

Accreditation Report

Doctoral Studies in the Fields of Natural Sciences and
Natural Resources

Agricultural University of Iceland

Expert Committee Report

April 2009

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I. Introduction

I.1 The Expert Committee

Dr. Christian Thune, Past Executive Director of the Danish Evaluation Institute, Denmark
(chair)

Prof. Dr. Maurice P. Boland, Principal, College of Life Sciences, University College Dublin

Prof. Dr. Raimo Hiltunen, Dean of the Faculty of Pharmacy, University of Helsinki

M.A. Magnus Lyngdal Magnusson, Head of Division for Science and Innovation, The Icelandic Centre for Research – RANNIS, Reykjavik, Iceland (Liaison Officer).

I.2 Terms of Reference

The Expert Committee is appointed according to Article 4 of Rules No. 37 on Doctoral Studies in Higher Education Institutions to provide reference of the ability of higher education institutions to provide Doctorate Degrees. The Committee is to base its reference on the components of Article 3 of the same act. They are:

- a. Role and objectives of higher education institutions for organising doctoral studies.
- b. Definition of doctoral studies with regard to the National Qualification Framework issued by the Minister of Education.
- c. Title of degree and duration of doctoral study programme.
- d. Description of admission requirements and demands for satisfactory preparation.
- e. Description of application procedure.
- f. Information about structure of doctoral study administration, including doctorate committee, doctoral defence and qualifications requirements of examiners.
- g. Accreditation of the field of study by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.
- h. Supervisors' position within the relevant study field, activity in research and published work.

- i. Information about the structure of research activities and future strategy within the relevant field of study.
- j. Information about relation between undergraduate and graduate study programmes and the number of graduated students at Master's level for the past few years.
- k. Position of the higher education institution within the study and research field and its sub-fields in international comparison. Cooperation with research institutions at national and international level, higher education institutions and companies.
- l. Description of financing of doctoral studies.

In writing the report the Committee noted a section in the application, marked with an "i" that did not fit the contents of Article 3. On closer examination the Committee discovered that section "i" is indeed included in the Icelandic version of the rules but is not in the English translation on which it was asked to base its evaluation. Part "i" states: "Information on facilities and theoretical resources, number of teaching staff and their education and experience". The Committee decided to address this part of the application under heading "i".

1.3 Working Method

The Committee received an application with appendices (see Appendix 2) on 8 December 2008. The first Committee meeting was held on 11 January 2009. The Committee made a site visit to the Agricultural University of Iceland (AUI) on 13 January 2008 (see Appendix 1) where it had the opportunity to hold discussions with the rector, senior management, deans and members of faculty, potential supervisors and PhD students. The team visited facilities and met staff at Keldnaholt, Reykjavík and at Hvanneyri where they also met two doctoral students. At Keldnaholt presentations were made on the major research activities at AUI within both Faculties of Land and Animal Resources and Environmental Sciences. The discussions were led by prof Aslug Helgadottir, Vice-Rector of Research and Dean of the Faculty of Land and Animal Resources and prof Olafur Arnalds, Dean of Faculty of Environmental Sciences; Prof. Laufey Steingrímisdóttir, AUI coordinator for graduate studies was also present. At Hvanneyri, the Expert Committee met the Rector, prof. Ágúst Sigurðsson, prof. Björn

Þorsteinsson, Vice-Rector of Academic Affairs, prof. Áslaug Helgadóttir, prof. Ólafur Arnalds and prof. Laufey Steingrimsdóttir and two doctoral students (Ms. Elsa Albertsdóttir and Ms. Gunnfríður Hreiðarsdóttir). Three staff members, prof. Bjarni D. Sigurðsson, prof. Anna Guðrún Þórhallsdóttir and prof. Ása L. Aradóttir who were not supervising any of the four current doctoral students also met the Committee.

The Committee considered its conclusions and reported its first impressions to Ministry of Education, Science and Culture representatives on 15 January 2009. Following the visit, drafts of sections of the report were circulated and the Committee agreed on a final version of the report by email correspondence.

The descriptive parts of the final version were sent to the Agricultural University of Iceland for a check of factual errors and misinterpretations on 16 March 2009. The Committee received some corrections and made minor changes which had no bearing on the recommendations.

