

*Quality Enhancement Framework for Icelandic Higher Education*

# INSTITUTION-WIDE REVIEW

**Bifröst University**

March 2021

## Preface

This is the report of an 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;
- Quality Board-led Special Reviews.

Further information on the QEF is available on the website of the Icelandic Quality Enhancement Framework ([www.qef.is](http://www.qef.is)).

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## Glossary and List of Abbreviations

**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.

**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.

## Team

The following experts comprised the Team:

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Ragnar Árnason, student.

Iain Morrison. Dean of Students, University of the Highlands and Islands.

Anneli Pirttilä. Rector Emerita, Saimaa University of Applied Sciences.

Lewis Purser, Team Secretary. Director, Learning, Teaching and Academic Affairs, Irish Universities Association.

Oliver Vettori. Dean, Accreditation and Quality Management and Director, Programme Management & Teaching and Learning Support, Vienna University of Economics and Business.

# 1. Introduction: the review in context

## 1.1. Overview of review process

In the second cycle of the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF2), Bifröst University's Institution-Wide Review (IWR) visit took place virtually in October 2020, with the report published on 12 March, 2021. Bifröst University submitted its Reflective Analysis (RA) for purposes of this review on June 30, 2020 and gave the Review Team (the Team) access to supporting documentation via an online file storage system. The University submitted QEF2 Subject-Level Reviews (SLRs) for its two Departments undertaken in 2018 and 2019. In the previous QEF cycle (QEF1), the University participated in IWR in 2015, and implemented SLRs during the period 2014-2015.

The present review followed procedures outlined in the 2nd edition of the *Quality Enhancement Handbook for Icelandic Higher Education*. As part of the review, the Team undertook a systematic evaluation of evidence of the University's procedures with reference to the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*, and the commentary on ESG provided in Annex 11 of the *Quality Enhancement Handbook for Icelandic Higher Education*. The full programme of the virtual visit is in Annex 1. The Team's conclusions are included in the summaries for Sections 3, 4 and 6, as well as in Section 7.

## 1.2. About the institution

Bifröst University (the University) began in 1918 as the Cooperative College, but is now a private non-profit university. In 1955 the College moved from Reykjavík to its current campus in the Borgarfjörður area. The University also has office space in Reykjavík, which is mainly used for desk work by academic and administrative staff. The University has offered university-level education since 1988, first in Business, then also in Law (2002) and Social Science (2005). The University has two Departments: Department of Business and Department of Social Science and Law. Degree programmes are offered at the Bachelor's and Masters levels. The University also offers a



preparatory, or Gateway, programme to prepare students without requisite matriculation exams for entry to university. The University claims a leadership position in online education in Iceland, citing a rate of 88% of students who study online while living off-campus. Approximately 80% of incoming students in the Autumn of 2018 enrolled in study lines or specialities that were not in place in the academic year 2013–2014. Therefore, the University makes claim to being an innovative institution. Finally, The University prides itself on being a leading school in Iceland in the field of leadership education for women via the *Empowering Women* programme.

In 2015, the University developed its Strategic Pyramid that defines the University's role, purpose, values, vision and strategic themes, as well as actions and priorities. Its role is described as a Business School educating leaders for business and society with a purpose to graduate creative and responsible individuals who want to and can strengthen business and make society better. The University's vision is to be an internationally recognised institution of high quality. The University's values are initiative, cooperation and responsibility, whereas strategic themes are quality, growth and efficiency. Actions and priorities are subject to strategic planning meetings and subsequent decisions. Further, the basic mission of the institution is spelled out in the Bifröst University Charter: to advance and strengthen Icelandic business and society by offering superior quality education in the fields of business, law and social sciences. The University Charter also emphasises academic research and maintaining special relations with the business community.

### 1.3. Funding/resourcing

The University is a private non-profit university that charges students tuition and also receives block funding from the government. The Icelandic Student Loan Fund makes student loans available for the full amount of the tuition. Block funding is determined by a service agreement with the *Ministry of Education, Science and Culture* according to a model that applies to all Icelandic universities, both private and public. The overwhelming majority of block funding is based on historic student and graduation numbers, and a small percentage is earmarked for research activities.

The University faced considerable financial challenges during its QEF1 IWR, which carried over into 2016. Since 2017, however, the University has operated within its budget. The University credits this turnaround primarily to increased government contributions to Higher Education, steady increases in student numbers and internal cost-cutting measures, which included a new remuneration structure for academic staff. The University has also been able to sell off its real estate assets that were no longer in use and signed an agreement with the Housing and Construction Authority of Iceland that makes housing at the Bifrost campus sustainable for the near future.

#### 1.4. Staff

The University reported in its RA that it employed 17 academic staff at the time of submission, with the majority of those holding full-time positions. Of those 17 staff, 12 are male and 10 hold doctoral degrees. Part-time academic staff (sessional staff) have an agreement with the University as contractors, and the agreements are based on a formal tariff and type of work included, such as teaching a course and being a Masters thesis supervisor, to name but two examples. Across the whole University, sessional staff have contributed approximately 70% of all taught class hours in the past three semesters (Data provided 30/10/20 by Quality Manager), with the remaining 30% covered by full-time staff.

The University operates under an Equality Plan to ensure gender equality of: salaries; participation in administration; facilities; and opportunities for further study. The University has been certified as an equal-pay workplace (*i. jafnlaunavottun*) by an independent third-party.

#### 1.5. Students

The University is one of four universities in Iceland that have fewer than 1,000 students. Statistics Iceland<sup>1</sup> reports that students at the University numbered 576 in 2019 which is approximately the same as the number the University reports which is 585. The difference is likely the timing of the

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<sup>1</sup> [www.hagstofa.is](http://www.hagstofa.is)

data collection and does not present a significant discrepancy. Undergraduate students were 342 in 2019, compared to 243 Masters-level students. Students are distributed with 63% in Business and 37% in Social Science and Law. While students in Iceland are generally older than students in Continental Europe, students at the University are older than is typical in Iceland, as the average age of students has ranged from 36-38 in the past five years. The student body is approximately two-thirds female, which is typical of universities in Iceland.

### 1.6. Key committee and managerial structures

The trustees of the institution are the Municipality of Borgarbyggð, the Confederation of Icelandic Employers, the Federation of Icelandic Cooperative Societies, the Alumni Association and the University Council. Each of the trustees appoints one member to the Board of Governors and three members to the Council of Representatives.

The Board of Governors must have a majority of outside members, who are not students or employees of the institution. The Board elects its own chair. The basic role of the Board is to monitor the institution's operations. It is responsible for strategic planning, and it approves the opening of new Academic Departments and determines tuition. The Board appoints the Rector and determines the terms of the Rector's employment. The Board also sets the University Regulations.

The Rector is responsible to the Board of Governors. The Rector represents the institution externally and internally, attends meetings of the Board, manages the institution's financial issues and prepares the annual budget for the Board's approval. The Rector reports to the Board on staff changes and is responsible for the annual report of the institution. The Rector is responsible for quality issues and appoints the Director of Quality Management (currently a 30% appointment), who works with academic and support departments. Department Boards are responsible for the internal quality issues in the Academic Departments.

BU's Annual General Meeting is also a meeting of the Council of Representatives. It is held no later than May of each year. The Council of Representatives has 15 members, with each of the trustees appointing three members on a three-year rolling basis. The Council of Representatives is the highest authority in the institution. It sets the Charter and approves amendments to the Charter.

The University Council has two roles. It is an advisory body on the internal affairs of the institution, and it appoints members to the Council of Representatives and the Board of Governors. The University Council has 11 voting members: the Rector, five staff representatives and five student representatives. The Rector can invite others to join as observers.

The Executive Board is the most important consultative body for the Rector. The heads of academic, administrative and support departments and the Director of Quality Management form the Executive Board with the Rector. Permanent or *ad hoc* working groups are established as needed.

The permanent academic staff forms the Education and Research Board, which is a consultative body and a formal forum for discussion. It appoints academic staff representatives to various formal roles in the institution.

### 1.7. The Reflective Analysis

The RA submitted by the University was considered by the Team to be a comprehensive, coherent and well-written document that covered all areas necessary to support the Team's preparation for the review visit. The Team noted the open and reflective nature of the document and the number of appropriate and helpful annexes appended to it. Where significant actions were recent or ongoing this was largely clear from the text of the RA. Only a few additional information requests were made by Team members ahead of the main review visit. However, Team members did note that formal use of data, including the use of key performance indicators and other quantitative benchmarks, to the extent they would have anticipated, was not readily apparent from the RA or the annexes provided. The number of different strategic priorities listed in the RA also made it challenging to pinpoint exactly which initiatives would be receiving highest priority in the near future.

## 1.8. Summary evaluation

The Team formed an initial view from the RA that, having achieved financial stability in recent years, the University's leadership is now working to establish the brand of the University as an internationally recognized university of high quality. The Rector is new to her post (three months at the time of the Team visit) and she has made it a priority to explore new opportunities and reach university-wide agreement on key institutional focus areas, while at the same time emphasizing the importance of adhering to quality standards in all aspects of the University's management and operations.

Faced with the COVID pandemic, the University was well placed to expand its pedagogical model of online education and adapt its on-campus "working weekends" to a virtual approach. The online model meets the educational need of the student population which is older than the average for Icelandic higher education and is considered a strength of the University.

The Team approached the virtual visit with a commitment to work with this initial view. Further, the Team was committed to implementing the QEF2 methodology so that it that would be as helpful to the University as an on-site visit. Through discussions with both students and staff, the Team quickly gained a sense of a strong commitment at BU to supporting students.

