

# Faculty of Psychology

## SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

### Subject-level Review Report



February 2021

## Introduction

This report is an abstract of the subject-level review for the Faculty of Psychology at the University of Akureyri. The review was carried out in response to the requirement to conduct subject-level reviews within the institution-wide review undertaken by the Icelandic Quality board for Higher Education, under the authority of the Icelandic Government. Subject-level reviews are one of the main elements of the *Quality Enhancement Framework for Icelandic Higher Education (QEF)*, as described in full in the *Quality Enhancement Handbook for Icelandic Higher Education* (2nd edition, 2017, QEF2). This review closely follows Section 3 of the Handbook: *Subject-Level Review including research*.

The committee members were:

1. Dr. Árni Gunnar Ásgeirsson, Associate Professor
2. Dr. Guðmundur Torfi Heimisson, Assistant Professor and Head of Faculty
3. Dr. Peter Shepherdson, Assistant Professor
4. Dr. Yvonne Höller, Professor
5. Steinunn Alda Gunnarsdóttir, 3<sup>rd</sup> year undergraduate student
6. Vaka Halldórsdóttir, 2<sup>nd</sup> year undergraduate student

## Faculty Characteristics

A baccalaureate programme in Psychology has existed at the University of Akureyri since 2003. The first psychology cohort was graduated on June 10th of 2006, a total of 16 graduates. In 2019, the graduation cohort counted a total of 61 graduates. The programme became a standalone faculty in 2019 but was until then housed within a larger faculty of various programmes in UNAK's School of Social Sciences & Humanities. The Faculty became independent during an administrative restructuring of the College, which was undertaken to streamline administration of a faculty formerly known as the Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities, Psychology, and Law. The restructuring resulted in three separate faculties: Social Sciences and Humanities, Psychology, and Law, respectively. Becoming a Faculty on our own gives us greater flexibility and the possibility to focus on core aspects of development within the Faculty. The additional workload of administering the Faculty is the main challenge but leaves us with advanced possibilities of change and innovation in teaching, research and administration itself. These include a higher speed of change processes, more independence in design of the course catalogue, and financial separation from other study lines in our former faculty which has given us the freedom to more flexibly use the resources.

The psychology faculty at UNAK is very small compared to other psychology faculties in Iceland. UNAK's psychology faculty currently has five permanent members and one temporary member. Two permanent positions are pending budgetary approval. In contrast, the faculties at the University of Iceland and Reykjavík

University have 22 and 20 members, respectively. By virtue of its small size, UNAK's psychology faculty is a generalist one when it comes to teaching. All current UNAK psychology faculty members have a quantitative approach to research.

Despite being much smaller than other faculties, we receive a similar number in applications from students, which led to the situation of a very high student-to-instructor ratio. Distant and flexible teaching is a unique feature of our programme in psychology, which is the main reason for the high number of applications.

However, all BA/BSc Psychology programmes must be rather similar for the degree to be accepted by receiving institutions (e.g., where students are applying to graduate programmes). All changes in emphasis have the potential to negatively affect alumni opportunities for further education.

The academic orientation of the baccalaureate psychology programme at UNAK has been of a generalist nature since its inception. Its tacit aim was to prepare students for graduate study in psychology, but since psychology was not a Faculty in its own right, it did not have its own vision and mission. The new Faculty of Psychology has drafted a vision and mission to provide this guidance. A critical focus of the new Faculty's vision and mission is to support and increase research activity. A proposal for a master's level programme in Psychology has been created and submitted to the UNAK quality board for review.

As already mentioned, the psychology programme has been steadily increasing in popularity. After the economic crisis of 2008, student numbers rapidly outgrew new academic hires, culminating in a period of higher than desired student-to-faculty ratio, excessive teaching loads among permanent faculty, large numbers of adjuncts, and high employee turnover. To remedy this, new academic hires were made, and the number of students allowed to proceed after the first semester has now been capped at 60, with progression determined by a student's mean grade from three core courses taken during the first semester. Steps have also been taken to support research collaboration within the Faculty, and support research of individual Faculty members. While there is still room for improvement in the student-to-faculty ratio, the interventions described above have nevertheless made it possible to increase the research output of the faculty as a whole, and improve the quality of teaching and learning at the Faculty.

