

Quality Enhancement Framework for Icelandic Higher Education

Follow-up Institution-Wide Review

Bifröst University

March 2023



Preface

This is the report of a Follow-up Institution-Wide Review of Bifröst University undertaken at the behest of the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education under the authority of the Icelandic Government.

The review was carried out by an independent Team of senior international higher education experts together with a student from the higher education sector in Iceland. The Team was appointed by the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education.

Institution-Wide Review is one component of the second cycle of the Icelandic Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF2) established by the Icelandic Government in 2017. The main elements of the QEF are:

- Quality Board-led Institution-Wide Reviews (IWRs);
- University-led Subject-Level Reviews (SLRs);
- University-led Year-on and Mid-Term Progress reports;
- Annual meetings between universities and Quality Board members to discuss institutional developments, including quality assurance;
- Quality Council-led enhancement workshops and conferences; and
- Quality Board-led Special Reviews.

Further information on the QEF is available on the website of the Icelandic Quality Enhancement Framework (www.qef.is).

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Chair

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Glossary and List of Abbreviations

BU. Bifröst University.

ESG. Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, 2015 edition. Also known as European Standards and Guidelines.

IWR. Institution-Wide Review. Board-led review of institution, based on QEF.

PL. Programme Leader.

QEF. Quality Enhancement Framework for Icelandic Higher Education.

QEF2. Second cycle of the Quality Enhancement Framework for Icelandic Higher Education, scheduled for 2017-2022.

RA. Reflective Analysis report produced by Bifröst University in preparation for the IWR.

SLR. Subject-Level Review. Institution-led review of an individual department, based on QEF.

SR. Status Report submitted by Bifröst University, December 2022.

Ugla. Information / Records Management System (hosted by the University of Iceland).

Review Team

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Raymond Smith (Secretary), Higher Education Consultant. Former Registrar, London Metropolitan University.

1. Executive Summary of Judgements

Following its consideration of the Status Report and associated evidence submitted by Bifröst University (BU), and the site visit to the institution from 12-13 December 2022, the Review Team commissioned by the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education concluded that:

- The judgement from the March 2021 report that “limited confidence can be placed in the soundness of the University’s present arrangements to secure the academic standards of its awards” can be alleviated.

The Review Team therefore arrives at the following judgement:

- Confidence can be placed in the soundness of Bifröst University’s present and likely future arrangements to secure the academic standards of its degrees and awards.

The Team is cognisant that the period since the publication of the March 2021 IWR report has been one of considerable change and challenge for the staff, students and external stakeholders of Bifröst University. In this context, the Team has been struck by the high levels of commitment shown by all those constituencies to the need for serious reflection on the future vision, mission strategy and management of the University. The positive outcome to those deliberations is a testament to the hard work and dedication of those that chose to establish a modified direction for the University and manage the change that inevitably flowed from that decision. Given the timescales involved this was, by any standard, an impressive achievement that is to be **commended**. The Team has no further recommendations to make as a result of this follow-up review process.

2. Introduction to the review

2.1 Background to the review

This review was conducted according to agreed terms of reference in order to follow-up on progress on the recommendations and outcomes of the Institution-Wide-Review of Bifröst University conducted in 2021. Institution-Wide Review is one component of the second cycle of the Icelandic Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF2) established by the Icelandic Government in 2017.

The main purpose of this follow-up review was to assess whether sufficient progress had been made on recommendations put forward in the March 2021 review to alleviate the limited confidence judgement outlined in the report. This judgement related to:

- the soundness of BU present and likely future arrangements to secure the academic standards of its awards.

2.2 The review process

This follow-up Institution-Wide-Review of Bifröst University was organised by the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education, with specific guidelines developed for the expert Team. In preparation for the follow-up review, BU prepared a Status Report responding to each of the recommendations made in the March 2021 review report.

The Status Report and Annexes were sent to the follow-up Review Team on 11 November 2022, with further supporting documents received on 1 December 2022. The Review Team visited Bifröst University on 12th and 13th December and held meetings with internal and external stakeholders, including students. Some participants attended meetings in person and others attended online.

The Review Team (hereinafter the Team) thanks the Rector, Margrét Jónsdóttir Njarðvík, and the staff and students of BU for their open and helpful discussions, and is grateful to key partners and stakeholders, for their valuable contributions. The Team also wants to

thank Lydía Geirsdóttir, Quality Director, for her kind support as institutional liaison throughout the review process.

3. Review of the March 2021 recommendations

3.1 Introduction

The Review Team evaluated the evidence of progress made on the specific recommendations in the March 2021 review report. Those recommendations are reproduced here, accompanied by the Team's considerations on progress made on each, based on the documentary evidence received and meetings held with staff, students and stakeholders.

3.2 Recommendation 1

The vision for the university is multi-faceted and complex. As a result, the strategies, priorities, and implementation of action plans need to be more clearly delineated.

The Rector notes in her statement in the December 2022 Status Report that the required response to the IWR2 Final report allowed “no room for negotiation whether...change should take place or not.” The momentum for change was viewed as “urgent” and this, in turn, was seen to require a comprehensive strategic change process owned by both academic and administrative staff. It also required endorsement by those responsible for the governance of the University and support from a wide range of external stakeholders. The scale of this challenge was reinforced to the Team during a range of meetings, especially those involving the Rector and the Executive Team.

At the heart of the strategic change process has been the development of a new Strategic Plan - Bifröst University Strategic Intent 2030 - and an associated Strategic Action Plan for the period 2021-24. The development of these documents was supported by the employment of an external advisor and the University's willingness to respond positively to such external scrutiny is evidenced throughout the SR, but it is most pronounced at the level of strategic direction.

The overall vision for the University has been reviewed, refreshed and clarified - to be a business school at the forefront of delivering digital learning with a flexible approach; to be committed to academic independence and conduct research connected to society; and to emphasise a personal teaching approach centred on a balance between theory and practice. The outcome of the strategic plan review process reveals a coherent and measured approach to the University's development over the rest of the decade. Four strategic pillars - Learning and Teaching; Research; Culture and Management; and Societal Engagement have been established. These strategic pillars are soundly based and resonate with the core values and priorities of the University. Within each pillar the University has established nine goals, based on SMART¹ principles, with a series of sub-goals to aid clarity and support the delivery of the Strategic Plan. The 3-year Action Plan offers a sensible initial period for the monitoring and measurement of achievements against these goals. Annual monitoring is an embedded aspect of this approach and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) integral to judgements on progress. For example, a mid-year review of progress on the set targets for 2021 was conducted in December 2021 and then discussed at the Executive Council. Priorities for 2022/23 were discussed and confirmed at full day meetings of the Rectors Office and the Executive Council. The monitoring process is also open to appropriate reflection and change as indicated by a scheduled January 2023 meeting of the Executive Council to review KPIs and adjust them so that they offer a more targeted element to indicators, for example, the inclusion of financial indicators.