The Expert Committee was given excellent help by Magnus Lyngdal Magnusson from Rannis in preparing and conducting the visit and most recently during the finalization of this report.

1.4 Short evaluation of the work process

The work process associated with the site visit was well organised and very informative. The formal application, while very brief, was also informative concerning the current low numbers of doctoral students at AUI. All staff and students were extremely cooperative during discussions and this added significantly to the formal application. It was difficult to conclude that the complete research process from grant proposal, grant set-up, student mentoring/advising/directing, hypothesis development, experimental design, execution of experimental work, discussion and analysis of results and writing of research papers had been carefully considered. The general impression from the application and site visit is that critical mass in doctoral student numbers and academic staff with expertise and enthusiasm in supervising/mentoring/directing students in particular disciplines is quite challenged; however, there is the potential to address this in the relatively short term to put in place the resources to deliver an academically robust doctoral programme.

II. Agricultural University of Iceland

The Agricultural University of Iceland (AUI) was founded on 1 January 2005 by merging The Agricultural Research Institute, Hvanneyri Agricultural College and the State Horticultural School. It is an educational and research institution in the field of agriculture and environmental sciences. The main focus is on the conservation and sustainable use of land and animal resources, including traditional agriculture, horticulture and forestry, environmental planning, restoration sciences, rural development and sustainable development.

The AUI awards B.Sc. degrees in these fields, and is entitled to award both M.Sc. and PhD degrees as well as providing vocational and continuing education.

The overall objective of AUI is to pursue high quality education in its academic fields supported by competitive nationally and internationally oriented research programs provided by competent and dedicated staff. AUI should also be an active participant in sustainable development of the Icelandic society and represent the country in the global forum in its academic fields.¹

III. State of Doctoral Studies at the Agricultural University of Iceland

a. Role and objectives of higher education institutions for organising doctoral studies.

The application presented very limited information in relation to the strategic research objectives of AUI; however during the initial presentation more minute details were presented about specific and varied projects in the two Faculties (Land and Animal Resources; Environmental Sciences) concerned. It was difficult to elicit details regarding a well developed financial programme to support doctoral students via competitive research funds or from University monies accumulated from overheads earned on research grants.

A strong argument was presented during the visit in relation to the desired wish to have a greater number of doctoral students working with staff to create critical mass in research. There was no indication that serious thought had been given to hiring a number of Postdoctoral Fellows who could provide tremendous impetus to the research programme, provided that sufficient numbers are in place. The Committee agreed that

¹ See <http://www.lbhi.is/index.aspx?GroupId=410&TabId=416>

more attention must be given to developing focused research programmes that are required to support a vigorous, energetic, inquisitive and enthusiastic group of doctoral students.

b. Definition of doctoral studies with regard to the National Qualification Framework issued by the Minister of Education.

The application stipulates that a doctoral student shall complete at least 30 ECTS units (out of the minimal of 180) in coursework. ECTS Units are earned by participating in subjects at an Icelandic or foreign university in accordance with the agreed course plan. The maximum number of ECTS Units that a doctoral student may take in reading subjects with a supervisor is 9 ECTS Units. It is desirable that a student takes part in teaching within her/his speciality during the course.

The minimum grade for a subject to be counted as part of the doctorate is 6.0. All learning outcomes shall be in accordance with the definition of doctoral studies with regard to the National Qualification Framework issued by the Minister of Education (Government gazette No. 80. 2007). This aspect of the application is along the lines proposed by other Icelandic universities and is appropriate for purpose.

c. Title of degree and duration of doctoral study programme.

Field of study:

- 1) Natural sciences, (categories: Nature and environmental sciences, Forest science, restoration ecology and management and Landscape planning and architecture).
- 2) Natural resources and agricultural sciences, (categories: Agricultural sciences and Equine science).

The fields of study and the duration of the programme suggested are appropriate for a doctoral programme.

d. Description of admission requirements and demands for satisfactory preparation.

