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Gyða Jóhannsdóttir og Jón Torfi Jónasson

The development dynamics of a small higher education system Iceland – A case in point

► **About the authors** ► **Key words**

Carried out in 2011 to 2012, this study investigated how the higher education (HE) system has developed in a small country, Iceland, compared to the HE systems of larger countries, such as the US, Japan and other Nordic and European countries. Similarities and differences in the HE systems were sought by focussing on the following issues: 1) the expansion of HE participation, 2) the structural development of HE systems and various categories of academic drift, and 3) the regulation and evaluation of HE institutions, including the establishment of quality assurance agencies.

The article intends to answer three questions: 1. To what extent can it be assumed that HE develops in essentially the same way in a very small system as in larger or even much larger systems? 2. Does Icelandic HE present significantly different drivers of change than larger systems for which comparable data exist? 3. Can specific development problems be identified in a small system that do not come to the fore in the larger systems? Our data stem from the available literature as well as various official documents and statistical data banks.

Regarding the dimensions explored, the principal conclusions are that small and large systems show essentially the same development characteristics. Governmental and institutional agents as well as students were also revealed to act in similar ways, whether in small or large systems. On the whole, Icelandic HE faces the same problems as larger systems, even though some differences were found, such as in Iceland students having had until recently to go abroad for graduate studies, and in the implementation of quality systems, as through quality assurance agencies.

Kvik þróun lítills háskólakerfis: Dæmi frá Íslandi

► Um höfunda ► Efnisorð

Í rannsókn frá árunum 2011–2012 er þróun háskólamenntunar í litlu landi, Íslandi, könnuð í ljósi af þróun háskólamenntunar í stærri löndum, einkum á Norðurlöndum en einnig í öðrum Evrópulöndum, Bandaríkjunum og Japan. Kannað er hvað er líkt og ólíkt með þróuninni á Íslandi og annars staðar og sjónum er beint að eftirfarandi þáttum: 1. Þenslu æðri menntunar. 2. Þróun skipulags á háskólastigi og nokkurra flokka bóknámsreks. 3. Fyrirkomulagi mats í háskólum, einkum með tilliti til stofnunar sérstakra eftirlitsstofnana og til skipulags þeirra.

Umræðan snýst um þrjár spurningar: 1. Að hvaða leyti er skynsamlegt að gera ráð fyrir að þróun háskólamenntunar í litlu landi sé í grundvallaratriðum sú sama og þróunin í stærri og jafnvel mun stærri löndum? 2. Standa önnur hagsmunaeða breytingaöfl að baki breytingum á íslenska háskólakerfinu en á við í öðrum löndum þar sem samanburðargögn liggja fyrir? 3. Koma í ljós sérstök vandamál í litlu háskólakerfi sem gera ekki endilega vart við sig í stærri háskólakerfum? Rannsóknin byggir á fræðilegum heimildum, margskonar opinberum gögnum og upplýsingum úr ýmsum gagnabönkum.

Meginniðurstöður með tilliti til ofangreindra spurninga eru að þróunareinkenni lítills háskólakerfis og stærri kerfa eru í grundvallaratriðum þau sömu. Niðurstöður leiða einnig í ljós að þáttur stjórnvalda, stofnana og nemenda er að mestu leyti sá sami í litlu háskólakerfi og í stærri kerfum. Á heildina litið koma sömu vandamál upp á Íslandi og í stærri löndum en þó má greina mun, svo sem um stofnun og skipulag eftirlitsstofnana, og þá staðreynd að til skamms tíma þurftu íslenskir háskólanemendur að sækja framhaldsnám til annarra landa.

The Development Dynamics of a Small HE System

Discussions on the development of higher education (hereinafter abbreviated as HE) often assume that despite having varying histories, HE systems generally show rather robust characteristics of development (Peterson A. D. C., 1971; Rothblatt & Wittrock, 1993; Rüegg, 2004). A particular assumption, especially of those exploring smaller HE systems, is that these develop similarly to larger systems. Bray and Parker (1993, p. xxiii) for instance claim “that certain features of small states are indeed generalizable despite differences in culture, geography and economic development, ... (although) some features and processes ... are exaggerated and assume greater significance in small states”. In order to underpin such kindred evolution, HE and development are sometimes observed from the perspective of institutional theory (Meyer, Ramirez, Frank, & Schofer, 2007), allowing for the conclusion that HE on a global scale is largely isomorphic, as though some kind of blueprint was being transferred from one system to another.

National reforms of HE policy and governance have without doubt been influenced by transnational tendencies such as the Bologna and Lisbon goals promoted by the European Union, OECD recommendations, etc. In turn, national reforms have influenced the policy and governance of universities (see Neave & Maassen, 2007). The apparent resulting trend is for the HE institutions and systems of different countries to gain in similarity, as each organization adapts to its environment by reacting more or less similarly to ever more uniform environmental conditions (van Vught, 1996). There is some empirical evidence, at least for the last few decades, of this HE homogenization having mainly occurred as a process to be understood as academic drift (Jóhannsdóttir, 2008; Jónasson, 2004a, 2004b; Kyvik, 2004, 2009; Neave, 1979). Some examples of this evidence include steadily rising student participation, a gradually increasing participation in the ranking exercise (Hazelkorn, 2011) together with the regulation of evaluation (Danö & Stensaker, 2007), the structural development of HE systems (Kyvik 2009), and the tendency of non-

university institutions to copy certain aspects of more prestigious institutions which are frequently universities (Morphew, 2000). This is in line with the prognosis suggested by Ramirez (2006, p. 124): using “organizational parlance one expects growing institutional isomorphism, as different universities increasingly experience common rationalizing influences from a common organizational field” (p. 124).

Nonetheless, indications that small systems develop essentially like larger ones does not preclude the existence of some differences that cannot be accounted for by mere reference to system size, even if size is the most obvious aspect. While certain problems depend directly on size (i.e. capacity) of the system as a whole, other problems may relate to factors such as the scope or ambition of individual institutions. Further practical factors may come into play, such as the question of the language used, for instance when it is a language spoken by relatively few.

Here we present a study which we carried out in 2011 to 2012, comparing the development of the HE system in a small country (Iceland with its 325,000 inhabitants) to that in larger countries, taking examples from the US, Japan, and other Nordic and European countries, based on an analysis of official documents and student data, including legislation, regulations, scholarly writings and data banks.

The main aim of the study was to clarify similarities and differences between the development of a relatively small HE system, as represented by Iceland, and the development of larger or even much larger systems. In the process we wished to pinpoint some of the drivers of change, i.e. the forces seeming to push or modulate development, and identify the potential interested constituencies or stakeholders in small versus larger HE systems that may affect change, as well as some of the developmental problems in a small HE system which are hardly noticed in larger HE systems.