Based on the documentation (SR and its annexes) and the meetings during the site visit it was obvious to the Review Team that the University has not only clarified its vision, strategic profile and priorities according to the recommendations of the previous IWR2 but has also successfully carried out an impressive strategic change process involving the whole organization in implementation of the new strategy.

¹ Specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time bound.

3.3 Recommendation 2

Given the ambitious vision the Rector has for the University, the strategic alignment of existing staff, selective recruitment for new positions, a comprehensive staff development plan, and a staff performance evaluation program would be beneficial.

The new vision and strategy have driven a review and renewal of the whole organisation, in particular staffing. The leadership of the University has tackled this recommendation very directly with both structural and wide-ranging personnel changes. The SR makes clear that the appointment of Dr Margrét Jónsdóttir Njarðvík as Rector was one that came with a “mandate for change”. The nature of this mandate was reinforced to the Team during a number of meetings, and it was also apparent from other meetings that there was both understanding and support at management and academic and administrative levels of the need for these changes. A review of the strategic alignment of existing staff was conducted in the autumn of 2020.

The scope and extent of the subsequent staff changes is highlighted in the SR.

Some of the senior staff changes have been associated with a structural realignment in academic organisation. Thus, the Department of Law was separated from the Department of Social Sciences in 2020. New appointments of Deans to the now three departments were made during 2021 and 2022. The University acknowledges that the new Department of Law currently has a limited critical mass; however, the Team was informed during meetings that both the Law and the Social Sciences departments viewed this structural re-alignment as being of benefit in renewing a sense of identity and focus on their respective subject areas. The SR provides a number of metrics to show how improvements in performance have been evidenced since the separation of the two departments.

This degree of structural and staff change and churn can be difficult to manage, especially in such a relatively brief period of time². However, during its meetings with staff the Team received reports that in operational terms the University had become more efficient and effective. The University also notes that “there is a steady movement towards increasing satisfaction with various aspects of the university operations” and that staff commitment was improving.

The presentation in the SR of developments relating to staff selection, staff development and staff appraisal and the updating of the HR Handbook provide strong evidence of a revitalisation of approaches to staff effectiveness and the associated support available, both formal and informal, to help ensure currency in pedagogical skills, a focus on career development and appropriate induction arrangements for new staff. Staff review and recruitment decisions have included careful consideration to balance the profile of full-time academic, part-time (sessional) academic, and support services positions.

Detailed descriptions of staff development initiatives and embedded training courses / support, both internal and external, are provided. The University notes that most of these opportunities relate to academic staff and that support for administrative staff lags somewhat in comparison. These opportunities are geared to employees on a permanent contract; however, the University “encourages sessional lecturers and other contractors to also avail themselves of the offers of training within the institution.”

Further attention is being paid to administrative staff development for 2022/23 as they are seen as playing an important part in supporting a wider quality culture. Following discussion with administrative staff the HRM Manager has developed a wish-list of training opportunities that staff would like to pursue, for example, leadership, wellness, project

² The SR notes that “since 2020 there have been 46 new arrivals, 16 in administration, 25 academics (not all FTE) and 5 in services. There have been 16 departures, 11 in administration and 5 academics”.

management and IT systems training. Staff from Academic Services and the Rectors Office confirmed that the annual appraisal system allowed them to identify staff development opportunities that could assist them in improving their performance. The academic staff appraisal scheme has been well received. Permanent staff confirmed to the Team that the scheme had improved as a result of greater standardisation, and that it was helpful for the staff appraisal processes to be set out in detail in the university HR Handbook. Permanent staff also commented that this approach provided for an increased focus on personal development and that the appraisal meeting was, for example, a good opportunity to discuss changes in the balance between teaching and research.

The Team concludes that the University now has a comprehensive approach to staff development, which is aligned to performance evaluation and indicators.

3.4 Recommendation 3

Evidence-based decision making is not consistently applied. The strategic plan and enhancement plan lack targets for the KPIs and timelines for achievement of outcomes.

As has been noted earlier in this report, the new strategy and action plan identify goals, sub-goals, actions, responsibilities, timeframes and indicators. The framework for KPIs has been established around the most significant indicators linked to the Strategic Plan sub-goals. Evidence-based decision-making is now at the heart of the University's approach to quality management. It is noted in the SR that the operational calendar forms the basis of continuous monitoring by the Executive Council and that "decisions are not taken unless the relevant data has been gathered and reviewed." The minutes of the Executive Council provide an audit trail for this process.

Developments in quality assurance are now built around data, and members of the Executive Council emphasised in their meeting with the Team that the wider intention was for all staff to commit to evidence-based decision making with the elements of standardisation, predictability and fairness at the centre of this approach. A case study

relating to the revision of the structure of undergraduate programmes in the Department of Business is provided in the SR as one example of this data-driven approach. The case study also provides a useful indicator of quality assurance processes linked to information gathering; and while longer time series comparisons will need time to develop, systems are now clearly in place to facilitate this, not least as a result of the improvements in the management, functionality and interoperability of IT systems. The Team also notes the strong sense of commitment, at all levels, including the Board of Governors, to ensuring that progress is maintained and improved upon.

3.5 Recommendation 4

The University does not have a formal approach to benchmarking and implementation of best practices.

In the SR it is acknowledged that the lack of appropriate formal benchmarking activity has been an issue for the University over two cycles of QEF reviews. Action to address this shortcoming was initiated by the Rector in Spring 2021 with the establishment of a Benchmarking Working Group comprising the Deans and the Quality Director.