An applicant needs to have completed an MSc degree (Master's degree cycle 2 level 4) from the University or hold an equivalent academic qualification from another academic institution in order to enrol in the doctorate at AUI. In exceptional cases holders of high honours at Bachelor level may be admitted, but more consideration should be given to encourage more top class home produced students enter via this route to ensure greater

numbers of students are available as doctoral students; this should not diminish the quality of the students, but may in fact raise the standard of admission to the programme.

e. Description of application procedure.

The application process for prospective doctorate students is described as follows:

- a. The student finds a supervisor.
- b. The student seeks entry to the doctoral programme on a special form available at the Education Office/AUI website. An application for the doctoral programme shall include a draft course plan and concise description of the research project and research plan. Applications shall be lodged at the AUI Education Office.
- c. A draft application for financial support for the course should also be included with the application.
- d. If the principal supervisor works for AUI, he or she is also the overseer (see Art. 9 and 10) and along with the student submits a final course plan to the Education Committee for consideration. In addition to the principal supervisor, two co-supervisors need to be nominated who together form the doctoral committee. One of these two co-supervisors also functions as an overseer if the principal supervisor is not working for AUI. The Education Committee approves the application (provisionally if dependent on funding) or rejects it, explaining why it does not fulfil all the requirements. Applications are then passed on to the faculty for comments. On receiving the faculty's comments, the Education Committee notifies applicants of the outcome in writing.
- e. Applications received before 15 April shall be processed by May 25. Applications which are received by 15 October will be processed by 15 November.

f. Information about structure of doctoral study administration, including doctorate committee, doctoral defence and qualifications requirements of examiners.

The doctoral committee shall be made up of three specialists appointed by the faculty, and shall include the overseer and principal supervisor and co-supervisor/s. One of these shall work outside the respective faculty. The doctoral committee invites the doctoral student to a meeting as necessary during the period of study and holds an

examination for her/him half way through the course. Before defending the doctorate, the doctoral committee submits supported views to the faculty about whether the doctoral candidate is ready to submit the thesis for defence.

The doctoral committee examines the doctoral candidate in general scholarly knowledge and research methods in the respective field half way through the course of study when formal courses shall usually be completed. A student must pass the exam if s/he is to continue in the doctoral programme. If the committee does not pass a student, it shall defend its decision. A doctoral programme concludes with the student submitting the thesis and presenting a lecture on it.

The faculty appoints three people to the evaluation committee to assess the scientific merit of the work, which supports the doctoral candidate's application. People from outside the University, including foreigners, may be appointed to the committee. The committee submits a written and supported report to the faculty. If it is the unanimous view of the committee members that the work submitted by the candidate does not satisfy the requirements for a doctoral thesis, the faculty shall then deny the candidate from being awarded the doctorate. The faculty usually decides for itself whether the candidate is offered the opportunity to retake the examination.

If the faculty believes the thesis to be admissible for defending the doctorate, it then nominates two opponents for the oral defence of the thesis. The doctoral candidate shall then defend the thesis at the University in public, on a day set by the faculty, but the thesis should have been public for at least four weeks before the oral defence commences. Together with the submission of the thesis the student shall also provide the doctoral committee with her or his official record of study.

A faculty nominates two opponents to the education committee for the doctoral defence and they shall be independent parties, who do not hold a seat on the doctoral committee. One of the opponents shall be from outside the faculty and it is preferable that he or she come from another university. The other may be from within the faculty.

The doctoral thesis shall be submitted to the doctoral committee and opponents no more than six weeks before the defence. The final thesis shall be a collection of papers which have been published or accepted for publication in international journals. A detailed introduction with a summary and an overview of the work shall always be

included with the collection of papers. In exceptional cases the thesis may be in the form of a book. The Education Office provides instructions about the format and layout of the thesis, the number of copies and submission to the University Library and also approves the final format.

A thesis shall usually be in English but each doctoral thesis should include an abstract in Icelandic and English.

g. Accreditation of the field of study by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture accredited AUI in the field of natural sciences in the categories of nature and environmental sciences, forest science, restoration ecology and management and landscape planning and architecture on September 5th 2007. The Ministry also accredited AUI in the field of natural resources and agricultural sciences in the categories of agricultural sciences and equine science on April 22nd 2008.

h. Supervisors' position within the relevant study field, activity in research and published work.