While noting a commitment to strategic planning and quality assurance and despite having developed many policies and procedures to guide the work of the University, the institutional structures and processes are not yet fully in place to monitor the effectiveness and efficiency of these policies. Examples provided by the staff of the use of data did not evidence a complete feedback cycle to students, or clear results of evidence-based decision making, the full implementation of processes for hiring and evaluating staff, or a comprehensive quality assurance and evaluation system.

In summary, the Team formed a view of a University that is in transition with new leadership and a more secure financial footing. The Team had a clear sense that the University has used previous

experiences of IWR and SLR positively to shape policies for improvement, yet needs to fully implement and evaluate the effectiveness of its actions through the use of data and comprehensive, systemic evaluation of programmes and policies.

## 2. Learning from QEF1 reviews

### 2.1. Learning from previous IWR

In the QEF1 IWR in 2015, the University received limited confidence in the soundness of the University's then arrangements to secure the academic standards of its awards. The University received confidence in the soundness of its then and likely future arrangements to secure the quality of the student learning experience.

The 2015 report supporting this judgement focused on numerous areas of development:

- 1. The limited useful statistics to support evaluation and planning together with the lack of evidence of using the outcomes of earlier evaluations. These problems underpinned a RA that was largely descriptive and lacked analysis.*
- 2. Although benchmark institutions have been identified, little practical use has been made of them or systematic data gathered on them.*
- 3. The evaluation and development of the modular system did not appear to be underpinned by effective systematic planning.*
- 4. In general, planning appeared to lack a formal approach to management with clear identification of such things as priorities and metrics. Long-term strategic planning seemed to be lacking while the University focuses on rebuilding enrolment.*
- 5. The development of the University has not benefited from a systematic approach or a plan for an approach to reviewing arrangements for governance and management to determine their effectiveness.*
- 6. A lack of clear data on the employment of graduates or embedding of entrepreneurship.*
- 7. The quantity of research varies considerably among departments, and overall, the link between teaching and research could be improved.*
- 8. Formal procedures for recruitment of faculty appeared to be lacking, with resulting difficulties of ensuring a strategic approach to the appointment of faculty. This is especially pressing considering the low number of academic staff that possess doctoral degrees.*

9. *The implications of the lack of financial resources constrain the University's ability to support technology, broaden the curriculum, strengthen its research activities, provide sufficient data to support its plans and evaluations and maintain its physical estate.*

The 2015 report stated that while the University's RA and its Quality Handbook outlined a structure for safeguarding standards, the operation was challenged by four factors: the quality system was relatively new and therefore largely untested; the University operated with very little useful data; there was a lack of formal planning; and the University needed to restructure its rules and policies regarding recruitment, development, and evaluation of new faculty.

The RA for this present review summarized how the University set out to tackle the main concerns expressed in the QEF1 Review Report. The first step was for the University to establish five groups:

- Working Group on Data Collection
- Working Group on Strategic Planning
- Task Force on Governance
- Working Group on Hiring Rules
- Working Group on Refinancing

The outcomes of this work were outlined in a Follow-up Report to the QEF1 Review submitted by the University in November of 2015. The main outcomes were:

- A new Data Collection Plan;
- A revised Strategic Plan for 2016–2020;
- Academic governance system was revised to efficiently and effectively strengthen the University's ability to secure the standards of its awards;
- Formal hiring rules were approved in November 2015;
- Refinancing of the University's debts was successful in 2015.

In the QEF1 Review of the Action Plan submitted by the University following the QEF1 IWR, it was concluded that "Confidence could be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future arrangements to secure the quality of the student learning experience". In the QEF1 follow-up report it was stated that "Because the University has re-financed its debt and received increased support from the government, it is gaining some measure of increased flexibility in its budget." The

University has kept improving its financial status since the follow-up review and the Team undertaking the present review was given assurances that the University's financial status is secure.

The Team undertaking the present review would affirm that there is now evidence of a link between research and teaching from permanent teaching staff, although the research does not frequently emanate from University full-time staff. It would also affirm that the University has appeared to achieve significant improvements in its financial strength, allowing for investments in personnel and technology to improve the student experience. Furthermore, this improved financial strength is crucial for the University to further standards in teaching and the quality of the student learning experience.

There are of course further enhancements that can be made, and some areas have not developed significantly since the 2015 IWR. The University needs to further develop its formal approach to benchmarking and implementation of best practices, strategies and priorities, while the implementation of action plans needs to be more clearly delineated, to name but two examples. The Team, however, sensed that from dialogue with all parties connected to the University that there was a general will to learn more and to try to improve the future of the University by following up on the weaknesses that were identified in the IWR from 2015.

## 2.2. Learning from SLRs

Both the Department of Social Science and Law and the Department of Business undertook SLRs in QEF2 between 2018 – 2019. This allowed the SLR approach to build on the reflection and action planning from the IWR from 2015 and underpin the RA for the current review. Both Departments included student representatives and an external expert in their SLRs. In meetings with departmental representatives, the Team was assured that the Departments were well supported by the Department of Academic Services and the previous Rector in this work. They also reported working closely with external stakeholders, such as alumni, foreign units/experts and the business community. In the meetings with Departmental staff, it became clear to the Team that staff were



positively disposed towards the SLR process and the benefits of going through the exercise. A Quality Calendar has been put in place following the SLR, changes in learning management system had been going well, and there is now more focus on learning from best practice examples from other relevant universities. However, little progress has been made in formal benchmarking, as noted earlier.

The SLR from the Department of Social Science and Law states that “A firmer foundation for quality assurance has been established, e.g. with a new data collection plan. The demarcation and distribution of tasks and responsibilities between university administration and Academic Departments has been clarified, rendering the latter better able to focus on their academic vision.”

The Team can agree with that statement but would like to note that while data collection has improved, it has not reached its full potential. This is in part due to technology systems in use, such as Uglá (an internal network of electronic applications that Bifröst accesses through an agreement with the Icelandic public universities), not being yet fully operational.

The SLR from the Department of Business states that “One of the effects of the organizational changes at The University (BU) in 2016 was the establishment of academic independence for the Department of Business, including in relations to research matters. In this light, a special work committee was formed in autumn of 2017. The purpose was to analyse DB's research activities and define a new research agenda, in relations to quality of research output, study programmes, student experience, and employee development and well-being. The committee has not finished its work but preliminary results point into the direction of defining more clearly the role of academic and applied research, strengthening of academic staff in terms of number of employees, and increased academic independence in terms of BU's research evaluation system.” The Team for the present IWR can confirm that even though the committee has not finished its work, staff numbers and credentials have improved with an eye to promoting academic standards.

Both Departments have exceeded the goal of having 50% of permanent teachers with PhDs. The SLRs also directly feed into the departmental enhancement plans and there is strong emphasis on

quality improvements. Even though not all priorities arising from the SLRs have been addressed, the Team felt that the University was making deliberate progress. It was clear for the Team that the University's institutional management supports the implementation of action plans arising from SLRs and was cooperating with the departments to achieve their goals. It is evident to the Team that the SLRs have had a positive effect on teaching quality and student experience at the University, even if the University has not yet been able to follow through on every goal, plan or intention.

### 3. Managing Standards

#### 3.1. Policies, structures and processes related to the management of standards

The RA submitted by the University for the present review describes its governance and management structure in detail – also with regard to the university's Quality Assurance system. The role of the Rector is a central one and has been further strengthened by the recent organisational reform. Internal rules and formal procedures are introduced by the Rector only. This includes procedures related to the development of new educational offerings, recruitment of students, evaluation of student performance, examinations and other issues concerning the quality of teaching and learning in the institution. The Executive Board – consisting of the heads of academic units, administrative and support departments, as well as the director of quality management - support the Rector in this.

Even though the Rector also holds the main responsibility for quality issues, related tasks are clearly divided. The Departmental Boards, for instance, are responsible for internal quality in the Academic Departments. The Chairs of the Academic Departments are responsible for the academic programmes offered by their Departments, as well as the quality of their staff. The Director of Academic Services is responsible for teaching evaluations and the Director of Quality Management maintains the overall quality assurance procedures. Various bodies – Board of Governors, Council of Representatives as well as the University Council – are also involved, albeit mainly in a supervisory or

advisory capacity. However, evidence from interviews indicated that communication between the different bodies is scarce. 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, as compared to the situation before the reform.

Apart from the Icelandic Quality Enhancement Framework and various regulations, which the RA refers to, the University declares itself oriented towards the Principles for Responsible Management Education framework (PRIME). Yet, the effect of this framework on quality assurance procedures was not elaborated on.

A number of policy documents, most notably the institutional Quality Assurance Policy and the institutional Teaching Policy, outline the University's Quality Assurance system. The description is brief, yet concise. The quality handbooks (e.g. quality enhancement & assurance, teaching and learning) define procedures and standards, for example with regard to syllabi and course evaluations. Overall, the handbooks mostly describe responsibilities (who needs to do what) but leave the details to the responsible actors. This makes the whole system somewhat dependent on subjective quality standards and personal motivation. At first glance, this did not appear to be much of a problem, as the Team found a well-developed quality culture, with leadership and staff recognizing areas of limitations and showing a strong commitment to improvements in research, technology, data gathering, and evidence-based decision making. This improvement-oriented collective spirit is somewhat impeded, though, by a lack of systematic processes, clearly defined quality goals and measures of success that would help the institution monitor areas of improvement and determine if enhancement goals have been met.

The Quality Assurance process that appeared best developed, and was referred to throughout the visit, is designed around teaching evaluations. Those evaluations on the course level play a key role in the University's Quality Assurance system, and the Team found plenty of evidence that course

evaluations are clearly followed up on for the University's staff, including sessional teachers. The evaluations are conducted every semester. Other instruments, such as focus groups, alumni surveys or student surveys with a broader scope, are also occasionally used, but mostly in relation to an upcoming external review, rather than as an instrument of ongoing quality monitoring. Options such as corporate surveys, systematic peer-observation of teaching, benchmarking or study progress analyses have not yet been explored to a discernible degree.