The current Faculty of Psychology at UNAK consists of permanent members Árni Gunnar Ásgeirsson, Kristín Guðmundsdóttir (on leave), Guðmundur T. Heimisson (chair), Yvonne Höller, and Peter Shepherdson. The Faculty's collective expertise includes Perception & Memory, Cognitive & Quantitative Psychology, Applied Behavior Analysis, Psychometrics, and Cognitive Neuroscience.

The Faculty of Psychology at UNAK is a young faculty, but one that has seen significant strides forward in the short time since its inception. While there is still room for improvement, the Faculty's relatively flat hierarchy, collegial culture, drive to succeed, and emphasis on data-based decision-making also allow room for optimism and hope for a bright future.

## Summary and Main Conclusions for the Faculty

### Lessons learned from QEF1

The Psychology Faculty at UNAK is a new faculty, founded in 2019, and the current self-evaluation is the first in which it takes part, so we have no prior lessons from which to draw. We have, however, drawn lessons from the reflections that the quantitative and qualitative self-reflections in the current process allowed. We found the current self-evaluation process quite in line with the Faculty's ethos; this ethos entails transparency in administration, data-based decision-making, streamlined administrative processes, ownership in the Faculty's

direction through delegation of responsibilities, and an active dialogue between faculty and students. Becoming a Faculty on our own gives us greater flexibility and the possibility to focus on core aspects of development within the Faculty. The additional workload of administering the Faculty is the main challenge but leaves us with advanced possibilities of change and innovation in teaching, research and administration itself. These include faster change processes, more independence in design of the course catalogue, and financial separation from other study lines in our former faculty which has given us the freedom to more flexibly use our resources.

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The strengths of the Faculty consist in the congenial work atmosphere with flat hierarchies and efficient day-to-day administration. This administrative strength lets this small group handle challenging situations professionally and with as little overhead as possible. Furthermore, the Faculty is particularly strong in research, with high research output, interdisciplinary and international collaborations, and a strong quantitative methods background. We are thankful for the opportunity of this self-reflection allowed by this process, and look forward to further engagement in the future.

## Teaching and Learning

The Faculty of Psychology has fully implemented distance and flexible learning. All courses are online with extensive multimedia content. All lectures are recorded and can be accessed by all students equally. Instructors often use Zoom to invite distance students to join the classroom and to participate in interactive contents online. These prerequisites ensure that on-site and distance students have equal opportunities. As a result, students are less dependent on time and place and are often situated far away from the learning centre, in some cases even abroad. Furthermore, the "flexible" nature of the courses benefits students who are studying part time and working or having families. This model particularly benefits mothers and fathers with young children.

The downside of this maximal flexibility is that the number of students attending classrooms is often as low as one or two students, and usually not more than 5-10 students. This situation is neither satisfying for instructors nor on-site students. Although instructors work hard to increase the interactive components of their classes, attendance is low, even for students living in Akureyri. However, instructors do feel well prepared for the technical challenges that need to be faced in this flexible model of teaching. In addition, pedagogical training is offered by UNAK. One faculty member is already enrolled in this training.

Another aspect that needs to be considered concerning students following the "flexible" model is that they can sometimes not invest the time they are expected to have. The curriculum is intended to require full time study, which does not match with the reality of many students who are working full time or, in fact, full time busy with their families.

To counteract the pressure from students to get their studies done in less time we continue to emphasize that flexible does not imply less work. One of our countermeasures is to continuously work on making courses demanding enough to justify the ECTS assigned to them. As soon as part-time studies are implemented formally, this model will be advocated to those students who cannot devote 40h/week to the studies. Many

instructors have implemented synchronous teaching sessions, which can be made obligatory and sometimes are required.