In order to achieve this aim, we explored the following aspects, drawing on the relevant theoretical frameworks:

- A. Characteristics of HE system expansion
- B. Development of HE system structures, with reference to Scott's typology (1995)
- C. Various academic drifts: policy drift, sector drift, student drift (as related to the population's drive to obtain steadily higher degrees, i.e. credentialism) and institutional drift (as related to the ranking discourse and the expansion of graduate programmes)
- D. Regulation and evaluation of HE institutions, with a view to the nature of quality assurance agencies

This paper seeks out the background of these aspects within the theoretical frameworks, describing our methods and finally our results.

HE system expansion

Over the long term, all HE education systems expand, and this expansion seems in many cases to be accelerating. The globally increasing rates emerge clearly in data presented by Schofer and Meyer (2005), enabling our inference that the overall global rate of expansion is approximately 4.2%, cf. *Figure 1*. If we perceive this growth as exponential and find the best-fit exponent, HE growth presents itself as relatively constant (Jónasson, 2003).

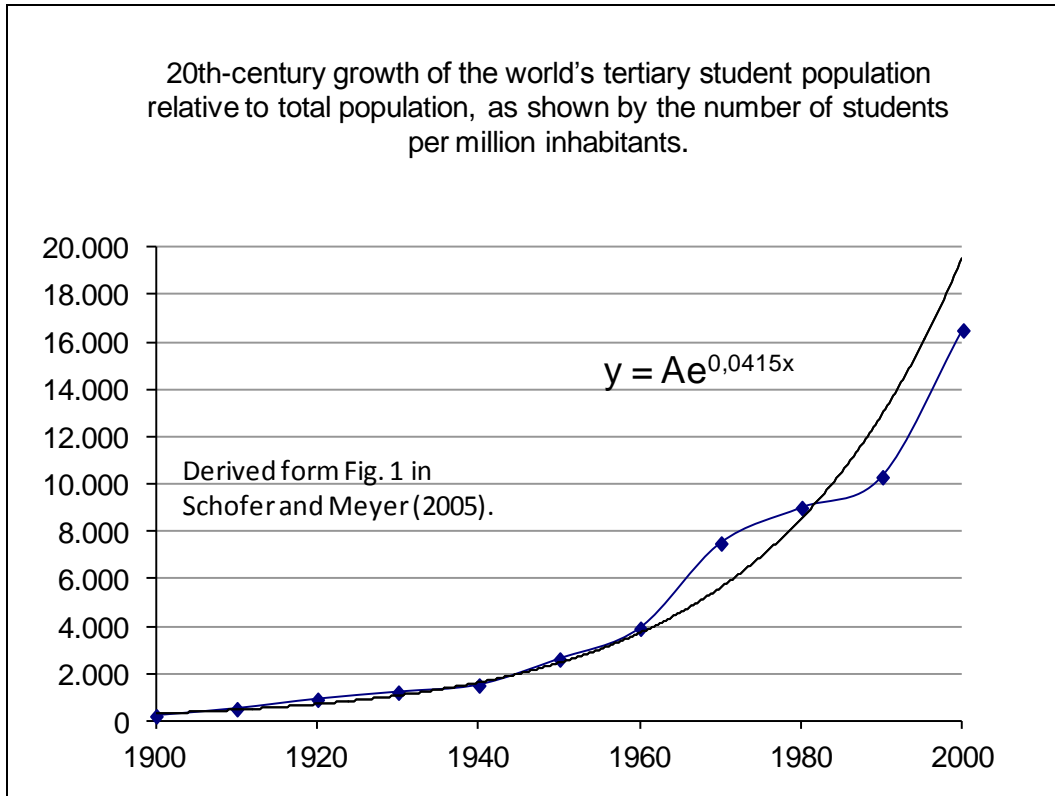


Figure 1 – Growth in the world tertiary student population during the 20th century, based on the data points presented by Schofer and Meyer in their Figure 1 (Schofer & Meyer, 2005). The smooth line above shows the estimated exponential growth, averaging approximately 4.2% over this period, in the tertiary population world-wide, figured in relation to overall population.

There are actually many problems in documenting this growth over long periods for individual countries, mainly because the available statistics are frequently fragmented. However, substantial differences between countries do come to light, even if this may not be the most meaningful dimension for comparison, due to the fact that we are comparing smaller with larger countries. Using the World Bank data base for the period of 2003 to 2011, it can be calculated that there were 21 countries with tertiary level expansion rates above 10%, and 47 countries with expansion rates above 5% (World Bank, 2013). The major challenge then remains to obtain comparable statistics over long periods because of different changes in the various systems, even regarding countries that in fact offer substantial statistics. What were considered clear-cut categories a century ago – when there was for instance no question whether institutions were universities or not – are no longer unequivocal and thus do not allow for comparison between periods. Even though some systems have developed dual systems, where certain institutions could in principle be assigned to the university category, other countries have opted for unified systems, such as the UK, Iceland, Spain and, from a certain perspective, Sweden.

In order to understand the dynamics of HE sector development, it might be argued that one should specifically consider the polytechnics or högskolar in countries like Finland and Norway and see how these develop in parallel with the universities. Only in this way might we comprehend the development of these systems and be able fully to compare them with the unified systems of other countries, but also to understand better the dynamics of HE development. Here, we will thus look at tertiary system expansion in its entirety, even if we also think it is important to consider some more detailed aspects of drift within various systems. After all, it can be maintained that it is the students them-

selves, via their choice of institutions and programmes and their striving for admirable grades, who are the principal drivers of educational change, and that they actually behave in similar ways despite differences between systems, keeping in mind the aforementioned similarity of student expansion in contrasting systems.

HE system structure

Scott (1995) introduced a typology of how different countries organize their higher education. Kyvik (2004) elaborated on this typology when comparing the organization of HE among fifteen European countries. Five categories are entailed in the HE system typology: 1) A university-dominated system which includes secondary schools and traditional universities and was common in Europe until the early 1960s. 2) A dual system, including on the one hand traditional universities, and on the other, small specialized post-secondary vocational colleges which offer a diploma but are not connected to the universities even though they are also accepted as part of higher, or tertiary, education. 3) A binary system including two parallel HE systems, that of traditional universities and that of a non-university sector such as polytechnics or colleges, with the latter sector being made up of colleges in the dual system which have merged into multidisciplinary centres of many institutions under the same legislation and regulation. Non-university sector research, where it occurs at all, is normally of an applied character. Good examples are provided by the polytechnic sector, which was established in the UK in the mid-1960s and in Finland in the 1990s. 4) A unified system in which the university and non-university sectors have joined in a comprehensive HE system, with the same designation (usually university) applying to all HE institutions so that they are not formally distinguished in sectors, as they are in the binary system. Even so, there may be some differences between institutions in status and research capacity or role. A typical example of the unified system is presented by Britain's abolition of the binary system in the mid-1990s, followed by its adoption of a unified system. 5) A stratified system, in which HE is viewed as one overall system even though the institutions contrast internally and externally; generally, the systems found in the US fit into this category (Kyvik, 2004; Scott, 1995).