The Team in the QEF1 Review in 2015 had already pointed out the shortcomings of the University's gathering and management of data that would support decision making and quality monitoring. The new data collection plan is certainly an important step forward since the last review and the University has clearly made some progress, in addition to improvements related to IT infrastructure. Upon closer inspection, however, the plan is still very much a plan (also indicated by the fact that the document made available to the Team was titled a "working document"). Further work is needed in order to implement the kind of management information system that the previous Review report had recommended. An effective reporting scheme linked to decision making processes should be a key element of this effort of moving away from "data collection" to "data driven quality assurance".

### 3.2. External reference points and benchmarks

Systematically comparing processes, structures and outcomes with carefully selected institutions is certainly a proven method of determining the success of one's own strategy – and to gain insights for adapting it. The Team found, though, that the University does not yet have a formal approach to benchmarking and implementation of best practices. In the RA submitted for this present review, the University admits as much, yet lists a number of institutions that might, in principle, be suitable as benchmarking institutions. It is important to note, though, that the 2020 list differs to a considerable degree from the list of benchmarking institutions provided in the QEF1 review in 2015.

Making more systematic use of external reference points via benchmarking and selecting adequate benchmarks, had already been recommended in the QEF1 review, as well as in the SLR for the department of Law and Social Science in QEF2. It is also included in that Department's enhancement plan for 2019-2025, starting with the selection of suitable benchmarking institutions. By the time of the present review visit, not much progress had been made in this regard. However, examining trends from abroad in order to enhance the University's online teaching, in particular through benchmarking with other higher education institutions, is mentioned as a potential enhancement in the RA for the present review.

In summary, the University appears to not have invested much time and effort in identifying suitable benchmarking institutions and has yet to set up a systematic approach to comparison and learning from others. The Team thus advises the University to follow up on the previous recommendations as soon as possible. Identifying peer, or aspirational peer, institutions in line with the University's own ambitions would be a helpful first step, especially if the identified institutions are comparable in size, structure and operations; cater to the same student markets; and/or apply for the same national, research or project funding pots ("competitors"). This is even more important as implicit comparisons during virtual visit interviews were rather drawn with other national higher education institutions, which do not appear in any of the lists mentioned above.

### 3.3. Programme portfolio and programme management

The University is a very small institution with a limited range of disciplines, yet it has a rather large portfolio of programmes and alternative educational offerings. In addition to various undergraduate and graduate programmes, the University also operates shorter educational offers. One is a preparatory studies programme, known as the University Gateway, which is currently under review (RA), for students not meeting the minimum requirements for admission to undergraduate programmes, and another is a continuing education programme offering shorter, work-related modules. Plans for starting a PhD programme are mentioned in the current strategic planning

documents as well as in the RA for this review. However, the Rector stated during virtual visit interviews that these plans have been put on hold.

BU is currently not offering any programmes in collaboration with other institutions (“collaborative provision”), but according to the RA, the university has been working on a new diploma programme in Educational Leadership and Management, in cooperation with *Hjallastefnan* and *Kaospilot* in Denmark. Work on this programme had been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic but will potentially be resumed in 2021. There is no information yet on how quality assurance will be organised within such a collaborative provision.

It is important to note that the entire portfolio of the University is operated with less than two dozen permanent staff members in addition to about 69 sessional staff members. Moreover, most permanent and sessional staff teach not only a considerable number of courses, but also a broad range of topics. Even for sessional staff, delivering 4-6 courses per year on various subjects is not an exception. Considering that many sessional staff members hold full-time positions at other institutions, as well as additional teaching obligations in some cases, the question arises how staff members ensure that their disciplinary knowledge stays current. In the QEF1 IWR in 2015, the issue of limited resources and competing demands on teaching staff had already been cited as one of the main concerns leading to the limited confidence judgment regarding academic standards. This challenge persists to this day.

Most programmes at the University also cater to a modest number of students. According to the University’s financial manager, the profitability of programmes is closely monitored. As courses within the University’s modularly-structured offerings are often shared across programmes and there are considerable drop out/non-completion rates across programmes, it is not entirely clear which criteria are ultimately used to determine if a programme is doing well.

Responsibility for managing programmes lies with the Heads of the two Academic Departments. This means that each of Department Head supervises between 9 and 15 programmes, even though several programmes have in some cases considerable overlap and function together more as a programme suite. The responsibilities of Department Heads do not only include academic directorship for each programme, but also operational day-to-day management. In this work, they are aided by other members of academic staff and the support units but it was conceded during virtual visit interviews that it might be necessary to change this structure. The Team shares this view, also in the light of the programme portfolio, which continues to grow with corresponding increases in Department Heads' responsibilities. Making sure the University's academic programmes are up to date and in line with national and international (inter)disciplinary quality standards requires sufficient time and resources to do so, as well as familiarity with the respective disciplinary discourses and curricular trends.

In summary, the Team found that the current programme portfolio would benefit from a comprehensive review to better align with student demands, the institutional strategy and available teaching resources, as the University is heavily relying on sessional staff. Updating the structure and criteria for programmatic quality enhancements should be considered an important part of such a review.

### 3.4. Design, approval, monitoring and review of programmes

Quality standards for the processes of design, approval, monitoring and review of programmes are outlined in the University's Quality Assurance manual.

The main responsibility for "greenlighting" a new programme lies with the Rector. The Quality Assurance Manual specifies that each newly developed programme needs to include teaching, learning and assessment strategies that can assure the achievement of Learning Outcomes.

Expectations are formulated so that the Heads of the Academic Departments, who can propose new

programmes, should seek input and advice from external stakeholders but it is unclear how these expectations are safeguarded or put into practice. The Team found evidence neither of systematic processes regarding market and competitor analyses nor clearly defined quality criteria, such as targets for new student admissions for new programmes. Some stakeholder involvement is ensured by the stipulation that each new programme needs to be confirmed by the Board of Governors and be presented to the University Council. However, it remains that the involvement of external stakeholders, as suggested by ESG 1.2, should be strengthened.

The Quality Assurance Manual does not make a distinction between the monitoring of programmes and cyclical programme reviews. It was reported to the Team during virtual visit interviews that the responsibility for monitoring programmes lies with the Department Heads, although the Director of Finance also monitors programmes' profitability. There was no evidence provided on quality criteria or Key Performance Indicators on the programme level beyond enrolment numbers. Overall, quality monitoring on the programme level is underdeveloped and this is not an area for improvement that is explicitly identified by the University in any enhancement plan. Improvements are needed to accord better with ESG 1.9.

According to the Quality Assurance Manual, programme reviews are conducted every three to five years and are scheduled in the University's Quality Enhancement plan. The responsibility for the evaluation lies with the Head of an Academic Department, although interviews during the virtual visit indicated that this responsibility can also be delegated to another faculty member who then chairs the evaluation team. There is no detailed information on how these reviews are to be conducted, with the exception of a few very general rules in the Quality Assurance Manual, which also contains a template as a guideline for the content of a programme review report. Neither did the Team find any evidence of a standardised procedure for these reviews, for example in terms of steps to be taken and questions to be asked during interviews with stakeholders. The specific review plan is developed by an evaluation team and needs to be approved by the Director of Quality



Management. Which, and how many, external stakeholders need to be involved seems to be at the discretion of the person leading the review, as is the decision what data should be collected and analysed. Overall, these reviews are largely run by the academic staff teaching in the programme. From this, it is not fully clear to the Team where the ideas for improvements stem from or how environmental changes (e.g., research developments, disciplinary trends) are taken into consideration. The relationship between programme-level reviews and SLRs is also not clarified in any official document.

In summary, the Team sees a clear need to update processes for quality assurance on the programme level, including the definition of clear quality or performance criteria for programmes. Further, there is a need for systematic stakeholder involvement in all steps of a programme life-cycle, a more data-driven approach to review, and the establishment of monitoring procedures beyond the cyclical programme reviews. This will also help the University to update its portfolio, as well as provide support for its ambitions to enlarge its international student population.

### 3.5. Programme delivery

The University has, for several years, followed what could be termed a “blended learning model”. This approach involves combining distance teaching with on-campus learning, with curricula constructed in a modular way. The choice of study format, however, seems very much up to the learner, with a considerable number of students mainly studying exclusively online. So-called “working weekends” provide students with the opportunity to meet and work on their studies on campus, with and without faculty support. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for obvious reasons, all teaching was delivered online, including “working weekends”. University staff members and students, as well as members of the various boards and councils, repeatedly declared that the University’s expertise in online teaching is a considerable asset to the University, in particular in comparison to the other Icelandic institutions. The Team found that despite some challenges described in the RA, new technology systems have been implemented and, while not fully

operational, offer great promise for greater ease of online course offerings. Despite these investments and improvements, as well as the effort and enthusiasm shown by all staff members with regard to online teaching, online teaching materials sampled by the Team do not yet meet the international standards that the University sets for itself. These will need to be improved for successful expansion into other online markets.

Overall, The University's current pedagogical model that combines theory and practice resonates well with students. It is also supported by sessional staff from the business community. Its main benefit is that it allows for real-world experiences and preparation for the world of work.