Furthermore, adaptation to this learning environment is also taking place in the form of various approaches to teaching, for example in fully online courses, and documentation of students' participation in the online activities, structured and unstructured, as well as in terms of the students' time management when the course in its entirety has been made available from the start of the semester. Looking at data such as these, we will compare participation and student activity to those of a hybrid on-site / online format.

In terms of workload, it should also be mentioned that no formal evaluation of workload has ever been done. As such, there is no evidence regarding equivalence of workload across the courses, and the extent to which courses meet the expected workload according to the assigned ECTS should be ascertained.

Instructors make use of electronic assessment techniques for final exams, and any written assignments are usually submitted electronically. Final exams are increasingly delivered using a closed browser (Respondus lockdown browser), to assist with valid assessment of knowledge. In addition to contributing to assessment validity, this objective assessment acts against grade-inflation. Grade inflation is a potential problem, because it is theorised to reduce the quality of the signal obtained from students' grades in assessment of their credentials, instead encouraging potential employers to focus on institutional reputation when choosing which candidates to hire (e.g., Chan, Hao, & Suen, 2007). This can negatively affect the competitiveness of students from smaller universities such as ours in situations where they are competing with graduates of larger and better-known universities for opportunities in both employment and graduate studies. Additionally, students tend to expend less effort in courses with higher average grades, likely reducing the extent of their learning (e.g., Babcock, 2010). Thus, protecting against grade inflation may have benefits for students' learning and employment outcomes. We are currently considering methods to ensure that grading across courses remains consistent and fair, and to prevent any incidence of grade inflation. In particular, discussions regarding solutions such as limiting the maximum average grade for any course, and implementing a standardised grading curve, are in progress.

## Management of Research

The members of the Faculty of Psychology are all passionate about research, but a consistent complaint is that too little time is available for research. The main problem faced is a heavy load of overtime teaching.

Faculty members try to reduce the amount of overtime teaching by hiring teaching assistants and by outsourcing teaching to sessional instructors.

All Faculty members hold a doctoral degree (N= 5), except for one recently hired and highly promising adjunct who is scheduled to complete his doctoral degree less than one year from now. Members represent different disciplines of Psychology, which is in alignment with the aim to let experts teach contents from their discipline of research and allows the emphasis of links between teaching and research.

The Faculty's research is undertaken in areas such as cognition, electrophysiology, sports and performance, behavior analysis, and psychometrics. Research is being conducted in an international context.

Internationalization of research is not a phenomenon restricted to single Faculties, but it is becoming the norm at most institutions since policy makers and funding schemes force international careers upon researchers.

The publishing activity of the Faculty members is reflected by the research points, which are mainly attributed to indexed publications. The faculty does not have its own publication strategy more explicit than the aim listed

in the Vision and Mission of an annual increase of research points. The system for achieving research points awards provide credit only to peer-reviewed publications, and not to predatory publishing.

As the Faculty of Psychology became a Faculty in its own right only recently, the only year for which Faculty-level data on publishing activity exist is 2018. However, the numbers are highly encouraging. The total number of research points of the Faculty is 222, with a per-person average of 32, which is the highest within the School, for which the average is 25. Also, Impact points of the Faculty amount to 153, with a per-person average of 22, which is again the highest within the School, and accordingly higher than the average of 16 within the School. The Faculty will continue to monitor the progress of research within the scope of the aims defined in the Mission and Vision.

Support for grant writing at UNAK is restricted to an offer provided by the research office, which includes help with finding funding agencies and help with formalities. This offer has not been used by the Faculty so far. More support from UNAK would be needed such as freeing up time for grant writing (i.e., by reducing the teaching and administrative workload). The faculty members use their international networks when applying for grants but write their applications themselves.

As a special hallmark in the recent history of the Faculty, in 2018 a grant was acquired which contributed to the establishment of core facilities. The result is the foundation of the “*Brain and Cognition Lab*”, which is equipped with a 32-channel EEG System by Brain Products and a Cambridge Research Systems high-speed eye tracker. The lab includes also computing facilities for processing our research data and for computational modelling.