Academic drift

The notion of academic drift relates to the structural development of HE systems and has been defined as the trend among non-university institutions to imitate certain aspects of universities, which carry an image of greater prestige (Morphew, 2000). While differing categories of academic drift have been suggested, it is ordinarily taken to refer to a gradual transfer to increased theoretical orientation within or among programmes, institutions and systems (Neave, 1979; Jónasson, 2004a; Kyvik, 2004, 2009).

Kyvik (2009) introduces a comprehensive categorization of academic drift, defining six categories and elaborating in particular the work of Neave (1979). Kyvik's categories are *policy drift*, *sector drift*, *institutional drift*, *staff drift*, *student drift* and *programme drift*. The present paper emphasizes policy drift and institutional drift, in reference to structure, but also deals with student drift.

Policy drift refers to the changing aims and sometimes content of college education, as a state or jurisdiction gradually departs from a clear distinction in mission between different types of institutions. As a consequence, the rights and obligations of non-university teachers tend more and more to resemble those of university academics. Former non-university college teachers can then be expected to engage in applied research, and college diplomas are replaced by traditional university degrees. Thus, as the non-university institutions (colleges) are allotted university status, they move upwards in the system.

Sector drift often affects the college sector as a whole, as when the English binary system, with its contrasting polytechnics and universities, was abolished in favour of a unified system where the former obtained the status of the latter. Sector drift also occurs when new legislation directs a sector in a particular academic direction, for example translating a dual system into a binary system, as in the UK of the mid-sixties. Yet another occurrence would be when non-university teachers in a binary system become expected to engage in applied research.

Both policy and sector drift are part of Scott's typology of HE system structure. For him, sector drift refers to the movement from one system to the next, with the state or the political actors being necessary to enact this transfer within the law. None of the theoretical discussion, however, has assumed that the state is the sole actor, noting how such drift is influenced above all by the institutions themselves, their teaching staff and the students, even if only indirectly.

Institutional drift refers to the tendency of an entire institution to move towards higher status in the educational system. By striving for instance for full or limited university status, such as the right to confer doctoral degrees, the institution is seeking, at least in an incremental way, to depart from former restrictions and thus broaden its current, publicly stated objectives. The main difference between sector drift and institutional drift is that institutional drift refers to a particular institution and system drift refers to the HE system as a whole, or perhaps some substantial part of it.

Staff drift refers on the one hand to college teachers tending or pressing to obtain higher academic credentials, in particular if they have not yet obtained a Ph.D., or the tendency of teachers with high academic qualifications at non-university institutions to adopt academic values, for instance by including research in their terms of reference.

Student drift refers to the tendency of student populations to choose academically-based programmes instead of vocationally-based programmes or to add a masters or a doctoral degree on top of a previous degree.

The drivers of HE development are diverse; they can be transnational, national or institutional and even originate among students (Kyvik, 2009, chapter 6). Behind Kyvik's categories of academic drift there are therefore certain acting forces or drivers that, e.g. push the development of non-university institutions towards the university level, with such drivers even stimulating the movement of whole sectors within the educational system. While Kyvik argues that the different categories of academic drift should not be regarded as hierarchical but as closely related and often active at several levels concurrently, he does however allow for causal chains to operate, whereby drift at one level leads to drift at another (Kyvik, 2009).

Here, we extend Kyvik's categorization of academic drift, arguing that it does not stop when an institution has received university status. An example of such ongoing drift is the effort among universities to achieve a better ranking in the global competition for high scores on international scales. Supposed to evaluate institutional quality, such scales lend a steadily increasing weight to research. Hazelkorn (2013b) argues that the importance attached to global ranking scales derives from the simple international comparison which they provide of national or institutional performance and productivity. Ranking is seen as a tool to evaluate quality, as it gives information on the characteristics and achievements of the top universities world-wide. The notion that universities are crucial drivers of economic growth results in the perception of rankings as evidence not only of institutional but even of national competitiveness in a global context.

It is a challenge to identify the major drivers of development in the various systems, and to determine to what extent these drivers have comparable effects in different systems. Nonetheless, ranking certainly seems to be one such driver, at least in some systems. It is a moot point how reliable ranking criteria are, but history has until now demonstrated that originally, the more prestigious universities got a head start; they thus already occupy a privileged position, in particular regarding research funds, and tend to retain this position (Hazelkorn, 2005, 2013b). The competition to score high on international ranking scales and move up their ladder is clearly a manifestation of institutional drift, in which numerous universities aspire to the status of the universities scoring high on the scales. Ranking is thus one of the drivers of academic development. To the extent that students themselves, via their choice of institutions and programmes and their striving for good grades, also drive educational change, they may be thought of as affecting different systems in similar ways, based on the similarity noted above of student expansion even in contrasting systems.

Quality assurance agencies and the regulation of HE systems and institutions

The importance of quality assurance has risen due not only to institutional independence, but conversely also to the internationalization of university operations and to the global competition and cooperation between universities. Universities are expected to maintain the quality of their activities and be accountable towards the public, at least to the extent that the public is paying for operational costs. Thus university accreditations and audits have been gradually increasing. External panels evaluate universities in order to ensure that they fulfil nationally and internationally accepted quality criteria. Even in the face of less formal direct control of public universities by the state, the overall control of universities has been reinforced, and potential, variable sanctions have been introduced.

On the other hand, the meaning and purpose of quality assurance is not always the same. Rhoades and Sporn (2002) have compared the origin, meaning and realization of quality assurance in the US and Europe. The origin of US quality assurance can be traced back to the late 1800s, or to the formation of accrediting bodies. The six accreditation bodies are voluntary non-governmental and non-profit organizations covering institutions from kindergarten to HE institutions. Even if seeking their services is voluntary, their decisions on accreditation affect the institution's possibilities for federal funding. Quality assurance in US has little to do with the federal government, let alone the global market. European quality assurance is much more recent, only traceable to the mid-1980s and 1990s. In Europe quality assurance has aimed at some sort of quality equivalence among HE institutions across Europe. The Bologna agreement was an important milestone in this direction and had the purpose of creating and organizing quality assurance systems to ensure high standards and facilitate transparency so as to enhance the coordination of European higher education and thereby provide for the greater mobility and employability of European citizens (Bologna Declaration on the European space for higher education). In 2000, the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) was established in order to encourage European collaboration on quality assurance; this Network became the European Association on Quality Assurance in Higher Education. As a membership association, ENQA is clearly a common driving force for developing quality assurance across the countries that have signed the Bologna agreement. Quality assurance organizations in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) member states belong to ENQA and observe its standards, most recently the Bergen Communiqué of 2005. Whether large or small, all national systems within this arrangement are obviously influenced by it, and probably in similar ways. The similarity

of this impact can indeed be seen through the participation of national representatives in the ENQA process.

