate of the institution
 - ⌚ A current or recent professional colleague from outwith the institution with whom significant joint professional activities have been undertaken. (e.g. co-author or co-researcher)

- 4 The following factors may contribute to a material conflict of interest. In these cases very careful consideration needs to be given to the potential (actual or perceived) material conflict of interest. Any of these factors should be explicitly recognized and stated and the matter explicitly weighed in the balance. In the context of Institution-led Reviews, the Board would be very happy to discuss the matter informally and in total confidence.
- ⌚ A distant relation
 - ⌚ An acquaintance but described as a close friend
 - ⌚ A colleague who has been part of a shared professional large group but not necessarily described as a close colleague, e.g. a minor collaborator in a relatively large research team
 - ⌚ An employee who left the institution more than 5 years previously
 - ⌚ A previous applicant for a post at the institution more than 5 years previously.

Application

- 5 The Board will apply these criteria to the appointment of members of its review panels for Institution-wide Review. The Board will undertake all reasonable action to ensure that no “material conflict of interest” exists between an institution and a potential reviewer (i.e. a conflict of interest which is significant and relevant to that particular context. See above, paragraph 2.) Potential reviewers will be asked to sign a statement confirming that no material conflict exists. Institutions are also asked to confirm that this is the case.
- 6 In the appointment of externals on Institution-led Subject Level Reviews, institutions are required to confirm that no material conflict of interest applies. In the case of the external reporting to the Quality Board, the Board will seek reassurance that this has been rigorously applied. In any cases where the institution is uncertain whether or not a material conflict of interest exists, advice should be sought from the Board in advance of making a formal recommendation to the Board. Assuring lack of material conflict of interest is one of the priorities of the Board in approving the nomination of an external.

Further information and discussion

- 7 Given the diversity of possible circumstances, it is both impossible and undesirable to provide an exhaustive list of factors that could create a potential conflict of interest. Colleagues are asked in all cases to consider the meaning of conflict of interest as outlined above in paragraph 2. It is always helpful to give explicit consideration to the matter of potential conflicts when making or recommending these appointments. It is usually better to err on the side of caution in these matters. Finally, the Quality Board is always very happy to discuss particular cases that pose challenges in this area.