In the RA for the QEF1 IWR in 2015, the University had already planned to focus on an enhancement project to "Introduce at the department-head level a more formal supervision of learning outcomes of programmes and individual courses and how learning outcomes are related to relevant teaching methods and assessments." The goal was to conduct "such reviews systematically and in conjunction with subject level reviews." The QEF1 IWR further encouraged the University to act on these plans. The Team for the present review found that the University has made some significant progress in defining clear Learning Outcomes and aligning them with delivery modes and assessment ("constructive alignment"). Key graduate attributes the University is aiming for are also defined in the institutional teaching policy. There is no evaluation of the effectiveness of Learning Outcomes on the programme level though, as the assumption is that course level outcomes ultimately add up to the graduates' overall competence portfolio. This may well be, but the lack of systematic alumni surveys, corporate surveys or career tracking processes makes it difficult to assess if the University delivers on its ultimate mission-related goal of educating leaders in business and society and whether graduates are actually equipped to assume such roles. The Team was assured though, that some steps to amend this are already being taken, with a new staff member responsible for alumni tracking and alumni relations currently being hired.

Teaching evaluations on the course level are taken very seriously at the University. Results are brought to the attention of Department Boards and the Director of Academic Services. Problems indicated by the evaluations are discussed by the Heads of the Academic Departments and the respective instructors. Remarkably, instructors are also contacted by the University if the feedback is particularly positive. It was revealed to the Team in interviews during the virtual visit that some teachers continued to teach in spite of making no discernible changes in response to negative feedback, although students overall appear to be mostly satisfied.

Teaching staff have a considerable degree of autonomy to choose any teaching and assessment methods best suited for their courses. Their choices do not seem to be evaluated or monitored beyond the course-level teaching evaluations and SLR, but the institutional Teaching and Learning Guidelines provide some guidance on institutional priorities. A recently hired teaching consultant is supporting all teaching staff in developing their designs and improving their course delivery, often in close alignment with IT support staff. The Team recommends making this kind of support, or some form of similar introductory training, mandatory for all new teaching staff (see below).

### 3.6 Assessment policies and grading

The University has rules on assessment of student learning explained in the Handbook for Teaching and Learning. These include, for example, the grading scale, the connection between assessment and defined Learning Outcomes, the time limit for submitting grades to students, students' rights to appeal an assessment and the role of external examiners. Article 31 of the University Regulations defines how students can appeal an assessment.

In general, all courses need to offer a variety of assessment methods and components and conclude with a final comprehensive assessment in the form of written or oral examination or a student project. All assessments are clearly defined in the course syllabus, according to the university website. Teachers are free to design their own assessment, though, without any alignment of the

different assessments on the programme level. This raises the risk of having too many assessment forms of the same type, for example, group assignments and homework assignments, which do not cover the full range of programme level learning outcomes.

The University uses a 1-10 grading scale and the Academic Department Heads have the responsibility of monitoring consistency in assessment. This happens to a modest degree. According to some interviewees from the ranks of students and staff, the standards for awarding a “10”, for example, can vary across the University. Considering that the University knows very little with any certainty about the causes of its high dropout rates, a more systematic monitoring of student progress, student workload and the overall assessment regime is encouraged.

### 3.7 Staff induction, appraisal and development

As a preamble to this section, the Team wants to emphasise that all the staff members it met during virtual visit interviews were highly motivated and enthusiastic about their work. A strong sense of the University’s commitment to students was expressed throughout the visit by students, teachers, administrators and alumni.

Most policies and responsibilities regarding staff are defined in the Quality Handbook on Human Resources, yet that Handbook provides few details on procedural aspects such as hiring criteria, staff induction mechanisms and performance appraisal processes. Systematic quality assurance of academic staff, including recruiting and induction, is one of the foundations for safeguarding standards. The QEF1 IWR Report noted that “formal procedures for recruitment of faculty appear to be lacking, and finding new faculty seems to have been more opportunistic than systematic, with resulting difficulties in ensuring a strategic approach to the appointment of faculty”. Not much has changed in this regard since 2015, with the exception of administrative staff where new positions were created and turnover seems to be quite high. Most faculty and sessional teaching staff the

Team met seem to have worked for the University for several years. This may explain why recruitment strategies are not overly high on the University's agenda.

Staff induction is mostly limited to providing new staff with the necessary administrative and procedural knowledge of the University. A Teacher Handbook informs each teacher about the University's expectations and defines key deliverables and obligations. There is no mandatory staff induction programme for new academic or administrative staff. According to interviews during the virtual visit, a considerable number of staff members seek the advice of the newly established teaching consultant. Opportunities for competence development are regulated in the Human Resources Handbook, but overall, staff development is largely a voluntary exercise.

Regarding staff appraisal, Bifröst University and the University of Iceland came to an agreement in 2014 to the effect that the University of Iceland conducts an annual evaluation of Bifröst University's academic staff members based on the evaluation system for academic work applied by the public universities in Iceland. Follow-up on the results remains the responsibility of Bifröst University. Annual appraisal interviews for all staff members are conducted by the Department Heads, and include discussions of personal development goals. The team found no evidence of quality goals for staff or staff development being set by the institutional leadership, for example with an eye to prepare academic staff for a new academic programme or to encourage their research productivity. Job satisfaction, however, is monitored regularly, with the assistance of an external body. Results show that job satisfaction is slightly higher at Bifröst University than at other Icelandic universities.

Academic promotion is regulated by article 12 of the University Regulations. A promotion committee assesses the staff member applying for promotion, yet ultimately the decision is made by the Rector. The faculty is generally aware of the internal rules, including those on progression. In interviews, the Rector emphasised several times her ambition to change the internal staff appraisal system, working towards criteria for assessing and rewarding quality teaching in the near future.

Overall, the Team found staff highly committed, with most reportedly working beyond mandatory working hours. There are many processes in place that allow the University's employees to grow and develop. The whole system relies heavily on intrinsic motivation and voluntarism though, and there are barely any systematic and transparent processes that ensure that the University targets, recruits and evaluates its academic and administrative staff in full alignment with its strategic ambitions, broad portfolio of educational offers and growing competition. Further investing in formal quality criteria for recruiting and appraising staff will help the University prepare for an increasingly dynamic higher education landscape, although the Team is well aware that any such efforts need to be carefully assessed regarding their impact on its almost family-like culture of trust and collaboration.

### 3.8. The role of SLRs in safeguarding academic standards

SLRs play an important part in the Icelandic Quality Assurance system and complement Institution-Wide Reviews. SLRs are conducted regularly within departments in order to secure the standards of awards and degrees and to manage the student experience. They are carried out by the institution itself, with an international external expert involved and result in enhancement plans. In a small university, such as Bifröst, with only two Departments (and thus only two SLRs per cycle), considerable redundancies between the SLRs and the IWR are to be expected.

In the process of SLR, a broad range of aspects are evaluated by the project team nominated by the Department Head, including teaching methods and assessment on the course level. As the SLR reports that were available do not go into any detail regarding specific courses or lecturers, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of such an approach. It has to be noted, though, that the SLRs are not intended to serve as reviews of the discipline in the way of scrutinising if content is up to date or if the Department's processes and outcomes are fully in line with national and international standards. Instead, the focus is more on formal standards and quality assurance procedures within a Department. The role of the SLRs in safeguarding academic standards is therefore somewhat difficult to assess.

The SLRs that were conducted in the last five years seem sound, as was confirmed by the external experts that participated in the SLRs. In terms of methodology, the SLRs again rely heavily on teaching evaluations, *ad hoc* surveys and focus groups, mirroring the University's general approach to quality monitoring. This evidence suggests that the SLRs directly feed into the departmental enhancement plans and there is strong emphasis on quality improvements, for which the Team commends the university. Again, the quality enhancement plans are very broad, containing activities that are obviously related to quality aspects, as well as more general goals and ambitions of the Departments (e.g., the proposed launch of new programmes).

Overall, the SLRs are very much in line with the University's quality assurance system as a whole, showcasing the same strengths and areas for improvement. In order to create synergies, the University should align the SLRs more closely with the programme monitoring and review scheme suggested above. This would also give the SLRs a strong role in the University's internal mechanisms for safeguarding academic standards.

### 3.9. Summary on safeguarding standards

The Team sees the considerable progress that the University has achieved since the 2015 IWR. The organisational reform started after the last IWR, for instance, led to a clearer structure, empowering the Rector and simplifying decision-making processes. Responsibilities are also more clearly defined.

The University is now clearly in a more stable situation financially and has dedicated some funds to improving its structures and processes. Most notably, investments in the IT infrastructure have not only supported the new data collection plan but also form an important basis for distance teaching operations, in particular during the COVID-19 crisis, for which all stakeholders applauded the institutional performance.

Progress has also been made with regard to introducing quality standards for teaching and learning. The formal description of Learning Outcomes and course information, including assessment criteria, has been significantly improved and syllabi are all up to date and informative. The new quality handbooks contribute to streamlining processes and cover a broad range of activities.

In addition, the University can rely on its considerable strengths, which form a big part of the institutional identity and profile. The institutional quality culture is evident and commitment to a high-quality student experience is visible across the entire institution. Staff across all units appear reflective and fully dedicated to bringing the University forward.

The University's pedagogical model is catering to the needs of a diverse student population, many of whom are first generation and working students, with a high degree of practical relevance, securing the University an important niche position in the Icelandic Higher Education system.

On the other hand, the Team also found a number of areas of concern, which should be tackled in the near future in order to help the University actually benefit from its strengths and relative advantages. First and foremost, quality assurance in many areas is still not very data-driven and systematic, with goals and quality metrics lacking and data management still being in a very early developmental stage.

This is particularly visible on the programme level, where quality assurance is hardly developed. There is a broad range of responsibilities relying on too few actors, programme monitoring hardly exists, and involvement of external stakeholders is rather haphazard. In the same vein, alumni and their careers are not yet tracked systematically and assessment is not necessarily aligned on the programme level, making it difficult to assess the University's vision and strategy model – for the institution itself as well as for any outside reviewer.