The overseer shall always be a permanent teacher in the field concerned. The doctoral student's principal supervisor shall always be a recognized expert in the respective field and have published articles in respected international journals in the field. The student's research project shall be in the supervisor's field of expertise.

i. Information about the structure of research activities and future strategy within the relevant field of study.

Academic staff apply for grants of international standards to the Icelandic competitive research funds (funds managed by the Icelandic Centre for Research). AUI applicants have received high scores and have been awarded a number of research grants. In addition, a number of grants have been received for more applied research from the Farmers Productivity Fund and other sources related to the Farmers' Support System.

The academic staff have participated in numerous international research projects, both on a Nordic and EU level in the field of animal husbandry, plant breeding and genetic resources, in the EU – EUROFLUX, and the Nordic CONGAS and AUI staff members contribute to the European Soil Map and Arctic Soil maps. The AUI is currently a full

member of NECC (Nordic Centre for Studies of Ecosystem Carbon Exchange and its Interactions with the Climate System).

The AUI publishes a peer-reviewed journal entitled the *Icelandic Journal of Agricultural Sciences*. Many peer-reviewed publications have been edited and published from AUI, such as the recent *Soils of Volcanic Regions of Europe* (2007, Springer), the recent *Sward dynamics, N-Flows and Forage Utilisation in Legume-Based Systems* (2006), *Quality Legume-Based Forage Systems for Contrasting Environments* (2007).

The AUI is a full member of the NOVA University Network, a joint education venue of the Nordic Agricultural and Veterinary universities (see <http://www.nova-university.org/>).

Academic staff are members of various scientific and academic societies and committees. Faculty members have been very active in the work of the Nordic Gene Banks for Farm Animals and Agricultural Plants. The AUI has participated in various EU COST Actions, had a leading role in COST-622 (Volcanic Soil Resources of Europe), and COST 852 (Quality Legume Based Forage Systems for Contrasting Environments), COST-634 and others. One professor is the Icelandic representative to the COST Agriculture and Food Domain. Staff members are also members to the EU Soil Bureau, and various committees related to forestry, landscape architecture and planning such as Nordic Centre of Advanced Research on Environmental Services (CAR-ES).

AUI experts, in co-operation with the Icelandic Soil Conservation Service, are now formulating an international training program for developing countries on soil erosion, desertification and ecosystem restoration, aimed to be a part of the United Nations University System in the future. AUI staff are active and have a leading role in a number of scientific activities in Iceland.

Because of special natural circumstances in Iceland, such as volcanic activity, special soils affecting the cultivation of agricultural plants, unique races of livestock, sub-arctic and oceanic climate and cold-climate agriculture, means that natural and agricultural sciences in Iceland can be considered unique in many respects. Catastrophic ecosystem degradation, soil erosion and desertification have also shaped Icelandic nature. Therefore all of these research fields are considered of international importance by the staff at AUI. Research and graduate studies in relation to many environmental fields, such as desertification, ecosystem restoration, afforestation and carbon sequestration

are considered by AUI to be international programs at AUI. Special emphasis is on research related to the utilization of the unique genetic resources in both livestock and agricultural plants.

Furthermore, AUI has unique datasets and databases related to nature and agriculture which are used in an international context: soil erosion, soils, the Icelandic Farmland Database, livestock and genetic databases.

AUI has reasonable research facilities, such as experimental farms, laboratories, and outdoor experiments (including long-term fertilizer experiments), which have multiple roles for internationally inclined research programs and graduate research projects. Laboratory facilities are considered to be just about adequate for the current limited research conducted there.

Within in the Faculty of Land and Animal Resources the diverse fields of research include: (1) sustainable use of genetic resources, (2) nutrient cycling in agriculture, (3) fodder and food production and varied production systems, (4) healthy production and quality products and (5) non-food production. In the near future they plan to strengthen the research in economics, molecular biology and bioenergy.

Within the Faculty of Environmental Sciences the main fields of research are: (1) carbon dynamics and global change (sequestration and release from Icelandic ecosystems); (2) effects of afforestation on ecosystems structure and function; (3) land and nature databases (soil erosion, geomorphic surfaces, farmland); (4) Icelandic soils; (5) ecosystem restoration; (6) grazing and animal behaviour.

j. Information about relation between undergraduate and graduate study programmes and the number of graduated students at Master's level for the past few years.