The University has now developed a formal approach, which includes guidelines for different types of benchmarking. Benchmarking is seen as an important element of the University's quality assurance cycle and the guidelines have been provided to help answer three key questions: how do the University's standards compare to that of their peers; how does the University's performance measure against the outcomes of national and comparable institutions; and how can the University adapt good practice examples from other institutions to its own organisation? Benchmarking at BU is based on three models - data comparison (currently national but adaptable to an international arena), department driven (focusing on areas such as teaching and learning and research) and theme-based (concentrating on specific issues such as good practice in digital education). The Benchmarking Group also completed work on a Partnership Variable Analysis Benchmarking document that provides a helpful framework for departments to use when considering potential international partners for comparative analysis. This exercise is part of a work in

progress, as no formal agreements between BU's academic departments and international partners have been concluded. However, the other models of benchmarking are being actively pursued. The example of the Business Department's undergraduate programme review referred to in the section above is a case in point. As part of that review comparisons between BU's BSc Business Administration programme and its equivalents at the universities of Iceland, Reykjavik and Akureyri were considered. Some of the outcomes of that process (e.g. shared core courses, a need to strengthen quantitative aspects of the BU curriculum) are noted in the SR. The adjustments to programmes following that review made use of this benchmarking exercise.

Equally, in a number of support service functions - Academic Services, Rectors Office, IT, Finance and Housing - there is a developing culture of benchmarking activities against other national universities. These exercises involve external visits in both directions and there are plans for further visits in 2023 and 2024. Formal benchmarking agreements have been established, primarily involving university administration, with the universities of Akureyri and Reykjavik. The formalisation of some of these initiatives is a good indication of the systematic approach now being taken by BU to benchmarking activity. The University also acknowledges that some of the comparisons between BU and other institutions are made more challenging by the difference in delivery modes, i.e. on-line as opposed to on-site. This is not, however, seen as an obstacle to understanding and learning from good practice elsewhere.

There is also no doubt that some aspects of these benchmarking exercises can be resource intensive, especially when considering quantitative indicators across different institutions. Going forward, the University notes that some progress is being made toward a national approach to sharing data and that work being undertaken by the Quality Council³ might lead to the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation publishing university data sets

³ The Quality Council is made up of the Quality Directors of the Icelandic Universities and representatives from the National Union of Icelandic Students.

within nationally agreed norms. BU indicates that it is willing “to be open with our internal data for the purpose of quality enhancement,” and this is a further indication of the commitment to data driven decision making and the value of benchmarking within the University’s quality processes.

The SR provides a number of examples of theme-based benchmarking activity involving membership of the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU), the yet-to-be-realised OpenEU Consortium⁴ and the PRME⁵ Nordic Chapter. Membership of EADTU in particular is offering significant opportunities for sharing best practice with similarly based on-line universities.⁶ The University’s strategic vision includes to be “in the forefront of delivering digital learning with a flexible approach.” It is evident that online delivery is embedded in all activities of the University and is a “modus operandi” throughout the organisation. The University has succeeded in designing and implementing an online learning model that provides good opportunities for students to study regardless of time and place, and students appreciate these opportunities very much. The Review Team encourages the University to further develop the interactivity of their online teaching and learning methods and pedagogical solutions. This should include choosing the best international partners to be engaged in benchmarking of the online learning designs and practices. With reference, therefore, to the strategic vision to “be in the forefront of delivering digital learning with a flexible approach” the Review Team would encourage the University to continue to prioritise benchmarking and the planned actions regarding online learning design and practice.

⁴ Submitted as part of the European Universities Initiative. See <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/news/2022-erasmus-european-universities-call>

⁵ The Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) is a United Nations-supported initiative founded in 2007.

⁶ The members of EADTU can be found at <https://eadtu.eu/index.php/members>

3.6 Recommendation 5

While there are successes for students with diverse academic backgrounds, there are high non-completion rates for students overall and there is insufficient analysis of the reasons for this outcome.

The University argues that, with outcome data now available, its non-completion rates, although high, are on a par with others in the HE sector in Iceland. This is not a statement of complacency as the University also states that it aims “to put retention at the centre of our operations and [to] design our educational offerings in line with the newest research on retention.” The Team recognises that since the 2021 IWR report much has changed and improved in the IT infrastructure at BU, stimulated by the appointment of a new Director of the IT Department. This has been most visible in the operation of the Uglya records system. The resolution of critical issues relating to the IT infrastructure allows the University to collect, manage and analyse data in a way that informs its actions on retention. This is clearly one of the core building blocks for evidence-based decision-making. As the deliverables from IT systems improve there is also scope for the KPIs in this area to be refined and augmented, for example it allows for the drilling down to performance on courses and this can be instructive particularly where courses are shared across programmes. Staff in Academic Services were also proactive in pushing for system enhancements and the Team was advised that there was already a “wish list” of system improvements and modifications that was under consideration.

On the basis of its on-going work in analysing non-completion rates and its efforts to understand the factors underlying student decisions to drop-out of their studies, the University has revisited its processes and procedures particularly in relation to the work of its Academic Services Department. This covers a wide range of activity and offers a holistic approach to tackling this problem. Thus, there are now three Project Managers in Academic Services, each with a pre-defined group of students, that focus on some of the red flag issues that can suggest student dis-engagement with their programme. These interventions have significantly increased the registration of students who are on a study break as

opposed to their previous identification as drop-outs. In addition, Educational and Career Counsellors work closely with Programme Leaders (PLs) to monitor student progression on their programmes. Student progression statistics are provided to PLs twice per year and actions follow a set procedure to address non-completion. Special emphasis is placed on new students and reaching students with little or no activity on courses. The Canvas system pushes out data to support this work. In separate meetings with Academic Services staff and Programme Leaders there was an overwhelming consensus that these approaches were bearing fruit and the Team was struck by the high levels of collegiality shown by both academic and administrative staff. The Team also noted that, following student suggestions, a psychologist has been employed by the University, and that discussions have started on establishing a small research project that might help understand how support from a psychologist could link to a reduction in non-completion rates⁷.

From a management perspective, Deans were also quick to offer praise for this combined effort between Academic Services and Programme Leaders. In wider oversight terms Deans would like to access data directly rather than rely on the push element that was currently in place and see combined data rather than individual programme reports. This would also aid comparative analysis of programme performance.

3.7 Recommendation 6

The current programme portfolio would benefit from review, to better align with student demands, the institutional strategy and available teaching resources, as the University is heavily relying on sessional staff.