Noting how widely the HE systems, cultures, traditions and national capacities differ, as well as the potential driving forces that converge to affect them, we decided to investigate the development of higher education in Iceland by studying its expansion, structural development, evaluative framework and signs of academic drift. We wished to comprehend each of these aspects by comparing it with the situation among not only our Nordic neighbours but also with instances in the wider global environment. In order to focus our investigation, we decided to pursue the following three questions:

1. To what extent is it reasonable to assume that HE in a relatively small system develops essentially like that of larger or even much larger systems, or shows the same developmental characteristics as larger systems? Here we address the expansion of graduate education specifically, relating it to academic drift.
2. Are there notably different drivers of change in the Icelandic HE system compared to larger systems which offer parallel data?
3. Can specific development problems be identified in a small system that do not become prominent in larger systems, since they can afford much more diversification and a greater division of tasks between institutions?

The study

Our study investigated HE development in Iceland by comparing it with that of other countries and systems. In two respects, our investigation was exploratory. In the first place, such data and documentation were accumulating continuously, and it was also impossible to obtain fully comparable data from every system with which we would have liked to compare the small Icelandic one. We might in most cases have been able to obtain sufficient data on other Nordic countries; however, due to their close cooperation and the similarity of their cultures, confining ourselves solely to them could have hindered our noticing some intriguing dimensions for comparison with starkly dissimilar countries and cultures. In the second place, we were exploring a wide range of dimensions in order to discover which ones might reveal interesting differences or similarities, on which much more systematic studies with predefined dimensions and a predefined set of national systems could later be based. One of our goals was thus to discover what might be the most promising systems for comparison.

Different parts of our study called for different methods; moreover, we collected the data from various types of documents and data banks, so that we have described our methods in each section whenever appropriate.

The expansion of tertiary education and growth of graduate programmes

Figure 2 shows HE enrolment in the Nordic countries (left panel) and in the US, Japan and Iceland (right panel). In all instances, enrolments are expressed relative to cohort sizes, in order to control for population fluctuations. Although the left panel demonstrates a rough overall similarity in Nordic developments, one must note what sort of data is included in the figure, i.e. data based on each nation's own definition of higher education. It is also noteworthy that the Danish enrolment numbers flatten out at the beginning of the 21st century, whereas the growth curves until then indicate overall symmetry (for methodological clarification see Jónasson, 1999). The right panel shows that even quite disparate systems share some basic characteristics. The growth exponents there are very similar, even though the initial US enrolment in 1900 elevates that curve in comparison to

The development dynamics of a small higher education system
Iceland – A case in point

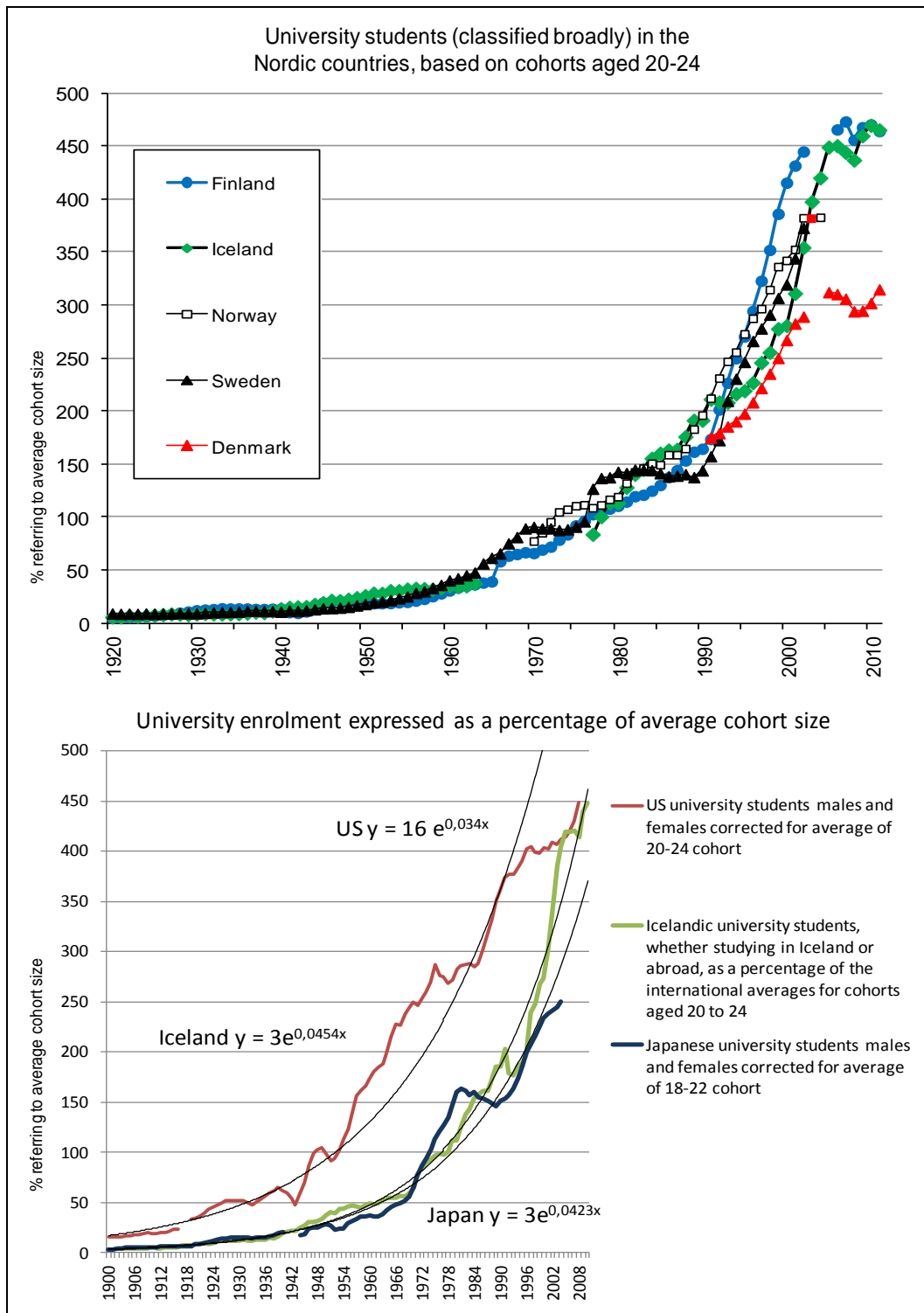


Figure 2 – Examples of expansion in university education through somewhat over a century.