Little information was presented in the application linking the undergraduate programs to the proposed doctoral program and this was not the subject of major discussion during the visit. The Expert Committee was aware that the AUI had already been accredited. It was confirmed that a Master's thesis may not be used as part of a PhD. From the foundation of the University in 2005 AUI has awarded only ten MSc degrees to students. It is the Committee view that AUI will need to focus on a limited number of research areas, provide critical mass and support in these areas and desist from attempting to cover all research areas in order to be a serious player in doctoral

programmes. Failure to do so will limit the quality and quantity of applicants and may also lead to missed opportunities for subsequent employment.

k. Position of the higher education institution within the study and research field and its sub-fields in international comparison. Cooperation with research institutions at national and international level, higher education institutions and companies.

As this is a very new university it is perhaps not surprising that its research programme is not well developed and is predominantly applied rather than basic in nature. However, significant strides have been made by a very limited number of younger staff who are currently training PhD students. Part of a doctorate programme at AUI may be taken at another Icelandic or foreign university. The weighting of subjects and projects at AUI and other universities shall be stated clearly in the course plan which is submitted to the Education Committee and faculty for approval before enrolment.

The Agricultural University of Iceland co-operates with various other universities, both domestic and international, with regard to mutual recognition of studies. A formal agreement has been signed between the University of Iceland and AUI. There is a formal co-operation between the agricultural and veterinary Universities of the Nordic Countries (NOVA Network), with joint courses being offered and a mutual recognition of coursework. The Nordic universities offer joint PhD courses in many fields, and joint MSc programs are being developed in soil science, forestry and other fields. Furthermore, there are formal agreements with international universities, such as Guelph University, Canada, Aalborg University, Denmark, University of Tromsø, Norway, and Ohio State University, USA. Other agreements are currently being formalized. Students that have graduated from the AUI have received full recognition abroad for their coursework undertaken at the AUI.

The proposal aspires to ensure that the study lines of the Agricultural University of Iceland are based on international perspectives, and can be compared to similar degree plans in larger universities in the field of agriculture, natural resources and management, landscape architecture and planning. The application indicates that study requirements and outcomes are comparable to what is common in both domestic universities and abroad. It is difficult to conclude that the study programme is comparable to overseas universities, because the programme is so new and no PhD student has graduated, few Master's students have also graduated.

The composition of the academic staff is favourable for academic and educational qualifications (see part III.h and III.k), with relatively large proportion of PhD's and academically qualified full professors and associate professors. Research is indicated as more than half of the activity of the AUI, both in terms of manpower and monetary expenditure, supporting its role as a research university. Staff in the field of natural sciences (Faculty of Environmental Sciences) is as follows: seven professors, two associate professors, seven assistant professors and four other specialists. Among these staff 11 are PhD graduates and 8 have MSc or equivalent (e.g. cand. scient.) qualification.

In the field of natural resources and agricultural sciences (Faculty of Land and Animal Resources) the faculty composition is as follows: four professors, three associate professors, seven assistant professors and three other specialists. Among these staff 8 are PhD graduates and 6 have MSc or equivalent (e.g. cand. scient.) qualification.

l. Description of financing of doctoral studies.

The application indicated that financial support will be sought from appropriate national research funds (funds managed by the Icelandic Centre for Research, the Agricultural Productivity Fund, the Research Fund of the Reykjavík Energy Authority, etc.) and in connection with international cooperation. AUI will pay for the work carried out by the principal supervisor, provided he or she is a permanent member of staff or, alternatively, seek cooperation with other universities, institutions or companies if necessary.

During the site visit it was not possible to get a clear picture of the financial support, if any, in place to support the start-up of a serious doctoral programme; general statements were made that the programme would be financed, but it was not possible to get down to specific details or concrete examples. Enquiries regarding overhead income from external grants and an associated overhead investment plan failed to elicit a clear and precise answer as to what if any plan is in place. The Expert Committee therefore decided that this was something that had not received sufficient serious consideration; it is the view of the Committee that such an investment plan must be developed and put in place before the research and the doctoral program develop, thrive and expand to become a serious international player in the chosen and somewhat diverse fields. Implementation of the plan (when and if in place) will be a significant administrative

workload to ensure transparency for the individual PI whose job it will be to bring in funds with overhead financial support attached.