The University heavily relies on sessional teaching staff and has so far not established systematic processes for ensuring that staff resources fully match with the programme portfolio and strategic ambitions (i.e. via strategy-driven and transparent recruiting procedures, regular and criteria-led staff appraisal and development).

In the light of these findings, the Team concludes that limited confidence can be placed in the soundness of the University's present arrangements to secure the academic standards of its awards. The Team wants to emphasise once more, though, the considerable progress made in the last years and the possibilities for further improvement if clearer priorities and more systematic action plans are enacted.

As part of the review, the Team undertook a systematic evaluation of evidence of the University's procedures with reference to the ESG, and the commentary on ESG provided in Annex 11 of the Quality Enhancement Handbook for Icelandic Higher Education. The Team concluded that the University's procedures relating to managing standards are to a large degree in alignment with the ESG, with some areas for improvement:

- The Team finds the University to be aligned with ESG 1.1 *Policy for Quality Assurance*. The university has a quality assurance policy document as well as a quality enhancement manual, both of which are available to the public. The Team also noted, though, a lack of clear quality goals and indicators as well as processes covering the entirety of BU's operations
- Regarding ESG 1.2 *Design and Approval of Programmes*, the University has clear processes in place, which are outlined in the quality assurance manual. Programme design is oriented at qualification profiles, following the national and European qualification frameworks. Involvement of external stakeholders, however, could be stronger and more systematic.
- In their pedagogical principles, as well as in the actual online/in classroom teaching, the University has established a strong student-centred learning approach, aiming for individualised learning support as much as possible. Therefore, the Team sees the university very much in line with ESG 1.3 *Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment*. Assessment policies are clear, though assessment could be better aligned on the programme level.
- BU has clearly formulated guidelines which seem to fit national as well as institutional requirements in line with ESG 1.4 *Student admission, progression, recognition and certification*. Monitoring of student progression is somewhat underdeveloped, though, with drop outs and non-completion rates a particular problem that deserves more attention.
- ESG 1.5 *Teaching Staff* is arguably the standard that the University is struggling with the most, as the current staff seems highly motivated and capable, yet overextended and with a large share of sessional staff among the teachers, who are not regularly evaluated. Moreover, the university has yet to establish systematic and criteria-led processes for recruitment, orientation and performance appraisal in order to ensure all teaching staff are able to support the institution's strategic priorities and quality ambitions.
- ESG 1.9 requires *ongoing monitoring and periodic review of programmes*. Regular programme reviews are conducted, yet with limited safeguarded stakeholder involvement and an over-reliance on student and staff surveys. Quality monitoring on the programme level is underdeveloped and an area for improvement not yet explicitly identified by the University in any enhancement plan.

## 4. Student Learning Experience

### 4.1. Overview: Management of quality of student learning experience

The University's Mission Statement and Teaching Policy set out clearly articulated ambitions for the student learning experience, focussing on preparing students to be leaders in business and wider society. A Handbook for Teaching and Learning provides guidance to staff on their responsibilities in delivering these ambitions and encourages a diversity of teaching and assessment methods, including extensive use of group-based project work. The University's modular system is delivered via a flipped classroom approach with ongoing communication between staff and students during a course involving email, "working weekends", Facebook™ groups, the Canvas™ VLE and MS Teams™ systems.

The Strategic Plan calls for a 15% growth in Icelandic students and at the time of the Review meetings, the University had reached this target. An increasing ratio of students are studying at a distance, implying a changing role for the physical campus and the need to ensure that the online experience of students is monitored and enhanced. The self-evaluation team propose a comprehensive review of teaching and learning methods to ensure the University maintains its position as a leader in online education in Iceland.

The RA was written, and the Team hosted, during an unprecedented time: COVID has forced universities world-wide to rapidly move to online learning, teaching, assessment, and support. For the University, this transition was easier than most. Staff and students felt that the institution had been 'COVID-ready' in terms of the existing strengths of its pedagogical model. Apart from a changed format for the "working weekends", which was handled smoothly, students felt that there had been little disruption to their learning experience. The Team concluded that the University's response to the COVID pandemic was very effective with seamless continuation of courses and support for students and staff.

## 4.2. Relevance of Case Study to enhancing student learning experience

The University's Case Study described the development of the Masters programme in Leadership and Management. It argued that the programme reflects the mission of the University to educate and develop socially responsible leaders for both business and society. It also reflected the desire to offer, in response to an unfilled market need, curriculum pathways for students to pursue at postgraduate level in a subject area applicable to a variety of employment contexts and delivered in Icelandic.

The development process involved the scrutiny of programmes at international universities, meetings with students and partnership with an external body that promotes Servant Leadership. As the programme has developed, new streams of specialisation have been added in the areas of Human Resources Management, Project Management, and Servant Leadership. Each has involved teams of subject specialists, academics and trainers with experience relevant to that stream.

Quality control and evaluation of the programme involves the use of student surveys, staff meetings and periodic review. Recruitment to the programme has greatly exceeded initial expectations and it is seen as one of the cornerstones of the Department of Business.

The case study offers relevant evidence subsequently affirmed by the Team about the enhancement of the student learning experience in a number of ways: the importance attached to the mission of educating leaders, the importance the institution attaches to student survey feedback as a key quality indicator, the strong links that the University has to the business community through its use of sessional staff, and the intention to offer the Servant Leadership programme in English from Spring 2021 links to the University's international aspirations. Each of these aspects will be addressed in this section of the report.

### 4.3. Resources for enhancing student learning experience

The University has achieved significant improvement in financial strength since the last institutional review. The Board of Governors' top priorities continue to include ensuring financial stability but increased student numbers and recent increases in state funding have allowed for investments in personnel and technology to improve the student experience. There has been investment, for example in new IT systems and the Canvas VLE™ that will have significant benefits for both students and staff (ESG 1.6).

Given the ambitious vision the Rector has for the University, the strategic alignment of existing staff, coupled with selective recruitment for new positions, a comprehensive staff development plan, and a staff performance evaluation program would be beneficial. The Team found widespread agreement that the entry into the online market by other universities presented a challenge to the University but also confidence that the competitive edge could be maintained because of the experience and enthusiasm of its staff for this mode of learning, but also by an increased focus on the enhancement of online pedagogical skills and course design.

The new teaching consultant position supports staff to develop their distance teaching methods and skills within the Canvas™ virtual learning environment and to make best use of “working weekends” with students. Investment in technical capacity and support, allied to the personal approach to individual students, is seen by the University as offering a strong base from which to continue to strengthen its student numbers. To support its status as a leading online institution in Iceland, the University must continue to invest in sector-leading practice, including strengthening the technical support team and student support services and more quality assurance of online programme content and delivery standards.

It was apparent to the Team that the University is still in the early stages of working out a clear strategy on the best use of its main physical resource: its campus. There is a desire to encourage

people to live at the University and although student housing is of a similar cost to that in Reykjavík, there are no waiting lists. It was clear from discussions with students that, for some, the campus offers a highly conducive living and studying environment, offering opportunities to form strong relationships with other students and staff. For others, who do not live on campus, the “working weekends” at the University offer opportunities to create these relationships. The significant challenge for the University is to revitalise the campus and get more people on site, using the existing physical capacity, whilst at the same time maintaining its strength in online, distance delivery.

#### 4.4. Recruitment, admissions and induction

The University employs a wide range of methods to recruit students including: marketing campaigns, advertisements on TV and radio, and events; the creating and dissemination of hard-copy marketing materials and videos; online material on the website and social media communications. As much of this as possible is developed in-house by the Marketing and Communications department. A key marketing message is that the University is the leading provider of distance education in Iceland and there is a recognised need to work extra hard to maintain the University’s advantage, as other universities also develop their own online provision.

The admissions process uses rules and guidelines designed to improve selection confidence and the promotion of equal opportunities for study. Student numbers have continued to increase, and the next admission cycle is for the Spring semester, starting in January 2021. Whilst generally there are fewer applicants for Spring semester than for Fall, this year might be different due to the impact of COVID, including increased job losses, reduced workload at work, and government assistance to encourage people to return to education.

Within the Icelandic context, a matriculation exam entitles all students to access higher education. Some institutions have established additional entrance selection mechanisms for disciplines that are

much sought after, such as medicine or law. The University has not established any such mechanisms, as the applications until now have not surpassed the capacities of the University. There is no policy, though, which regulates the ratio of applications and available places or defines entrance regulations, should the need arise.

Correspondingly, admission policies, in general, are simple, but clearly defined, and subject to the University's equal opportunities principles. Exemptions from standard entrance qualifications are possible, and the Department Heads (in conjunction with academic services) have some leeway to admit students even if they do not fulfil all formal requirements, yet show potential or have obtained the necessary knowledge and skills through more informal types of learning.

In reference to this flexible admission policy, it is important to note that the University is catering to a very specific student body, namely students with rather diverse academic backgrounds, as many of them are first-generation students and somewhat older than the average Icelandic student.

According to various interviewees among students and alumni, many of these students may not have succeeded elsewhere, yet succeed at Bifröst. The recruitment strategy and unique student population, however, might also contribute to the University's very high non-completion rate, which is high by international standards. Problem awareness in this regard is not very high and causes are mostly attributed to the students' personal situations, without further reflection and analysis, likely due to a lack of adequate data. The Team found no evidence of regular reviews of the validity and reliability of admission procedures and/or entrance regulations as suggested by ESG 1.4.