⁷ The SR makes an interesting linguistic point about the translation of the word retention in Icelandic. “A simple translation would be to ‘fall out of your studies’ which makes the student the agent and the university the passive by-stander”. BU, along with national partners, is committed to turning this proposition on its head. It is a good example of BU’s wider pro-active approach to tackling non-completion.

The University positions its response to this recommendation in the major changes in departmental structures and staffing following the 2021 IWR report. These changes have been commented on earlier in this report (see paragraph 3.3). In this context the University emphasises the restructuring of departments with the addition of a third Dean and a determination that Deans “have the necessary time allocation and resources to fulfil their duties to the fullest extent.” This has included limiting their teaching responsibilities while, at the same time, the introduction of Programme Leaders has also been an important factor in freeing up the time of Deans. The Team also notes that the University has cancelled plans to establish a PhD programme and development in this direction “will not be on the foreseeable agenda during this strategic period”. This, no doubt, will help academic leaders focus on the current offerings of taught programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

The SR provides a detailed overview of programme developments in each of the departments and these paragraphs offer a clear insight into the approaches to programme portfolio management and the empowerment of the Deans to take forward the sustainability, coherence and relevance of their programmes. In particular the Business Department completed a full review of its undergraduate portfolio in autumn 2021 and spring 2022 with implementation for the student intake for autumn 2022. Even though there was no intention to introduce a new study programme the process of revision of the Business Department undergraduate portfolio was largely guided by Bifröst University’s rules on new study programmes. This provided for a very thorough review process and Annex 21 of the SR shows in some detail the process of engagement with internal and external stakeholders / experts.

In overall terms, the Business Department undergraduate portfolio has been reduced by two programmes as a result of the review. Formal sign-off for the review was first with the Rector and then with the Board of Governors. In the two other departments reviews of their portfolios are on-going, with the Social Sciences department adding a new MA/MCM/Diploma in Crisis Management, while the Law Department has reviewed the

content of the MBL programme, is quality monitoring the MBL and ML programmes and is planning for a significant increase in masters level students.

As has been noted in relation to the Business Department undergraduate review, the portfolio review process is driven by strategy, including analysis of student demand and numbers, and is framed by the University's quality assurance policies and procedures. The University's strategic realignment of staff resources recognised that the numbers of sessional teachers had been too high. In 2020 the ratio was 40% of courses taught by permanent staff on average and 60% by sessional staff. The SR comments that a significant effort has gone into increasing the numbers of permanent staff, thereby shifting the ratio of courses taught by full time staff and sessional staff. Initially the target set in the Strategic Intent 2030 was 50/50. By autumn 2021 the ratio had reached 60/40 permanent to sessional staff, and this has continued in 2022. The University is "very comfortable with this level, as we aim to engage not only full-time professional academic teachers who are specialists in their field but also specialists in their field who are closely connected to industry." In a number of meetings with teaching staff (permanent and sessional), students and academic managers there was an echo of this statement with the role of Programme Leaders being stressed as an important aspect of academic coherence and support for sessional staff. This section of the SR also details how staff resources are aligned to the programme portfolio at the individual department level, including the number and proportion of sessional staff. The Team finds that there are now robust arrangements in place for portfolio management and review. There is scope for further data driven analysis to take place on the student take up on some courses on programmes and there are clearly opportunities for innovation in interdisciplinary programmes. The Review Team would, therefore, encourage the University to continue to monitor and review the portfolio, to promote efficiency for an organisation of this size.

3.8 Recommendation 7

While numerous policies have been prepared, implementation and assessment of quality outcomes are lagging, and processes need to be put in place to monitor this work.

In the SR, the University presents a holistic view of the operation of its updated and enhanced quality assurance system showing how this complies with ESG standards. Considerable reflection on earlier shortcomings has taken place and the new processes are embedded at all levels of university activity. For example, five structured monitoring levels are presented in the SR - continuous monitoring by programme leaders, regular programme reviews every three years, subject level reviews every five years, reflective analysis every 7 years and external review by the Quality Board of Iceland. The importance of these five levels - all seen to be interconnecting - was stressed to the Team in its meeting with the Executive Council. In particular, members of the Executive Council highlighted the process of standardisation, that developments in quality assurance were being built around data and that this facilitated benchmarking and the ability to build on best practice.

One important initiative has been the introduction of the role of programme leader (19 in total in 2022). Programme Leader is presented by the University as an important development allowing for more direct ownership of programme monitoring, supported by data from the Ugly system. The positive impact of the programme leader (PL) role in monitoring individual study programmes was highlighted to the Team in a number of its meetings. Deans commented that PLs offered not just a dedicated monitoring function but also a dimension of academic leadership that supported the quality culture in the department. The SR includes a useful summary of the role of the PL who “works in close collaboration with the Academic Services and the Quality Director and is a mentor for sessional teachers and a counterpart for teachers within the degree programme. The PL has a toolbox of monitoring activities to structure their work around, which increases their insight into the status of the degree programme.” The Team was able to assess this description during a number of meetings. Programme Leaders themselves confirmed, *inter alia*, the ability to access appropriate data, the role of KPIs in monitoring, engagement with the Dean on quality issues and the value of Academic Services and the Quality Director in supporting and helping to develop their role. Sessional teachers attested to the valuable mentoring role performed by PLs. Major improvements in IT management and infrastructure enable robust data collection and reporting.

The Quality Handbook offers a clear account of quality processes and this links to other quality publications such as the Teaching Manual and the Teachers' Checklist for programme management. The value of the formal recording of these core systems and processes relating to quality assurance and enhancement was reinforced in many of the Team's meetings. The University acknowledges that, in the past, perhaps too many assumptions were made about the efficacy of informal arrangements for the protection of academic standards, particularly in the context of a small institution. The senior leadership is very clear in its view that these changes in approach were essential and that the task now is to ensure that theory and practice are well aligned and that full implementation of systems and processes is carried forward, with the appropriate monitoring, in the period of the Strategic Plan.

3.9 Recommendation 8

Enhancement of quality assurance measures for programmes, sessional teachers' qualifications, and teaching performance, as well as for the relevance and rigour of course content, need to be strengthened.

In respect of this recommendation the comments in the previous section of this Report regarding quality processes should be read in conjunction with the points made below.