IV. Issues arising

The Expert Committee is of the view that there are a number of issues that must be developed before full and unconditional accreditation should be recommended. Overall the written application provided minimal data on which to base a judgement and there appeared to be relatively little academic input to the application, apart from the senior administrative team. The Committee expected to find a well rehearsed series of arguments from the various meetings as to why the Committee should recommend accreditation. This did not happen and in fact apart from a few members there was almost a sense of resignation that AUI is small and this should be awarded. It must be stressed that enthusiasm, energy and “can-do” attitude of the two doctoral students stood out a shining beacon in an otherwise run-of-the-mill site visit.

The issues identified by the Expert Committee that should be addressed include:

- AUI should focus on a limited number of major programme areas to ensure that it develops the critical mass to support the research programme that will underpin the implementation of a successful doctoral programme.
- AUI must develop a financial plan to initiate and sustain the doctoral programme.
- The Committee is concerned that there is a possibility of loan scholar syndrome developing because AUI may be spreading its resources too thinly over many areas; leadership is required to ensure that appropriate focus occurs.
- The Committee is of the opinion that support for current graduate students was less than adequate in some instances; this is not facilitated by the bilocation of the campuses.
- Structured training of doctoral students needs development by way of generic and specific 4th level courses.

- Staff are involved in the delivery of significant 3rd level courses and planning must be such to ensure that they have sufficient time to devote to supervising/mentoring doctoral students.
- The Committee strongly suggest that doctoral students be better integrated into the academic community by way of seminars, providing tutorial/practical support for undergraduate students and by delivering a limited number of formal lectures during their doctoral training.
- Because of the relatively small size of AUI, there is a concern for establishing critical mass in a number of areas. This has to be balanced by the requirement to deliver undergraduate courses necessary for current students, while being cognisant of isolation from colleagues who are willing and able to scientifically challenge current dogma.

V. Recommendations

The Expert Committee considered carefully the application, the information provided during the site visit and the potential to develop doctoral programmes in the areas identified. The Committee is clearly of the view that the programme is not sufficiently well developed, nor has the staff had the critical and searching critique of what is required for such a programme to recommend unconditional accreditation; however we are recommending accreditation for a four year period. During this period the staff must undertake a complete review of what is required for a serious, robust and credible doctoral programme that will compete on a national and international basis; graduates need to compete afterwards for academic/industry positions. AUI should take full advantage of the agreement with the University of Iceland and consider amalgamating for the benefit of staff, students and Icelandic science and education.

VI. Signatures of the Accreditation Expert Committee.

Dr. Christian Thune, *Denmark*
Chairman

Prof. Dr. Maurice P. Boland, *Ireland*

Prof. Dr. Raimo Hiltunen, *Finland*

Appendix 1: Agenda of site visit of Expert Committee to the Agricultural University of Iceland 13 January 2009

- 09:30 – 10:45** AUI research facilities, Keldnaholt, Reykjavík. Presentations of the major research activities at AUI with emphasis on Faculty of Land and Animal Resources.
- 10:45 – 11:45** Travel from AUI Reykjavík to AUI Hvanneyri university campus.
- 12:00 – 13:00** Lunch
- 13:00 – 14:00** Sight seeing of the Hvanneyri campus and AUI facilities.
- 14:00 – 14:30** Meeting with PhD students
- 14:30 – 15:00** Further discussions – other staff joining according to the wishes of the Committee.
- 15:00** Departure to Reykjavík.

Appendix 2: List of documents received

From the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture

Higher Education Act 63/2006 (draft translation)

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

From the Agricultural University of Iceland (in addition to the application itself)

1. Regulations for the Agricultural University of Iceland doctoral programme
2. Individual study plan and contract form for PhD studies at Agricultural University of Iceland
3. List of recent publications by Agricultural University of Iceland staff
4. International cooperation in teaching and research