In terms of induction, and in line with ESG 1.4, there is a range of resources available to new students. The Student Counsellor organizes courses for new students on study skills and there is information provided online to students, for example, videos on how to use IT systems and the support that is available around mental health and wellbeing. Regular communication between staff and students by email takes place and there is an early-warning system that works well in tracking

student engagement in the first few weeks of studies, in cooperation with teaching staff, to help identify students who may be at risk from non-engagement and withdrawal.

#### 4.5. The student voice and engagement of students in QA

The Enhancement Plan identified the need to develop a more formal process for handling student and staff surveys and implement necessary improvements. As mentioned in Section 3.6, it was apparent to the Team that staff evaluation surveys after each course are given serious consideration by the University, in line with ESG 1.5. Results are reviewed by the Academic Department Heads using a "traffic light" system based on the evaluation scores. Although support for staff is provided to improve their teaching practice, contracts are terminated for those with red lights for two consecutive years.

However, there is a need for a more systematic use of survey results involving deeper analysis of the data, as well as better communication of the results and resulting actions to students and staff. The benefits of this would include the identification of trends across courses and Departments, as well as thematic areas for quality enhancement across the institution. They could also be used to identify and reward great teaching and help others learn from them, share good practice and enhance the University's reputation for online teaching. Similarly, there is a need for the University to take deliberate steps to improve the survey response rates, given the importance that is attached to them as a key indicator of teaching quality. A prize draw has been offered and there is a partnership with the Students' Union to encourage survey completion, but the University should explore other ways in which this can be improved, or alternative student voice mechanisms employed.

The student survey data is a useful indicator of student satisfaction but it should not be the only indicator of teaching quality. More is required and the Teaching Consultant, the Head of Academic Services and the Heads of the Academic Departments each play a part in ensuring the quality of the student learning experience, along with direct student feedback. The Team was not convinced,



however, that there was currently a systematic process in place as quality issues were rather dealt with on a case-by-case basis. Similarly, there is a need in line with ESG 1.5 to widen the evaluation of the student learning experience beyond a focus on procedures, didactics and delivery, to include the relevancy and currency of course content, something students are not well positioned to do.

It was clear to the Team, however, that University staff value, seek and respond swiftly to the student voice. Students were involved in the development of the RA and are engaged in strategic planning at the institutional level. Students feel that the Rector is paying considerable attention to student issues, both informally and within formal meeting agendas. When asked during our visit about how issues were resolved at the University, many people said they brought them directly to the Rector. Whilst indicative of an attention to the student voice at executive level, the Rector is aware that the demand on her time may become unsustainable and there is a need to consider establishing clear communications channels for students.

As per ESG 1.2 and ESG 1.9, current students are explicitly involved in programme review processes and the University is developing plans to involve alumni in future. There are also clear programme design and approval processes that explicitly involve students. The design and approval processes require specification of intended learning outcomes to be achieved by students, the approach to learning that will be followed to support their achievement, and the assessment approaches that will be used to support and reliably testify their achievement.

One area of enhancement that would provide significant benefits to the students and to the institution is around closing the feedback loop. It was apparent to the Team that although the student voice is encouraged, listened to and acted upon, it is not clear to students what action has been taken as a result of their feedback. There is neither a clear system nor assignment of responsibilities for closing the feedback loop, which in itself may be one of the main reasons that students do not feel motivated to complete the surveys. The University should explore ways in

which actions taken as a result of student feedback at course, departmental and University levels can be systematically shared with the student body.

The Student Union is mostly focused on the social engagement of students and needs to be supported to enhance efforts to protect the rights and interests of students within and outside the University, and to engage more students in continuous quality improvement for the University in line with ESG 1.3. The social role is important, not least because of the online nature of many students' engagement with the University and the need for a sense of belonging. In pre-COVID times, the Student Union organised events and trips and supported students getting to know each other, particularly during "working weekends" on campus. Even without the current COVID restrictions, there is a need to consider ways in which online students can be encouraged and supported to form online social relationships, looking at good practice from around the world.

The Student Union President is a formal part of governance structures at the University Council and was involved throughout the institutional response to COVID. The President is part of a six-person council responsible for events, welfare, student rights, and finance, to name a few. There is no administrative support or sustainable infrastructure within the Union, leaving the quality of its representation of the student body vulnerable to the strengths and weaknesses of individual elected officers and volunteers. The Team found evidence of a lack of awareness of student representatives and their activities, which suggests a need for enhanced training for student representatives to ensure they are effective as possible in their roles. To support the development of a vibrant student union that can work in partnership with the University to enhance the student learning experience, the University should explore ways in which their work can be supported and their effectiveness and impact improved.

Overall, one of the University's core strengths to date has been its close connection to its students; a move to online education will pose a challenge for this and the University needs to focus on how to

maintain the "personal touch" in an online environment. Further, there is no systematic evaluation of the quality of learning and teaching, as student surveys are used extensively but response rates are low. Finally, there is ample evidence of "quality assurance by exception," for example, if a student complains. The responsiveness of staff in these cases is commendable, but this approach is reactive and does not represent systematic handling of the student voice. As student numbers continue to grow, there is a need for the strengthening of formal quality assurance and enhancement measures relating to the student learning experience.

#### 4.6. Student support services

It was clear to the Team that the University has student support services staff who are committed to the wellbeing of their students and responsive to student need. Students spoke highly about the quality of individualised student support they had received across several functional areas. This was particularly true in terms of the responsiveness and helpfulness of IT support. In addition to online training resources in Icelandic and English, the IT Service Manager provides swift advice and guidance via email, MS Teams™ and telephone calls. This includes outside business hours, for which he is paid on a contractual basis. Students also appreciated the proactive service he provides in terms of sharing updates and checking for possible technical issues prior to online assessments. Although there is back up for when the IT Service Manager is not available, the University should consider ways in which a robust and suitably resourced IT support system can be maintained if student numbers continue to grow.

The Student Counsellor role is also important in terms of a wide range of generic support activities and acting as a triage point if external professional support is required. Data are collected and published on the number of student enquiries and the new Counsellor, who started last month, has helped around five students per day. These can involve support for personal challenges, answering student queries, guidance on study and career opportunities, support with disabilities and anything else concerning student wellbeing and persistence. Again, student feedback to the Team on this

service was that the Counsellor had been very responsive and helpful. One student was particularly positive about the quality of support provided following a diagnosis of dyslexia, both in terms of the advice and guidance provided and the electronic resources available to support learning needs. (ESG 1.4)

However, to further comply with ESG 1.6, there is a need to raise awareness of the careers information, advice and guidance that the Counsellor can provide, for example through regular promotion of this service to students. Students were unaware that there is central careers support available, for example with their CV or interview technique, and instead referred to careers support in terms of informal help from specific academic staff in securing internships or placement opportunities.

Students are introduced to mental health and wellbeing support services during induction and contact details are published on the website. There was a COVID-related initiative with some additional support provided, such as YouTube™ videos and other wellbeing resources. It was claimed that an emergency support line had no requests for support, although the Team met one student who claimed to have sought support without receiving a response. With the continuing impact of COVID on the wellbeing of many students, the University should explore ways in which the access routes for mental health support are well known to students and that all enquires are dealt with promptly.

The University has been investing in library services as the number of students has increased. Students have access to over 22,000 e-journals through the Icelandic university consortium and hard copy books can be sent through the post. The University cannot track the number of downloads by their students because the consortium resources are available from any Icelandic IP address. The Librarian's role is to make people aware of resources available and how to access them. She does not train students to use the library; students reach out themselves if they have difficulties and there

is support available through phone calls, videoconference, instructional videos and guidance on the website. Welcome days each autumn for new students include introduction to library services and the main access channel for support is through the library webpage. Student feedback on the library service was positive in terms of the resources available and the support provided, although there was a suggestion that reminders about how to use the library and what it has to offer would be helpful for students in their later years, particularly those about to undertake their thesis project. To support this, the University should explore ways in which the awareness of the library service can be maintained throughout the student journey.

The organisation of academic services is undergoing change, to allow for more direct support for students in each academic Department, through named contacts. The central team will not be divided but will have more clearly defined responsibilities at departmental level. This re-organisation is due to increased numbers of students, in order to maintain levels of personal service for students. However, there is no systematic process to evaluate the effectiveness of these services beyond the occasional use of surveys to gauge the level of student satisfaction with the services provided by the support team. The new Rector is having a positive impact on the campus community by supporting the professionalizing of student services. Given that individualised student support is already an institutional strength, the University should explore a more systematic, evaluative framework that would not only help to enhance service provision, but also provide rigorous data that could be used for reputational enhancement and marketing purposes. This would also help ensure the achievement of ESG 1.6 in ensuring that the allocation of resources for student support is fit for purpose in terms of meeting institutional goals for student-centred teaching and learning.

The University prides itself on its individualised personal relationship with its students and this is something that was verified in discussion with students and alumni. Student support services are an important aspect of this ethos. To maintain this, it is very important that if student numbers

continue to grow, investment in the IT systems and student support services continue to grow with it.

#### 4.7. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment

The University Quality Handbook sets out requirements for programme design and the publication of explicit intended learning outcomes and programme descriptions in line with the Icelandic National Qualifications Framework and the European Quality Framework, as well as University regulations and policy statements. Programme descriptions include teaching, learning and assessment strategies that assure the achievement of learning outcomes. A teaching plan is required for each individual course, containing information on teaching methods and assessment terms.

All programmes and courses must have clearly articulated learning outcomes and regulations cover the assessment of student learning: including the grading scale, the connection between assessment and defined learning outcomes, the time limit for returning grades to students, and the students' rights to appeal an assessment. The Team found considerable evidence of a student-centred approach to learning and teaching, including an emphasis on active student participation, real-world projects, small group work and an extremely accessible and responsive approach to student questions.