Upper panel: Numbers of students enrolled at university level in the Nordic countries, adjusted for cohort size and expressed as percentages of the respective cohort.

Lower panel: Expansion curves for the US, Japan and Iceland, again adjusted for cohort size, showing growth rates for the US slightly lower than for the other two countries. The smooth lines are the exponential best fits for the respective curves. There are clear signs in the US of saturation. While the growth rates for Iceland and Japan are very similar and that of the US slightly lower, this difference stems largely from the fact that the US base in 1900 was considerably higher. The data for these two graphs was derived from the official national statistics of each country.

the other two. The approximate average growth rates during the 20th century for Iceland and Japan are 4.5% and 4.3%, respectively, whereas the average US growth rate is slightly less, or about 3.4%.

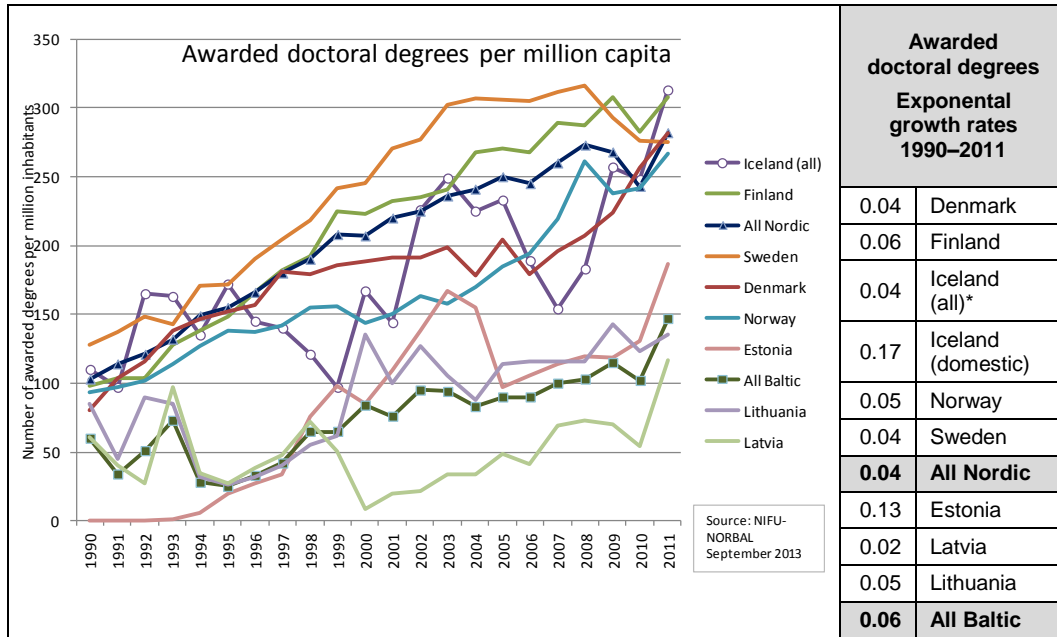
The history of Icelandic HE exhibits academic drift at numerous points. Developing in the 19th and early 20th century, the first Icelandic programmes were solely for professional degrees such as those of the clergy, physicians and lawyers. Bachelor's degrees did not emerge until the 1940s. During the late 1960s, Icelandic officials began more seriously to address development at the University of Iceland. By that time, they were anticipating a considerable increase in student attendance, predicting that the number of students applying to the University of Iceland would triple over the next few years. In order to deal with this massive increase as well as with the nation's need for specialized education, a government committee (Háskólanefnd Háskóla Íslands, 1969) suggested that during the next ten years the University of Iceland should undertake a much broader spectrum of courses, mainly short (three- to four-year-long) study programmes leading to a bachelor's degree. These study programmes were meant primarily for the labour market, specifying eight fields of employment, although these degrees were also meant to be suitable for further studies in Iceland or abroad.

As the subsequent step to bachelor's degrees, master's degrees did not begin to emerge as a general option until the 1990s, at least if the previous Icelandic master's degrees are ignored, which had normally been unitary degrees granted after a five-year course of study. Exploring the development of Icelandic university operations during the period of 2001 to 2008, Jóhannsdóttir (2008) found that in 2001, three out of eight university institutions offered programmes leading to a master's degree and two offered Ph.D. programmes. By 2008, however, seven out of eight universities offered programmes leading to a master's degree, and four university institutions offered Ph.D. programmes (Jóhannsdóttir, 2008; Jónasson, 2004c). The Icelandic degree structure was thus in tune with the degree structure required by the Bologna Process, cf. the Bergen Communiqué of 2005.

Until the early 20th century, Icelanders were only able to take Ph.D.s abroad, but during the course of that century the University of Iceland gradually enhanced its doctoral programme. Even today, however, a strong emphasis remains on external, foreign evaluation, expecting the candidates to write their thesis or other papers in English and seek external examiners insofar as possible. In terms of Ph.D. candidate numbers, *Figure 3* indicates an Icelandic trend resembling that of other Nordic countries, with the right panel confirming an expansion of graduate studies in all seven countries, despite some interesting differences. The stark contrasts between the Baltic countries brings home the point that distinctive developments can stem from factors not easily explained by systemic or general cultural factors.

The general expansion of the Nordic university sector, as reflected by student body growth, is clearly kindred to that evidenced by other systems and cultures, despite dissimilar details. This observation applies not only to a broadly defined tertiary student population, but also to students pursuing doctoral degrees. Roughly speaking, the number of Icelandic doctoral students is relatively on par with that of other Nordic countries, considering the total group of Icelandic citizens being awarded a Ph.D. However, this comparison definitely underestimates the comparable totals for other Nordic countries, without our having been able to determine the exact extent of underestimation. System and country variations over these short periods stand out in the Baltic data, as well as in Iceland's quick rise in domestic doctoral degrees, which increased more than 15% above the climb in population.

The development dynamics of a small higher education system
Iceland – A case in point



* Counting Icelanders studying domestically as well as abroad

Figure 3 – Left panel: Numbers of doctoral degrees in Nordic and Baltic countries from 1990 to 2010, expressed in proportion with national population. While similar general levels and trends appear, there are considerable variations. Only in the case of Iceland does the figure include all doctoral degrees awarded to the country’s citizens, wherever in the world these degrees are granted, but despite this advantage in reference, Iceland is not on par with every country where only domestic degrees are counted. The list of countries on the right side of the left panel is ordered according to rank in the final year, 2011.