Current research topics in the lab include, for example, visual attention and memory, emotional arousal biases of attention, synesthesia, retrieval effects of memory, short term memory architecture, EEG studies in seasonal affective disorder, and reliability of quantitative EEG.

The Faculty welcomes bachelor's and Master's Students in the lab, conducting research within the scope of their theses, and includes the lab-facilities into teaching in the Faculty of Psychology.

The Faculty does not currently have a doctoral programme. However, our aim is to be considered for a doctoral programme during the next audit of the ministry of education. The university only enrolled its first doctoral student in 2018 and the then psychology study line was not among those accredited. This was before the department became a faculty and while being severely short-staffed. Since then, three new faculty members have been hired (2 added to the total number), one of whom has become a full professor.

Furthermore, the Faculty has started a master's programme for the first time in September 2020. Therefore, the Faculty is optimistic that we will have accreditation within a few years.

## Follow-up Processes

One year after completion of the self evaluation (i.e., in April 2021), the Faculty will prepare a follow-up evaluation and a status report based on the Management Plan, the Report and the current status of projects in the to-do list. A report about this follow-up will be submitted by the Chair of the Faculty to the Quality Management Board.

## Appendix 1. Key Figures.

**Table 1. overview of present study Programmes within the Faculty**

| Name of Study Programme   | Cycle <sup>1</sup> | Degree | Credits (ECTS) |
|---------------------------|--------------------|--------|----------------|
| SÁL Psychology            | 1.2                | BA     | 180            |
| SRM Psychology (research) | 2.2                | MA     | 120            |

<sup>1</sup> See National Qualification Framework for Higher Education No. 530/2011.

**Table 2. Faculty Members as of December 1<sup>st</sup> 2020 and sessional instructors 2020, number (No.) and full time-equivalent (FTE)**

|                       | Men No | FTE  | Women No. | FTE  | Total No. | FTE  |
|-----------------------|--------|------|-----------|------|-----------|------|
| Professors            | 0      | 0.00 | 1         | 1.00 | 1         | 1.00 |
| Associate Professors  | 1      | 1.00 | 0         | 0.00 | 1         | 1.00 |
| Assistance Professors | 2      | 2.00 | 1         | 1.00 | 3         | 3.00 |
| Adjunct Lectures      | 1      | 1.00 | 0         | 0.00 | 1         | 1.00 |
| Total                 | 4      | 4.00 | 2         | 2.00 | 6         | 6.00 |
| Sessional instructors | 4      | 0.00 | 10        | 0.00 | 14        | 0.00 |

**Table 3. Total number of students, number of entrants, retention rate for first year, and completion rate (3-year mean).**

| Programme     | No. of students |           |           | No. of entrants | Retention rate | No. of graduates | Completion rate (semester) |
|---------------|-----------------|-----------|-----------|-----------------|----------------|------------------|----------------------------|
|               | Total no.       | Full time | Part time |                 |                |                  |                            |
| BA Psychology | 336             | 279       | 57        | 139             | 91/139         | 61               | 7                          |
| MA Psychology | 2               | 2         | 0         | -               | -              | 0                | -                          |

**Table 4. Research output of Faculty members, based on the Evaluation system for the Public Universities in Iceland, expressed by total research points (A) and research points from peer-reviewed publications only (B)**

|                   | 2017 <sup>2</sup> |      | 2018 <sup>2</sup> |      | 2019 |      | Mean |      |
|-------------------|-------------------|------|-------------------|------|------|------|------|------|
|                   | A                 | B    | A                 | B    | A    | B    | A    | B    |
| <b>Faculty</b>    | 539               | 315  | 836               | 548  | 175  | 137  | 517  | 333  |
| <b>School</b>     | 1025              | 566  | 1375              | 843  | 1424 | 755  | 1275 | 721  |
| <b>University</b> | 2142              | 1156 | 2577              | 1460 | 3007 | 1615 | 2575 | 1410 |