The University has approached this recommendation as far as it relates to sessional teachers on a twin track basis. First, it has recognised that the numbers of sessional teachers had been too high; this has been addressed by increasing the numbers of permanent staff and thereby shifting the ratio of courses taught by full time staff and sessional staff to 60/40. This change in staff ratios became effective from the start of the 2021/22 academic year and has continued since. The University regards this as a reasonable outcome given its strategic orientation to professional education, including using sessional staff who are closely connected to industry and current practice.

Secondly, the general strengthening of recruitment procedures has impacted on the quality of sessional staff being recruited through departments and Deans work closely with the HR

Director in this respect. As noted in the previous section, the role of Programme Leaders is also highlighted in monitoring the quality of courses taught by sessional staff. However, this relationship between Programme Leaders and sessional teachers is not part of a formal management function. Indeed, both Programme Leaders and sessional staff stressed in their meetings with the Team that at the heart of this relationship was peer support and encouragement. Programme Leader access to the Dean allows for discussion of the performance of sessional staff on courses and this offers the opportunity to agree action if student feedback on a particular member of sessional staff becomes a matter of concern. The Programme Leader oversight role in terms of performance on programmes has also enabled Deans to operate at a more strategic level. The Review Team found that these changes have been well-received and are promoting effective management of all aspects of programmes, including selection and integration of sessional staff.

Academic staff described to the Review Team how programmes are kept up-to-date and relevant. Students who met with the Review Team confirmed their appreciation of the relevance and quality of their courses.

3.10 Recommendation 9

Processes for the dissemination of information gathered from surveys and other data collections should be created along with an operations calendar specifying the timing of each step. Student feedback loops need to be closed systematically, particularly so in an online environment.

The University highlights the appointment of a new IT Director and the consequent improvements in the functionality of the Uglu system as being critical factors in responding to this recommendation. The re-establishment of a Data Collection Working Group, with the senior staff involvement of the Directors of Quality, Academic Services and IT, has provided fresh focus on data collection, management and utilization. A review of the Operational Calendar took place in early 2021 and the revised Calendar is now linked to the Strategic Intent 2030 and the Action Plan 2021-2024. The Operational Calendar, the core of which is

included in the Quality Handbook, specifies the data to be extracted from the system, the time of year this is to be done and the person responsible for evaluating the data. The gathering of data is coordinated with meetings of the Executive Council so that it can monitor activity in this area. A specific sub-goal relating to the information management has been included in the strategic pillar Culture and Management.

The University conducts five annual surveys as follows: graduates - 18 months after graduation; employees and teachers receive a job satisfaction survey every other year; students receive a quality survey covering areas such as teaching and learning, professional support services and the provision of information; foreign and Icelandic exchange students receive a survey measuring amongst other things the quality of exchange learning; and a reputation survey either directed to staff or students or towards employers and external stakeholders. The University has used a metareview of previous surveys (2017-2020) to pinpoint and address trends that might have been missed regarding stakeholder feedback. As the SR notes “the purpose of this task was to ensure that we have addressed all trends in student and staff feedback and to close the feedback loop....” In meetings with the Team staff at all organisational levels, not only management but also academic staff, were able to give concrete examples of how they utilised a range of data in their daily work. Additionally, staff - both academic and support - keep in touch and consider students’ experience in real-time via IT systems and more direct contact by email or over the phone. The analysis of 2022 surveys shows improving levels of student satisfaction particularly with various aspects of the university’s operations including the quality of their programmes, relationships with teachers, and the extent to which the Canvas system meets their needs. Students who met with the Review Team confirmed that their voice is heard, and that they receive feedback on the issues that they raise.

3.11 Recommendation 10

While investments have been made and improvements are evident, the online teaching materials, as measured by the sample available to the Team, do not yet meet the international

standards that the university sets itself, and will need to be improved to meet the University's stated goal to expand into other online markets.

The University has very significantly revised its strategy regarding international online markets, making the decision to stop efforts to attract students from outside the EU, discontinuing programmes offered in English apart from courses required by exchange students and terminating negotiations with two institutions relating to future collaboration. This change of direction is summarised by the Rector as follows: "In the profiling work of Bifrost University it becomes continuously more evident that teaching in Icelandic is a unique selling point for Bifrost University. At the same time we are committed to internationalisation and look forward to strengthening our efforts in this regard." The Review Team commends the University's strategic analysis and leadership in making this realistic decision.

The University notes in the SR that the on-line teaching materials made available to the IWR team in 2020 were both limited and atypical of materials provided for the overwhelming majority of courses offered by BU. It stresses that student satisfaction with their on-line courses is currently sitting at 92% based on data from the 2022 Student Quality Survey. Students who met with the Review Team were very positive about the quality and relevance of their online teaching and experience. These students made clear to the Team that, in their experience, course content was, almost without exception, current and that this applied equally to courses delivered by permanent and sessional staff.

Canvas is the delivery system for on-line learning at the University and the system allows for feedback on assignments and the circulation of student course questionnaires. Students remarked to the Team that the on-line learning experience was well organised, offered ample opportunities to contact academic staff and that there were regular on-line sessions with fellow students with an emphasis on group and teamwork. Feedback provided by students was said to be listened to, with one example given of a programme where most courses had

been mandatory and where, following student feedback, consideration is now being given to introducing elective courses into that curriculum.

As a complement to these discussions with students, the Review Team was provided with a showcase of how online teaching and content is aligned to the current strategic market and student population (local, Icelandic). This included samples of current online teaching demonstrating how the learning management system is used, and typical content. Additionally, academic staff, were able to explain how the quality of online practice is monitored.

The University is committed to enhancing the quality of its online materials and the scope of this activity is presented as actions across Strategic Plan Goals 1 to 4. The list of activities for implementation in the period 2021-24 is comprehensive and includes supporting teachers in developing group work methodology to enhance student engagement, providing incentives to teachers who are researching innovative digital teaching methodologies and examining trends in online teaching. The University acknowledges that it does not have the resources to be a cutting-edge innovator in digital technologies. It can, however, follow closely innovations as they emerge (such as Artificial Intelligence and approaches to on-line assessment), and this approach is serving the University well.

3.12 Recommendation 11

While the roles and responsibilities of governing and consultative groups have been clarified, it is not clear whether this has yet led to more efficient decision making.