Right panel: This panel is perhaps more realistic, as it shows the results derived from exponential best fit and is thus a summary measure. The listed exponents correspond roughly to the average growth rate, such that an exponent of 0.039 indicates an approximate growth of 3.9%. For Iceland, the right panel lists both the total doctoral degrees awarded to Icelandic citizens and then separately those degrees which were awarded inside Iceland. The figure is based on the NORBAL data base, September 2013. The Baltic countries represented in the NORBAL data base provide examples of countries with expanding HE systems, as they currently have lower doctoral levels but varying expansion rates, with Estonia showing the most expansion.

System structure and development

Elaborating on Scott’s typology, Kyvik (2004) compared HE organization in fifteen Western European countries and found that the majority had adopted a binary system, although Italy still had a university-dominated system, and two countries had adopted a unified system. *Table 1* shows his conclusions, adding Iceland as a unified system.

According to Kyvik, all of the countries adopting a binary system entered this stage via a dual system. Based on his conclusion, moving across *Table 1* from left to right indicates a drift in academic policy. Kyvik points out that the structure of Austrian higher education might be felt typical of a binary system, even if a dual system classification also seems reasonable. Only two of Kyvik’s countries had a unified model of higher education. The UK adopted its unified system in the mid-1990s, first moving to a dual system and then to a binary system, although some UK institutions still remain from the former multidisciplinary college system. It is interesting to note that Spain integrated all higher education within the universities, never operating a binary system. While Iceland was not included in Kyvik’s comparison, Jóhannsdóttir (2008) has classified it as a unified system.

Table 1 – A typology of the European HE systems, adapted from Kyvik (2004, Table 1, p. 396) with the addition of Iceland.

University dominated system	Dual system	Binary systems	Unified systems
Italy	Austria	The Netherlands Germany Belgium Sweden Norway Ireland Greece Portugal Denmark Finland Switzerland	Iceland The United Kingdom Spain

All of these structural changes reflect academic drift, i.e. policy and sector drifts. On the other hand, these data offer no information on institutional drift. The shift from dual systems to binary systems and in a few cases to unified systems reflects how the authorities gradually switched views on the role of colleges and their relationship to traditional universities. The institutions in the non-university sector of a binary system are more similar to universities (despite slight differences from them) than the small vocational colleges of a dual system. In a unified system, the two sectors in binary systems have merged, allowing the same classification to apply to all HE institutions.

Jóhannsdóttir (2008) investigated and compared the organizational development of Nordic higher education, seeking to discern academic drift (whether policy, sector or institutional drift). According to her results, Iceland adopted a unified system in 1997 but apparently did so via a university-dominated system, as Icelandic HE had never been formally organized into a decisively dual or binary system. Even today, Icelandic vocational and professional education occupies a rather grey area, positioned in both secondary schools and universities. Jóhannsdóttir has observed some institutional drift in every one of the Nordic countries (see also Jóhannsdóttir, 2008; 2012).

As noted above, the Icelandic HE system is comparatively young. During much of the latter half of the 20th century, there were several non-university institutions which specialized in various fields of vocational education, for example to prepare technicians, nurses, artists, primary school teachers, preschool teachers, physical education teachers and social educators. Originally linked to the upper secondary school level, these institutions gradually and rather unsystematically (i.e. without legal directives) moved closer to operating as universities. This evolution can likewise be perceived as the university sector gradually reaching down and expanding to embrace more and more programmes.

The first school elevated to university status, in 1971, was the Teacher Training College (for primary school teachers). Gradually, other vocational schools followed, either by elevation or by merger with an existing university. Moreover, new universities were established (Jónasson, 2004c), but even these introductions occurred more or less ad hoc, rather than implementing any definitive governmental policy for the whole HE sector. Each university operated under a separate legal statute. They also differed historically, since two of them had enjoyed university status for many years (the University of Iceland and the

Iceland University College of Education), whereas the others were newcomers or had only recently been elevated to university status.

Finally, in 1997, an overall framework was created by legislation which applied to all of the eight HE institutions of that time (*Lög um Háskóla*, 136/1997). It is noteworthy that some of the Icelandic institutions covered by this act did not actually meet the international requirements for a university, such as offering postgraduate doctoral programmes or conducting research. Research had been stipulated by some of their respective institutional acts, but it was not a general requirement to be found in the 1997 legal framework (see further Jónasson, 2004c and Jóhannsdóttir, 2008, 2012). In 2006, however, the 1997 act was supplemented by the Higher Education Institution Act, No. 63/2006, and in 2008 by the Act on Public Higher Education Institutions, No. 85/2008, though this last act applied only to state-run universities. In the final analysis, the varying history of each one of these institutions exemplifies academic drift, just as such drift appears when looking at their combined histories, i.e. at the history of the Icelandic HE system as a whole since the 1997 act. The Higher Education Institution Act of 2006 merely culminated the overall trend, not least by obliging every university to conduct research and requiring all academic staff to engage in research activities. The academic drift already occurring was thereby legally confirmed for the entire spectrum of Icelandic university institutions (*Lög um háskóla*, 63/2006).

Table 2 illustrates the remarkable changes in Icelandic university activities between 2001 and 2008. As of the Higher Education Institution Act of 2006, all universities were required to conduct research. By 2008 there was a considerable increase in master's programmes, i.e. seven out of eight universities offered study programmes leading to a master's degree. However, there were only four institutions offering the Ph.D.

Even though the period discussed was quite brief, these dramatic developments occurred gradually rather than in abrupt leaps. What probably proves of most interest is the dynamics appearing in doctoral studies, which we have discussed above.

Our analysis reveals interplay between internal HE drivers, such as non-universities and professional associations, which exert pressure on the government to upgrade their areas of education to university level. At the same time, structural developments reflect the transnational tendency of academic drift, even if this drift is not expressed in transnational recommendations. Whereas external drivers seem to have had little impact on structural developments from 1970 to 2006, they have had an obvious and extensive impact since 2006, when the Icelandic government implemented the Bologna agreement. The state was thus able to avoid potential resistance from the universities by implementing the Bologna Process; otherwise, these same universities might have opposed some aspects of the National Qualification Framework such as introducing learning outcomes in every subject.

This historical summary suggests that policy and sector drift has occurred in Iceland as well as in larger European countries. In fact, some Icelandic upper secondary schools have gradually begun somewhat to resemble universities in the international sense, usually in a step-by-step manner. Such schools have even obtained that classification according to law, and are ultimately fulfilling many of the criteria for university level. However, developments vary across Europe as a whole, such as regarding the time when sector changes were initiated and the pace at which drift has occurred (see further Kyvik, 2004; Jóhannsdóttir 2012). On a smaller scale, this reservation about variation also applies inside Iceland. While the overall drift in Icelandic HE institutions is clear enough, details vary substantially between institutions.

Table 2 – A tabular presentation of some formal aspects of Icelandic university development, referring to three points in time: 2001, 2008 and 2013.