The Teaching Policy focuses on enhancing students' abilities to employ professional work methods, to apply theories and concepts in problem-solving and to find solutions for concrete problems. One way this is done is through teaching strongly informed by practice via the sessional staff. Another is the focus on the application of learning to real-life scenarios in a range of assessments and term projects. The panel heard examples of courses that illustrated this 'real-world', applied approach to student learning. Courses are developed with participation from both students and local businesses, and employers provide problems and data for students to work on. Students often work in groups to

choose an Icelandic company as a case study to write a term paper. Alumni sometimes ask for assistance with particular issues and can be used as a source for student projects and interviews.

The University clearly values the application of theory to solve real business problems and is preparing students well for life beyond their studies in that respect. At the same time, although there are lots of strong links to businesses, the Team found an apparent lack of a cohesive framework and protocols for efficient employer engagement and a strengthening of this area would create efficiencies and an enhanced external reputation.

The Team also found ample evidence that the aims of ESG 1.3 in relation to student engagement are being comfortably achieved. Students are actively engaged in their learning experience and there is a good relationship between them and both permanent and sessional staff. Several people mentioned that students are not a social security number, but a name, and a strong sense of commitment to students was expressed throughout the visit by students, staff, administrators, and alumni. In return, students feel very connected to the University, fellow students, and staff.

One of the key ways in which students normally connect with the institution has been attendance at “working weekends” on campus. These face-to-face events facilitate the creation of a sense of belonging amongst the students and offer them opportunities to discuss study related issues directly with faculty and other students. The “working weekends” have not been possible during COVID but the format appeared to be delivered well on MS Teams™, with virtual attendance actually higher than normal. With the loss of “working weekends” as such an important tool to create connections between students, and between students and staff, the University needs to give more thought to online social engagement with students during Covid and beyond: for example the Student Union usually takes trips to Reykjavik to visit companies and provide social opportunities for students. After Covid, the University plans to return to in-person “working weekends” as before but there is a need to reflect on what is in the students’ best interests, as the geographic spread of students continues

to increase and with many students having family and work responsibilities that might make physical attendance difficult.

As a predominantly virtual University, however, in terms of curriculum delivery, an important way in which learning and teaching is kept student-centred is through ensuring a high quality of online class design and delivery. As discussed elsewhere in this report, there is a need for a more formalised approach to ensuring quality in these respects but the Team did hear persuasive testimony from students and staff about the responsiveness to queries and the strength of the commitment of staff to the learning experiences of their students. The investment in online pedagogical support through the Teaching Consultant and her work with the IT Services manager to provide templates, guidance and review online design is welcome (ESG 1.5). At the same time, while investments have been made and improvements are evident, online teaching materials do not yet meet the international standards and expectations that the University sets for itself and will need to be improved for a successful expansion into other online markets, as per Section 3.5.

As per Section 3.6 above, the University's Rules and Procedures for Teaching and Learning set out the University's approach to assessment policies and grading. It was clear to the Team that there has been progress regarding assessment since the last review, with a more systematic process evident. In line with ESG 1.2, all staff are required to complete a teaching syllabus which includes their assessment processes, and the Head of Examinations monitors this. The general intention is to ensure varied assessment methods and a standardized grading system is used across all courses, with an awareness of the need to avoid grade inflation. Staff are encouraged to explain assessment criteria and grades to their students. However, there is a need to ensure consistency across instructors on their approach to assessment, particularly by sessional staff, one of whom mentioned that they had never had input from The University regarding what sort of assessment should be used. Similarly, there is a need to encourage staff to use the full grading scale when they are



marking. The Heads of the Academic Departments encourage this in faculty meetings but there is room for more communication about the consistent use of the 10-point grading scale.

In the previous IWR, concerns were expressed about student cheating and the University provided reassurance to the Team about the steps that had been taken to deal with this. Staff are encouraged to use Turnitin™ for all projects and it is also used in some exams. A small number of instances of cheating are identified in this way each year. Integrity issues are included in the student handbook and there is a procedure for dealing with academic misconduct. There is a need for the University to consider extending the use of Turnitin™, or other similarity checking software, to all student assessments, not least for the formative feedback it can provide to students.

#### 4.8. Alumni relations

As mentioned above, one illustration of the student-centred approach of the University is that alumni are proud of their alma mater: they feel they are representing the institution in the workforce, they use informal networks to support their careers and believe they have a role in helping future University graduates, for example with internships. The alumni met by the Team said that their student experience had prepared them well for work, they had felt closeness to staff and other students, study had been fun and reality-based, and they had experienced significant personal, as well as professional, development during their time at the University. It was apparent to the Team that although alumni feel extremely warmly towards the University, alumni relations are currently underdeveloped to maximise the benefits of this disposition. The University is currently working to overcome GDPR data privacy issues, so that communications with alumni can be more effective and ideas are being considered involving, for example, the use of the campus by alumni. A formalised, structured alumni relations strategy, for example involving case studies of successful graduates, sponsorship of student prizes, involvement in programme development, and the enhancement of the external image of the University, should be explored.

#### 4.9. Use of sessional/adjunct staff

Sessional staff contribute to the teaching missions of Icelandic universities to a considerable degree, and Bifröst University is no exception in that regard. In the 2019 Fall semester, sessional staff taught 66% of the total number of courses delivered by the University (additional Sessional teaching data supplied by BU during review). In 2019, the University employed 69 sessional staff, working 19.09 full-time equivalent posts, compared to 9.1 full-time tenured academic staff.

From discussions with current students and alumni, it was clear to the Team that the pedagogical model that combines theory and practice resonates well with students. In particular, the use of sessional staff active in the Icelandic business and other communities allows for real-world experiences and preparation for the world of work. Alumni were extremely positive about the benefits of having networks of contacts and the use of current, practical examples drawn from practitioner experience in their own personal and professional development.

However, there is recognition of the need to get sessional staff more involved in the broader operations of the University and recently they have been given permanent contracts, more invitations to departmental meetings and weekly emails to keep them informed and engaged. The sessional staff themselves feel that they could be contributing more to the University, despite their other responsibilities. Both departments ask sessional staff to contribute to curriculum enhancement, for example in the development of the Masters degree in Marketing, attendance at a Law curriculum development meeting in Spring 2020, and the review of Learning Outcomes in Business Administration programmes.

Department Heads recruit sessional staff and vacancies are often filled by referrals, with informal search processes appearing to be the norm. It is particularly difficult to recruit practising lawyers in Iceland, so there is a heavy reliance on sessional staff. Adjunct faculty have to meet the same standards as full faculty and are subject to the same staff quality evaluation surveys. Results from

these are monitored and sessional staff removed if there is a consistent pattern of underperformance. It is less clear how sessional staff qualifications are monitored and reviewed; how online pedagogical skills are developed (ESG 1.5); and their workload managed.

Despite the added-value that practitioners can bring to the student experience, the Team felt that there is a lack of quality assurance measures for sessional staff qualifications, teaching performance, and the currency, relevancy and rigour of the course content they deliver and, given the extent to which The University employs sessional staff, this is an area that should be addressed as a matter of some urgency.

#### 4.10. The language experience

The University language policy strongly advocates for the protection of the Icelandic language, with high expectations on its use by students and staff. It also states that the University will develop new lines of study in other languages in accordance with demand. It was reported to the Team that Icelandic students tend to avoid courses in English but the Rector wants to ensure that they have good command of the language by requiring the choice of at least one course in English on a regular basis.

There were no negative comments expressed during the review process about the language policy but it may need to be reviewed in line with the institutional strategic aspirations. For example, the development of more teaching through English for international markets may act as a disincentive to Icelandic students, so the curriculum balance in terms of language will need to be carefully considered. In addition, although many staff have lived and worked abroad, and have a high level of spoken English, there will need to be additional staff development to ensure that they can teach in English to an acceptable, international standard.

#### 4.11. Internationalisation

The current International Policy emphasises collaboration with innovative international universities, institutions and associations in areas of research and staff and student exchanges. It emphasises the advantages of international study, as well as those found in working and studying alongside people from other countries. The new Rector has extensive experience and expertise in the area of internationalisation, and it was apparent to the Team that an international strategy is still in development. The University has applied to join the European Association for Distance Teaching Universities and already has numerous existing contacts and institutional links around Europe and the world. They have collaborated on international research projects dealt with elsewhere in this report and an international dimension is seen as important for both staff and students.

Traditionally, international students have been exchange students and the Summer School has also been successful in attracting some international "edutourism", particularly from Europe. There is a desire to correct an Erasmus+ imbalance by sending out more Bifröst students to other international partners, as currently there are more incoming than outgoing students. This is due to the personal circumstances, age and responsibilities of the typical Bifröst student, so the University is exploring the possibility of shorter mobility periods, scholarships and the better use of internationalisation in distance education.

The benefits of a focus on internationalisation are not only financial. The University understands the educational and cultural benefits of recruiting international students. It also understands that a competitive national market requires a strong brand and internationalisation can contribute to this.

The emerging international strategy is clearly linked to other strategies being developed around the use of the campus and developments around the provision of English language curriculum. The new Masters in Crisis Management and the programme in Nordic Leadership are designed to fill particular niches that could attract international students. The University could explore the potential

for differentiating their international strategy by level of study, to be more segmented and targeted in their approach.

To support internationalisation, the University could explore ways of developing through evolution by targeting foreign students who only want to learn the content of specific courses rather than complete a full programme of courses. To this end, the University will have to offer something unique in terms of a tailored curriculum.