Governance models can come in many forms and, as the University states in the SR, how far one model as opposed to another allows for greater efficiency is a challenging question. The position is further complicated by the changes in governance and organisational structures at BU occurring at different times over the last seven years. Identifying which, if any, of these variables led to more or less efficiency in decision-making is indeed highly problematic. The Team has noted earlier in this report the significant change agenda that

has been taken forward since 2021. Such transformation, at pace, cannot occur without critical aspects of the governance and management infrastructure operating in an effective, efficient and collegiate manner. The Board of Governors was fully engaged in the two days of meetings that helped BU focus on its future direction. Members of the Board confirmed that information flow to them is excellent and that they are benefitting from a data driven approach. From their perspective, arrangements were far more systematic with regular updates on areas such as programme portfolio development, outcomes from student surveys, and data on drop-out rates. There is regular contact between the Board and the Rector, and the Board views its working relationship with the Rector as very positive. Under the leadership of the Rector, the Executive Board operates as a driving force for change and improvement and is the guardian of evidence-based decision-making.

The organisation has been streamlined with the number of committees reduced. In addition, the independence of departments has been reinforced and the central function of Academic Services made more formal. The external stakeholder view of these arrangements is that the University is more flexible and agile than in the past. The Review Team is convinced that the present decision-making system is functioning well, with the roles and responsibilities of management, boards, councils and advisory groups clear and effective and offering the right level of support for the University's new strategic direction and the enhancement of quality.

3.13 Recommendation 12

There is a need to develop and implement strategies to improve the external engagement of labour market employers, alumni, and other stakeholders, including better use of student and alumni outcome data. This can yield helpful information to inform programme development and influence the external image of the University.

An external Advisory Board has been introduced at BU and this can often be a very effective mechanism for strengthening external stakeholder engagement and optimising the University's position in the external environment. The Advisory Board does not have

decision-making powers and its main role is to support the Rector “as a sounding board and an external supporter of Bifrost University...” The Rector is responsible for selecting the Board members, in consultation with the Executive Council. The supporting function of the Board extends to meetings with the Executive Council and the SR provides an example of a theme meeting between two Board members and the Dean of the Business Department for the purpose of receiving feedback on the portfolio review for Business Administration. The Advisory Board offers a solid platform for the development of external engagement although it is not seen as a panacea. Other initiatives to improve the external image of the University are identified in the SR and there is also an emphasis on departments working on their outward academic communication.

At a basic level, progress on alumni relations is hampered by the lack of a strong higher education alumni tradition in Iceland. However, the University is determined to revive its Alumni Association and a new member of staff was appointed in 2020 to take this forward. Developments in data management are supporting this activity and the SR notes improved communication with alumni. Alumni outcome data has been reviewed by the University’s Data Management Working Group and the results of the review are to be incorporated into future alumni surveys. A specific sub-goal relating to alumni activities has been included in the Strategic Intent 2030 and the Strategic Action Plan 2021-24 and the monitoring of actions through the strategic planning process should help to ensure that a strong focus on alumni relations is maintained.

The Review Team’s meetings with a range of stakeholders included discussion of Icelandic culture and communication, and the significance of informal interactions. The Review Team recognises that for a relatively small university, operating in this context, personal networking is in many cases a more effective way to engage external stakeholders in development of the university, rather than relying solely on a more formal approach. The Review Team would therefore encourage the University to maintain its agility and active networking based on individual contacts.

3.14 Recommendation 13

The Student Union is mostly focused on social engagement of students and needs to be supported to enhance efforts to protect the rights and interests of students and engage more students in continuous quality improvement for the University.

The University is rightly sensitive to the independent function of the Student Association and stresses the importance of collaborative efforts to arrive at a model of student representation that focuses on continuous quality improvement for the University. The current relationship between the Student Association and the University's management can be said to be a positive one based on student representative testimonies in the SR. The proposed organisational changes relating to the scope of the Student Association should be helpful in focusing the activities of the SA on issues relating to rights and quality improvement. The embedding of this work in the Strategic Intent 2030 goals indicates that these steps will be monitored on an on-going basis. The Student Association and the University are also focused on mitigating some of the potential barriers to student engagement that flow from the on-line educational model, including benchmarking the SA against other SAs that operate wholly within a digital learning environment.

The University provides details of six actions that it has taken to help with the shift from a SA that focuses on a social function to one that performs an advocacy role for students. These include financial support in relation to student fees for elected representatives to the SA, regulatory change that increases student representation on department councils, and the introduction of regular meetings between the President of the Student Association and the Quality Director and the Rector. The University sees a positive impact from these actions. The Review Team's discussions with students and student representatives provided evidence that the SA and other student representatives are now instrumental in protecting the rights and interests of the students in the University community, including quality improvement.

4. Conclusions

4.1 Judgements

Following its consideration of the Status Report and associated evidence submitted by Bifröst University (BU), and the site visit at your institution from 12-13 December 2022, the Review Team commissioned by the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education concluded that:

- The judgement from the March 2021 report that “limited confidence can be placed in the soundness of the University’s present arrangements to secure the academic standards of its awards” can be alleviated.

The Review Team therefore arrives at the following judgement:

- Confidence can be placed in the soundness of Bifröst University’s present and likely future arrangements to secure the academic standards of its degrees and awards.

4.2 Commendations

The Team has been struck by the high levels of commitment shown by all those constituencies to the need for serious reflection on the future vision, mission strategy and management of the University. The positive outcome to those deliberations is a testament to the hard work and dedication of those who chose to establish a modified direction for the University and manage the change that inevitably flowed from that decision. Given the timescales involved this was, by any standards, an impressive achievement that is to be **commended**.

The University has very significantly revised its strategy regarding international online markets. It no longer has goals to expand into international online markets, it is discontinuing programmes offered in English apart from courses required by exchange students and it is terminating negotiations with two institutions relating to future collaboration. This change of direction is summarised by the Rector as follows: “In the

profiling work of Bifrost University it becomes continuously more evident that teaching in Icelandic is a unique selling point for Bifrost University. At the same time, we are committed to internationalisation and look forward to strengthening our efforts in this regard.” The Review Team **commends** the University’s strategic analysis and leadership in making this realistic decision.