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Psychology was part of the Faculty of Social Science and Law

## Appendix 2. Action Plan for Teaching and Learning in QEF2

### 1. FACULTY LEVEL

| Actions    |   | How   | Deadlines     | Responsible party |
|------------|---|---|---------------|-------------------|
| Ch.<br>1.2 | Faculty Characteristics   |   |               |                   |
| 1          | Faculty becomes a lobby for quality in the flexible studies model.<br>Increase consistency between educational needs and advertising content.<br>Find definition of flexible studies.<br>Provide formal structure of part-time degree completion.<br>Emphasize teaching for students living in rural areas. | Gauge number of students participating in classes.<br>Number of students who moved to part-time model.<br>Number of students enrolled that live in rural areas. | May, annually | Faculty           |
| 2          | Focusing on sustainability when selecting publication outlets.<br>Consider environmental impacts when choosing conference options. The faculty serves as a lobby for sustainable decision making within UNAK.   | Measure sustainability of publishing.<br>Number of electronic-only / open-access publications.  | May, annually | Faculty           |
| 3          | Create transparent structures and timelines for proposing   | Structures in place and in use.   | December 2021 |                   |



|         |   |   |                   |                             |
|---------|---|---|-------------------|-----------------------------|
|         | and implementing changes, e.g. a waiting list for topics proposed by faculty members.   |   |                   |                             |
| Ch. 1.3 | Academic Vision   |   |                   |                             |
| 1       | Highlight opportunities for faculty to engage in professional development. Establish a peer-support system among instructors. Having a linearly standardized grading scheme across classes. | Participation of faculty members in professional development. Peer-support system in place. Distributions of grades across courses are consistent.                          | December annually |                             |
| 2       | Quantify faculty research output. Increase collaboration among faculty members. Increase faculty research output. Provide and use infrastructure in the form of a psychology lab.           | Total research points will be documented each year. Total research points will increase by at least 7.5% per year (3-year average). Number of studies conducted in the lab. | August annually   | Rector's office/<br>Faculty |

## 2. STUDY PROGRAMMES

### SÁL Psychology (BA 180 ECTS)

|   | Actions   | How   | Deadlines          | Responsible party |
|---|---|---|--------------------|-------------------|
| 1 | Increased course offerings in applied psychology with an emphasis on methods and technology, e.g. automation, artificial intelligence, interconnection through internet.  | Number of applied Psychology courses in place.  | March, annually    | Faculty           |
| 2 | Integrate international students into student community. Highlight opportunity of psychology exchange students to come to Akureyri. Increase opportunities for local students to go abroad. Let (exchange) students share their diverse experiences in classroom. | International teams in group work. Number of international students in class. Number of psychology students doing an exchange semester. Student interaction in class increases. | Ongoing evaluation | Faculty           |

|   |   |  |                 |         |
|---|---|--|-----------------|---------|
| 3 | Change course catalogue in order to increase the international comparability of our studies.<br>Having instructors who are experts in what they are teaching.<br>Establish measurement of actual workload per course, as compared to ECTS.<br>Establish regular plagiarism checking in all courses and all assignments. | Similarity of our course catalogue compared to major Universities.<br>Match between instructor's CV and course topics.<br>Measurement in place for each course.<br>Plagiarism check in place for each assignment of all courses. | March, annually | Faculty |
|---|---|--|-----------------|---------|

## SRM Psychology (MA 120 ECTS)

|   | Actions   | How  | Deadlines                | Responsible party |
|---|---|--|--------------------------|-------------------|
| 1 | To develop a research-focused master's programme at the Faculty   | Program in place                                       | Set to begin August 2021 | Faculty           |
| 2 | Increase course offerings at postgraduate level   | Courses developed and approved by quality board        | Ongoing development      | Faculty           |
| 3 | Compare and co-ordinate learning objectives between MA programme and BA programme to facilitate the appropriate continuum and progression. Examine course workload for compatibility with ECTS. | Examination of learning objectives and course syllabi. | June, annually           | Faculty           |