Any change between periods from a “no” to a “yes” has been indicated by shading the first “yes” cell. Note that the years in the headings do not necessarily specify the times when particular changes occurred.

Institution	2001				2008				2013			
	Research	BA	MA	Ph.D.	Research	BA	MA	Ph.D.	Research	BA	MA	Ph.D.
University of Iceland (UI)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Iceland University College of Education (IUCE)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	Merged with UI 2008			
University of Akureyri (UA)	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	no
Iceland Technical School (ITS)	no	yes	no	no	Merged with RU 2005							
Reykjavík University (RU)	no	yes	no	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Iceland Academy of the Arts (IAA)	no	yes	no	no	yes	yes	no	no	yes	yes	yes	no
Agricultural University of Iceland (AUI)	yes	yes	no	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Bifröst University (BU)	no	yes	no	no	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	no
Hólar University College (UCH)*					yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	no

* Hólar University College obtained preliminary university status in 2003 and formal university status in 2007. Hólar University College offers both undergraduate and graduate studies, as well as research programmes in three fields: tourism, equine science, and aquaculture and aquatic biology. (Háskólinn á Hólum)

Ranking discourse and institutional ambitions

University rankings are not an entirely new phenomenon. Several countries, especially the US, have used nation-wide university rankings for over two decades. The 2003 publication of Shanghai Jiao Tong’s *Academic Ranking of World Universities* introduced global rankings. The assortment of rankings gradually increased, so that ten major global rankings exist in 2013, besides national rankings in over sixty countries (Hazelkorn, 2013a).

According to the International University Association, there are over 16,000 universities world-wide. In spite of this number, research is heavily concentrated in the top 500 and hardly noticeable below the first 2000 institutions or so. Indeed, a super league of twenty-five universities has emerged which tends to continue leading in every new ranking. In addition, parties highly interested in HE, such as politicians, the media and funding bodies, tend to concentrate their discourse on the success of less than 1% of HE institutions,

i.e. those in the top 100 (Hazelkorn, 2013a). A crucial aspect is that such discourse is global and leaves very few institutions untouched, wherever they are positioned.

This discourse is also associated with the notion of universities as drivers of economic growth, resulting in government policies of extra funding for the elite institutions which rank highest in the scales. Any such funding thereupon reinforces the head start of those institutions. Hazelkorn (2013a) argues that government belief in rankings has led several countries to study the characteristics of universities ranking in the top 20 to 100 globally and then to imitate these characteristics for the purposeful design of their own world-class university.

Ranking ambitions also shine out in the Icelandic HE system. The 2006 mission statement of the University of Iceland stated an aim to reach the top 100 on the world ranking lists (Stefna 2006–2011, 2006). This decision was reached in collaboration with the government, which promised financial support to achieve the goal, though this financial support did not materialize, due to severe budget cuts in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. It was thus merely by coincidence that on its 100th anniversary in 2011, the University of Iceland was ranked by THE World university ranking as number 276, thereby placing for the first time on the list (Háskóli Íslands, 2013. According to the Times Higher Education Supplement, the University of Iceland ranked world-wide as number 271 in 2012–2013 and number 269 for 2013–2014.

This example reflects the ubiquity of the ranking discourse, which involves even such a small system as that of Iceland and links it to much larger systems throughout the world. Being on the list is not necessary for underpinning the ranking interest shown by the institution, but the ensuing discussion when a place is acknowledged by the ranking mechanism highlights how seriously it is taken.

Evaluation and quality assurance

Universities have been externally evaluated in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden since the 1990s. During the first decade of the 21st century, the emphasis on external evaluation increased, accompanying the Bologna Process with its accreditation of universities according to the quality criteria agreed in the Bergen Communiqué. Iceland has followed with interest the general Nordic developments.

Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden have all established national quality assurance agencies which are independent organizations and have their own legislative framework, except that the Finnish agency is controlled by government decree. The national agencies of all of these countries have been members of ENQA since it was founded in 2000, and can be briefly introduced as follows: The Danish Centre for Quality Assurance and Evaluation of Higher Education was established in 1992 and was integrated into Denmark's Evaluation Institute (EVA) in 1999. In 2007 the Accreditation Institution (ACE) was established by law. The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council, FINHEEC, was established in 1995. The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education, NOKUT, was established in 2003. In 1995, Sweden established the biggest of the Nordic external quality assurance organizations i.e. The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (HSV). The agency was an independent governmental authority supposed to carry out external quality activities, but it had also other tasks such as statistics and surveillance of institutional compliance of the law (Danö and Stensaker, 2007). HSV was abolished at the end of 2012, when quality issues were transferred to Universitetskanslersämbetet.

In Iceland, no special quality assurance agency yet exists, despite a clear provision for quality assurance in the first general legal framework to guide all of the country's university institutions, i.e. the Universities Act of 1997 (*Lög um háskóla*, 137/1997). When this

act was revised in 2006, two of the main changes were to emphasize the accreditation of universities and clarify the conditions for permission to offer doctoral programmes. These improvements brought Iceland in line with the Bologna agreement, which Iceland had signed in 1999. Another major change introduced by the Universities Act of 2006 was to implement the National Qualifications Framework, which is a systematic description of degrees, diplomas and competencies at different levels of study, specifically based on learning outcomes (*Frumvarp til laga um háskóla*, 132. löggjafarþing, 2005–2006). Furthermore, Iceland thereby followed the set of Bologna standards that was agreed through the Bergen Communiqué of 2005, adapting these standards to the domestic context. As of yet, however, quality assessment has been planned and conducted by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, rather than by independent agencies as in the other Nordic countries. This lack of a quality assurance agency means that Iceland cannot become a fully-fledged member of ENQA, but does belong to it as an affiliate member. Indeed, discussion lasted for some years on how to move the instrument of quality assurance out of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, but Iceland was felt to be too small for establishing a national quality assurance agency. Nor was the option of assigning Icelandic quality assurance to a foreign agency found feasible, as the foreign agency would lack sufficient knowledge of the Icelandic cultural and educational context. In conclusion, the task was assigned to a group of foreign experts with strong Icelandic connections, enabling the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture to establish a Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education in 2010. This solution combined leading international expertise on quality standards with a solid knowledge of the context of Icelandic higher education. One Board guideline called for using ENQA quality criteria, and one of the missions was to develop an Icelandic Quality Enhancement Framework (Rannís, 2010).

The Quality Board does not fall under any specific legislation to regulate its activities. The board receives its mandate from the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture and is not empowered to award or revoke accreditation.

In conclusion, the development of quality assurance systems in Iceland and the regulation of its universities reflect by and large the pattern and systems found in larger countries such as the other Nordic nations. However, Iceland also clearly illustrates how the small size of an HE system can hinder the establishment of an independent quality assurance agency. In other regards, the Icelandic HE structure is very much in line with other Nordic structures. Not even larger systems than these are free of variations in their quality assurance mechanisms, for instance in Europe and the US.