Annex 1: Meeting Schedule

Monday 12 December 2022

Meeting Number	Meeting	Attendees
One	Briefing with Rector	Margrét Jónsdóttir Njarðvík
Two	Executive Council	Margrét Jónsdóttir Njarðvík, Rector Margrét Vagnsdóttir, Financial Director Halldóra Lóa Þorvaldsdóttir, Director of Academic Services Hulda Dóra Styrmsdóttir, Human Resource Manager Stefan Wendt, Dean of the Business Department Auðbjörg Jakobsdóttir, Director of IT Department Lydía Geirsdóttir, Quality Director Elín Jónsdóttir, Dean of the Law Department Ólína Kjerúlf Þorvarðardóttir, Dean of the Social Sciences Department
Three	Deans	Stefan Wendt, Dean of the Business Department Elín Jónsdóttir, Dean of the Law Department Ólína Kjerúlf Þorvarðardóttir, Dean of the Social Sciences
Four	Programme Leaders	Anna Hildur Hildibrandsdóttir, PL BA/Diploma in Creative Industries Magnús Árni Skjöld Magnússon, PL BA/Diploma in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics (PPE) Njörður Sigurjónsson, PL MA/MCM in Cultural Management Unnar Steinn Bjarndal Björnsson, PL BS in Business Law Einar Svansson, PL BS in Business Administration with emphasis on Service Management Brynjar Thor Thorsteinsson, PL MS / MMM in Marketing Management
Five	Student Association	Not disclosed. N=4
Six	Sessional staff	Business Department - Anna Marín Þórarinsdóttir Social Sciences Department - Sævar Ari Finnbogason Law Department - Ari Karlsson Social Sciences Department - Steinunn Þorvaldsdóttir Business Department - Bjarki Þór Grönfeldt Gunnarsson
Seven	Board of Governors	Leifur Runólfsson (Chairman) from the Alumni association Magnús Smári Snorrason from the Regional Government Auður H. Ingólfssdóttir from the University Council Marteinn Jónsson from the Employers Union Gunnur Líf Gunnarsdóttir from the SSI (Co-op association)
Eight	Digital Learning Showcase	Bergsveinn Þórsson, PL BA/Diploma in Public Administration Unnar Steinn Bjarndal Björnsson, PL BS in Business Law Erlendur Ingi Jónsson, PL BS in Business Administration

Tuesday 13 December 2022

Nine	Academic Services and Rector's Office	Halldóra Lóa Þorvaldsdóttir, Director of Academic Services Ása Sigurlaug Harðardóttir, Teaching Advisor Helena Dögg Haraldsdóttir, Project Manager for the Undergraduate Programmes in the Business Department Helga Rós Einarsdóttir, Educational Counsellor Leifur Finnbogason, Examinations Manager Sólveig Hallsteinsdóttir, Project Manager for the Ugly and the Curriculum Auðbjörg Jakobsdóttir, Director of IT Department Lydia Geirsdóttir, Quality Director Hulda Dóra Styrmsdóttir, Human Resource Manager
Ten	Permanent Teachers	Business Department - Stefán Valgarð Kalmansson Social Sciences Department - Dr. Sigrún Lilja Einarsdóttir Business Department - Haraldur Daði Ragnarsson Law Department - Dr Helga Kristín Auðunsdóttir Law Department - Dr. Bjarni Már Magnússon Social Sciences Department - Dr. Eiríkur Bergmann
Eleven	Key External Stakeholders	Ingibjörg Þorsteinsdóttir, Chief Judge for Reykjavík and a former Dean of Bifröst University Law Department. Ásta Bjarnadóttir, Former HR manager at Reykjavík University and the HR director of the National University Hospital of Iceland. Currently working in central HR management for the city of Reykjavík. Gissur Pétursson, Chairman of the Bifröst Alumni Association Inga Dóra Halldórsdóttir, Representative for the Borgarbyggð municipality
Twelve	Students	Not disclosed. N=5
Thirteen	Any Outstanding Issues	Rector, Vice-Rector, Director of Quality

Annex 2: Review Terms of Reference

INSTITUTION-WIDE REVIEW OF BIFRÖST UNIVERSITY: ALLEVIATION OF LIMITED CONFIDENCE

TERMS OF REFERENCE

I. Scope of the review

The objective of the review is to evaluate if the limited confidence in Bifröst University's standards of degrees and awards that concluded the 2021 Institution-Wide review report should be alleviated⁸. Specifically, the current review will determine if sufficient progress has been made on the 2021 recommendations to warrant alleviating the judgment of limited confidence.

II. Methodology of the review

The general approach of this review will respect the philosophy of the Quality Enhancement Framework, as spelled out in the in the 2017 version of the *Quality Enhancement Handbook for Icelandic Higher Education*⁹ (hereinafter, the '*QEF2 Handbook*'). This review will follow to a large degree the process set out for Institution-Wide review in Section 4 of the QEF2 Handbook.

2.1 The 2021 recommendations

The review will examine how BU has responded to the recommendations given in the 2021 report. In subsequent communication to BU, the Quality Board provided examples of further enhancement derived from the recommendations of the 2021 review report and further guidance.

The recommendations from Section 7.3 of the 2021 review report and further guidance from the Quality Board are reproduced below.

a. Recommendations from Section 7.3 of the March 2021 review report

- The vision for the university is multi-faceted and complex. As a result, the strategies, priorities, and implementation of action plans need to be more clearly delineated.
- Given the ambitious vision the Rector has for the university, the strategic alignment of existing staff, selective recruitment for new positions, a comprehensive staff development plan, and a staff performance evaluation program would be beneficial.
- Evidence-based decision making is not consistently applied. The strategic plan and enhancement plan lack targets for the KPIs and timelines for achievement of outcomes.

⁸ Full report available at <https://qef.is/assets/PDFs/Universities/BU-QEF2-IWR-Report-for-publication-v2.pdf>

⁹ <https://qef.is/assets/PDFs/Others/QEF2-Handbook-for-website.pdf>

- The University does not have a formal approach to benchmarking and implementation of best practices.
- While there are successes for students with diverse academic backgrounds, there are high non-completion rates for students overall and there is insufficient analysis of the reasons for this outcome.
- The current program portfolio would benefit from review, to better align with student demands, the institutional strategy and available teaching resources, as the University is heavily relying on sessional staff.
- While numerous policies have been prepared, implementation and assessment of quality outcomes are lagging, and processes need to be put in place to monitor this work.
- Enhancement of quality assurance measures for programmes, sessional teachers' qualifications, and teaching performance, as well as for the relevance and rigour of course content, need to be strengthened.
- Processes for the dissemination of information gathered from surveys and other data collections should be created along with an operations calendar specifying the timing of each step. Student feedback loops need to be closed systematically, particularly so in an online environment.
- While investments have been made and improvements are evident, the online teaching materials, as measured by the sample available to the Team, do not yet meet the international standards that the university sets itself, and will need to be improved to meet the University's stated goal to expand into other online markets.
- While the roles and responsibilities of governing and consultative groups have been clarified, it is not clear whether this has yet led to more efficient decision making.
- There is a need to develop and implement strategies to improve the external engagement of labour market employers, alumni, and other stakeholders, including better use of student and alumni outcome data. This can yield helpful information to inform programme development and influence the external image of the university.
- The Student Union is mostly focused on social engagement of students and needs to be supported to enhance efforts to protect the rights and interests of students and engage more students in continuous quality improvement for the university.

b. Examples noted in Quality Board letter to BU on 27 May 2021

BU transmitted to the Quality Board an action plan in response to the 2021 recommendations. The Quality Board suggested that the action plan could be further strengthened by:

- *Sharpening the university profile:* The University has set out an ambition to “be in the forefront of delivering digital learning with a flexible approach”. This is an important statement and is potentially transformational. For transformational change to be successful, it should touch the entire institution. This has implications for everything the University does, as well as how

it distinguishes itself from other universities offering distance-learning. This will be easier to accomplish once the University profile is sharpened.

- *Setting priorities.* The IWR report recognises “the considerable progress made in the last years” and emphasises that further improvement requires setting clearer priorities (p.29). The need to set priorities is again emphasised on pp. 75-76. However, the current presentation of the Action Plan, whilst thorough, does not identify such priorities or indicate how the individual actions fit together.
- *Identifying both the financial investment and resources and the potential risks:* The Action Plan should identify the financial investment required as well as the academic and infrastructural resources needed to achieve the goals that have been set. It should also identify major risks and how to mitigate them.

c. *Examples noted in Quality Board letter to BU on 22 March 2022*

BU sent a memo outlining how it is addressing the 2021 recommendations. In response, the Quality Board suggested that BU detail in its submission of materials:

- How the university has aligned its quality assurance with its strategy.
- What institutional QA components (as now set out in the recent status report) have been put in place to ensure the standards of awards, and how these are embedded in the governance and decision-making system. By institutional components, we refer to programme monitoring and reviews and core data used (such as labour market data, outcome data, a formal approach to benchmarking). Useful reference may be made to Annex 11 of the QEF Handbook.
- How quality will be assured through staff development.
- Developments related to the working weekends.

2.2 The Status Report

The review will be based on a Status Report (hereinafter, SR), provided by Bifröst University (hereinafter, BU), which will detail the actions that have been taken in response to the 2021 recommendations (section a, above) and describe what further enhancements are planned to address them. The correspondence of the Quality Board to BU (sections b and c, above) should be used in the spirit in which they were given, as general guidance, clarification, and examples.

The SR should provide commentary on progress of action items to address all items above and provide context, where applicable, for possible delays in or barriers to closing any items.

The SR should be accompanied by the main sources of evidence on which it is based (key statistics, committee minutes, etc.) and other documents readily available which will assist the Review Team in understanding how BU has responded to the recommendations arising from the 2021 review. Documents that have been revised or created in response to those recommendations should also accompany the SR. These may include, but are not limited to, Quality Handbooks describing internal quality systems and structures, prospectuses, procedures, processes, staff and student handbooks/guides, etc.

All documentation relevant to the SR should be made available to the team in electronic format, by the most convenient means (e.g., via hyperlinks in the SR, or by granting access to the institution's intranet, or by some combination of the foregoing). Whichever means are adopted, there needs to be clear linkages between the SR and the related evidence base.

Following the submission of the SR (which is due a month before the scheduled site visit), team members might request further information from the institution.

A two-day visit by a team of experts will be organised by the Quality Board. The programme of the visit will be agreed in advance with the institution. The team will interview, as appropriate, the BU senior leadership, students, teaching and administrative staff as well as any other partners and stakeholders who are external to the university and whose views are deemed important for gaining a good understanding of BU's management of standards of degrees and awards.

III. Outcomes of the review

The review will result in a report that will be delivered to BU after the University will have had the opportunity to correct any factual errors.

The report will include commentary on progress to date made on actions arising from the IWR recommendations listed above (2.1a) and, where linked to these, to the areas of guidance provided by the Board (2.1b and 2.1c).

The report will conclude with a statement on whether the judgment of limited confidence in the management of standards of degrees and awards can be alleviated. The decision on the alleviation of the judgment of limited confidence should be framed only against the recommendations as articulated in the March 2021 IWR as set out in 2.1a above.

The Quality Board will publish the report of this alleviation review and post on its website.

BU will have the possibility to lodge a complaint or an appeal, as specified in § 90 of the *QEF2 Handbook*.

IV. Human resources and timing

- The Review Team will consist of four members: two international experts, a Secretary and an Icelandic student. One of the international experts will serve as Chair. The team will be assembled with a view of providing the following combination of experience:
 - Knowledge of the subject area.
 - Senior experience in higher education, particularly in managing quality and standards.
 - Evaluation experience.
- The student member will be nominated by LÍŠ. It should normally be a current student registered on an undergraduate or postgraduate course in Iceland and have no conflict of interest with the institution or the subject.

- Prospective reviewers will be required to certify that they have no conflict of interest with the institution being reviewed. BU will be asked to comment on the proposed membership of the team in relation to any potential conflict of interest.
- The Board Secretariat will provide coordination and support during all phases of this exercise.
- The Quality Board will train the team (face-to-face and online, plus access to all relevant Quality Board documents, such the *Guidelines for Team Chairs and Team Members*) and supervise this review. The Board will take responsibility for the final confidence judgments.
- The project will be conducted in autumn 2022 and concluded in the first part of 2023.

Day 1:

Arrive in Keflavík

Drive to Bifröst

Day 2:

All day: Review

Day 3:

All day: Review and arrive at preliminary conclusions

Evening: Drive to Reykjavík

Day 4:

Depart from Keflavík