Development similarities and differences

Comparing the development of HE systems is complex, as these systems vary greatly and continue to evolve internally, sometimes quite rapidly. In our study, we were not concentrating on the differences between systems, which were sometimes considerable, but on the qualitative developments within each system, attempting to gauge the extent to which kindred developments, perhaps driven by similar dynamics, were at play in the various systems. Returning to our three basic research questions, our preliminary responses are the following:

1. To what extent can it be assumed that HE develops in essentially the same way in a relatively small system as in a larger or even much larger system?

The simple answer is that on every dimension we studied, we found similar dynamics to be at work and quite kindred developments to occur. This may be partly because the essence of the institutions in question – the academic institutions – was largely the same, so that they were perhaps affected by the same internal drivers and responded to them in similar ways. On the other hand,

we have noted above that the external drivers themselves were universally similar in nature and tended to have similar effects.

2. Does Icelandic HE present significantly different drivers of change than systems for which comparable data exist?

Among the drivers internal to the system are the students who are seeking their degrees in increasing numbers (seen over the long term). This manifestation of credentialism (Jónasson, 2004a) may be taken as a universal driver of several aspects of the HE system (programme, institutional and even sector drift). The Bologna Process in general and the quality assurance mechanisms in particular are external drivers which are common and pronounced and seem to be guiding the development of corresponding mechanisms, whether in Iceland or its neighbouring countries. Bodies like ENQA seem to influence these mechanisms even within dissimilar systems. The ranking regimen may be seen as a mechanism operating from outside as well as inside. It is clear that both the institutions on the one hand and the respective governments on the other hand view elevation in ranking as a considerable asset.

In all these cases, a small system, judging by the Icelandic system, seems both proactive and reactive in similar ways to larger systems. On the basis of the evidence we have adduced, neither the Icelandic HE institutions nor the government seem to act much differently from other institutions and governments. While there are some variations, there are always variations anyhow, whether within other systems or among all of the systems. Between other Nordic countries, financial support for students varies at both the undergraduate and doctoral levels, as does student financial support in the US and Japan. Drift, however, is similar. One might have thought that credential drivers in these different places would contrast sharply, but enrolment patterns seem to develop similarly everywhere.

3. Can specific development problems be identified in a small system that do not become prominent in larger systems, since they should be able to afford more diversification and a greater division of tasks between institutions?

In answer to this, we have observed some instances of specifically small-system problems, although the picture has not yet become clear-cut. In this paper, we have delineated how a HE quality system has been organized differently in Iceland from its neighbouring countries, though the basic mechanism is fairly similar. Until recently, graduate studies were substantially different, as in Iceland the norm was to go abroad for a doctoral degree, but now the structures and competence for providing such degrees domestically have been developed in a very short space of time. In any case, the overall tendency of Icelanders to work towards a doctoral degree seems similar to the trend in neighbouring countries. Another aspect to question would be whether the mechanism of academic drift differs in Iceland from that in other countries. In Iceland drift perhaps occurred first within institutions, gradually spread throughout the HE sector and was finally turned into a policy drift through legislation, though the drift being legislated had perhaps already occurred. The net result was a clear example of policy drift which was very similar to that happening in numerous other countries. There may well be some further aspects of small countries which we have hardly touched on; for example, through needing to use a rather unique language for all academic interaction, a small language community might have special problems that would hamper its participation in global developments.

In short, our conclusion is that a small HE system, such as the Icelandic one, undergoes essentially the same symptoms of growth as the larger systems, evidences many of the same internal and external drivers and reacts on the whole in similar ways, ending up with essentially the same solutions.

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About the authors

Gyða Jóhannsdóttir (gydaj@hi.is) is an associate professor at the School of Education, University of Iceland. She completed a B.A. degree in psychology from the University of Iceland in 1976, a M.Ed. degree from Harvard Graduate School of Education in Boston 1982 and a Ph.D. from the Danish University of Education in 2002. Her main research interests include the development of higher education in the Nordic countries (systems and institutions). She has also studied the distinction between public and private universities in the Nordic context and has been involved in studies on quality assurance systems.

Jón Torfi Jónasson (jtj@hi.is) was educated in physics (BSc) and psychology (MSc and PhD) in the United Kingdom and taught cognitive and educational psychology and methodology for the social sciences for many years. He became professor of education at the University of Iceland in 1993 and was Dean of the Faculty of Social Science 1995–2001. In 2008 he became the Dean of the School of Education at the University of Iceland. In recent years he has written on all levels of education, i.e. pre-primary, compulsory (primary and lower secondary) upper-secondary (both academic and vocational), higher education and adult education, - in many cases

from a comparative, esp. Nordic, perspective. His current interest is how systems of education develop, what moulds them, and in particular what might stall or spur their development. Recently he has been asking if the educational system is essentially preparing young students for the past, present or future, and then for what future. See <https://notendur.hi.is/~jtj/>

Key words

*small HE systems – large HE systems – expansion of HE systems
– structure of HE systems – HE systems compared*

Um höfunda

Gyða Jóhannsdóttir (gydaj@hi.is) er dósent við Menntavísindasvið Háskóla Íslands. Hún lauk B.A.-prófi í sálfræði frá Háskóla Íslands 1976, M.Ed.-prófi frá Harvard Graduate School of Education í Boston 1982 og doktorsprófi frá Danmarks Pedagogiske Universitet 2002. Rannsóknir hennar hafa meðal annars beinst að samanburði á þróun háskólakerfa á Norðurlöndum (menntakerfi og stofnanir) auk samanburðar á þróun norrænnar kennara-menntunar, einkennum norrænna opinberra háskóla og einkaháskóla. Loks hefur hún unnið að rannsóknum á notagildi gæðatrygginga við háskóla.

Jón Torfi Jónasson (jtj@hi.is) lauk bakkalárprófi í eðlisfræði og meistara- og doktorsprófi í sálfræði frá Bretlandi. Hann varð prófessor í uppeldis- og menntunarfræði 1993, deildarforseti Félagsvísindadeildar Háskóla Íslands 1995–2001 og forseti Menntavísindasviðs Háskóla Íslands 2008–2013. Hann hefur ritað um málefni allra skólastiga, meðal annars með tilliti til samanburðar við önnur Norðurlönd. Framtíð menntunar hefur verið viðfangsefni hans upp á síðkastið, meðal annars hvernig menntun og menntakerfi þróast og hvað stuðlar að eða tefur þá þróun.

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*lítil háskólakerfi – stór háskólakerfi – útpensla háskólakerfa
– skipulag háskólakerfa – samanburður háskólakerfa*



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