#### 4.12. Links between research and teaching

The SLR of the Department of Social Science and Law noted the need to strengthen links between research and teaching and there has been some progress in that direction. To illustrate, salary levels are now based to some degree on research performance and promotion criteria are likewise based in part on research performance. Good examples of research-informed teaching were provided by some of the permanent staff, but it was more difficult to find examples from sessional staff. There is a significant structural challenge in finding ways to support busy sessional staff to undertake research to inform their teaching, as opposed to the evident benefits to students of practice-informed teaching.

Students undertake numerous projects, including their final year thesis, and the University should explore ways in which these learning resources might inform the curriculum. In addition, the recommendations in the SLR of the Department of Social Science and Law about a more formalised approach to research-informed teaching involving the setting and monitoring of annual targets within research plans and reports should be implemented to provide a systematic mechanism for further improvement.

To support research-teaching linkages, there is a need to develop a formal system to monitor and evaluate the ways in which staff integrate their research into their teaching. At the moment they are

simply expected to do this. For example, faculty publications are used as reading materials but there is no systematic approach in place to track this.

#### 4.13. Postgraduate programmes

Both Departments offer a range of postgraduate programmes in Icelandic and English. A new study programme on Crisis Management will be launched in 2021, and a programme leader has already been recruited for this. It was apparent to the Team that students at postgraduate level had a similarly positive learning experience to those at undergraduate level and for very similar reasons. They appreciate the flexibility that the delivery model offers busy professionals; feel that most teaching staff are passionate about their subject areas, although there were reports of some staff not keeping their content updated and current; experience a good level of personal support and contact; and are able to make connections through online groupwork.

Areas for improvement include the need to ensure that student project assignments include a variety of assessment approaches, that there are inbuilt opportunities for questions and discussions, that staff are encouraged to learn from each other and that the “working weekends” provide sufficient rewards for the effort of attending the campus.

#### 4.14. Collaborative provision

There is no current collaborative provision at Bifröst University.

#### 4.15. Serving the needs of different student populations

It was apparent to the Team that the University serves the needs of students on a personal basis. Although the University is able to do this in part because of its current size, it is also a reflection of its strong commitment to supporting and getting to know individual students.

The University, with its historic roots as a cooperative serving the needs of its regional community, continues to have a strong ethos of widening access to learning: for example, prisoners, vulnerable groups and single parents have been welcome to stay on campus. The Gateway programme for students who have not completed their high school education to progress to higher education is currently under review but the Team heard testimony of its value from students who had benefited from this entry route. The University is currently exploring the possibility of extending this Gateway programme to also include unemployed foreigners living in Iceland.

The University purposefully provides opportunities for adult learners who have not followed a traditional post-secondary education path; many study on a part-time or flexible basis. The average student age in Iceland is 29, but at the University it is 36. The University educates many first-generation undergraduate students, as well as postgraduate students from all over Iceland. Some local students choose to study at Bifröst University, rather than relocate elsewhere because of their preference to live in the area, but its transition to distance education was linked to the reduction in the rural population. The general trend has been for students to leave their rural regions to study in the capital and then not return afterwards. The University therefore also has a regional, socio-economic role in keeping students in the region and providing a base for sustainable communities and economic development.

The student gender profile is around 65% women and 35% men. The University wants to create more opportunities and role models to encourage males to go to university and is creating scholarships for them. The Student Union did not feel that there were any equality challenges beyond gender and pointed to improvements on campus accessibility for students with disabilities in recent years. The Student Union reported that a small number of harassment issues have arisen in recent years and there is a new Preventative Action Plan against Gendered and Sexual Harassment and Violence at the University, as well as an easily accessible reporting mechanism on the website.

In summary, it was clear to the Team that the University values the opportunities it provides to students with diverse academic and personal backgrounds and, in line with ESG 1.3, allows for individualised learning paths, where possible. Those who may not have succeeded elsewhere, often find success at Bifröst.

#### 4.16. Management of information

As mentioned in section 3.1, it was apparent to the Team that although the University now collects more data than at the time of the last institutional review, with appropriate policies and processes in place, the extent to which they are analysing and using it remains limited (ESG 1.7). There was an overreliance on anecdote during the review discussions. At the same time, there is recognition by staff that they require more data, as well as more systematic analysis of that data.

The Data Collection Plan was expected to be concluded by autumn 2020 but has not been fully implemented, partly as a result of information system delays. The Ugla software provider has not yet set up the data collection part of the system, and data transfer from old to new systems within the University has proven to be challenging. The revised timeline now expects conclusion early in 2021 and offers great promise for improved data collection.

Once the new data collection system is operational, there is a continued need for a strategic review of what data is required, why, and how this is collected. This is important not least because expectations around the world have advanced in terms of evidence-based decision making and how data is used to monitor the student experience. For example, 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. As discussed in section 4.5, student feedback loops need to be closed systematically, particularly so in an online environment.



The Team also felt that there needs to be more systematic collection and analysis of data on student destinations. The University has already hired a new staff member to follow up with Alumni and monitor graduate outcomes and there should be real benefit for the institution in being able to evidence the benefits of their vocational and practice-based pedagogical model for student careers.

It was apparent to the Team that there is insufficient analysis of the reasons for the high non-completion rates for students (ESG 1.4). There is no specific plan to improve the graduation rates and the Team was given anecdotal reasons why non-completion might be higher for Bifröst relative to other universities in Iceland. These included reference to the difference in the student cohort and their personal circumstances: some do not need the full degree, they just want some courses; some find it harder than expected; some had difficulty with the thesis element of some courses; some students progress very slowly; low unemployment rates mean students do not require a qualification to get a job; and most students are in full-time jobs and have a range of additional responsibilities. It is, however, not known to what extent some of or all of these apply across the range of non-completers.

It was felt that support from the Student Counsellor in specific programmes and curricular changes relating to the Masters thesis had positively impacted drop-out rates. Courses are monitored from two weeks after their start date to see whether students are engaged with their learning and materials. Personal support interventions are enacted if a student is deemed to be at risk of disengagement. Staff believe that many students only take a few courses which are of interest to them, with no intention of taking a full degree. There is a need, therefore, for the University to be clearer about the actual level of non-completion. To support this, the University should explore ways of presenting and analysing data based on student intention at time of enrolment. Bifröst is a student-centred organisation that values its relationship with individual students and it would be useful to analyse student retention data more thoroughly, for example across different programs.

This would help to understand student behaviour better and ensure everything possible to is being done to support students with the ambition to complete their degrees.

#### 4.17. Public information

A web editor and web director are employed in the marketing department and there is helpful information on the website in line with ESG 1.8 that is accessible, informative and transparent. This includes data from 2015-2019 on a wide range of categories, including student numbers, gender analysis, teaching evaluations, as well as research and staff information. In addition, the webpages include information about internal quality assurance; assessment practices; SLRs for both departments; links to policies and regulations; academic and support services available to students; and much else besides.

The University is waiting for clarity on new national Ministerial guidance on the data that needs to be collected and shared publicly. As discussed above, the University can only share the data they actually collect and the conclusion of the data management project in early 2021 should provide additional useful public information for potential students and external stakeholders.

#### 4.18. Using SLRs to enhance the student learning experience

It was apparent to the Team that the SLRs directly feed into the departmental enhancement plans and that there is strong emphasis on quality improvements. There was a lot more data available than for previous SLRs and the process allowed a structured reflection on all Departmental processes, using student and alumni inputs. One example of an enhancement resulting from the SLR of the Department of Social Science and Law was the appointment of specific coordinators for each study line within the newly merged Department. The Quality Management Calendar has also helped both Departments integrate quality issues into routine work at departmental level and raised awareness of quality matters amongst staff.

The Departments receive support for the implementation of the enhancement plans arising from the SLRs from the heads of academic and other services, and the new Rector's focus on quality issues arising from the SLRs and the RA process is viewed by the Department Heads as a positive step.

However, there is a need to progress the external benchmarking elements within the SLR enhancement plans, for example through the systematic identification of comparable institutions. The benefit of this would be to help clarify realistic and achievable enhancement targets, as well as the integration of good practice from elsewhere. Similarly, there is a need for greater evidence-based decision making and the enhancement plans lack targets for the Key Performance Indicators and timelines for achievement of outcomes. Overall, however, it was clear to the Team that the University takes the enhancement plans arising from the SLRs seriously as a way to guide developmental activities and developments.

#### 4.19. Summary on the student learning experience

There have been improvements in creating structures and processes to support the student learning experience since the last IWR, but more is still needed by way of evidence-based decision making. Similarly, although the student experience is reportedly high, more is required to ensure quality on a systematic basis so that flaws are identified quickly, action taken that is reported back to students and existing good practice highlighted and shared across all teaching staff.

Staff do recognise that weaknesses exist, however. For example, there is acknowledgement that the online teaching material is not yet ready for an international market and staff are taking deliberate steps to address this. The new Rector is also highlighting student issues more strongly and should be commended for that.

Most importantly, students could have gone elsewhere, but have proactively decided to join Bifröst: they know why they are there; they feel known and valued. They are happy and there is a strong

team ethos and pride across the institution and its stakeholders. They have found their place at Bifröst University and believe that their needs are largely being well met by the institution.

As part of the review, the Team undertook a systematic evaluation of evidence of the University's procedures with reference to the ESG, and the commentary on ESG provided in Annex 11 of the Quality Enhancement Handbook for Icelandic Higher Education. The Team concluded that the University's procedures relating to student learning experience are aligned to the ESG.

- The institution has a highly student-centred view and ESG 1.1 *Policy for Quality Assurance* points to specifications to ensure continued student engagement pertinent to an institutional move predominantly away from campus-based delivery. Policies are in place and further work to ensure effective benchmarking, implementation and monitoring to support evidence-based decision-making will further strengthen this area.
- ESG 1.2 *Design and Approval of Programmes* stresses student engagement and the consideration of the impact on student learning experiences, and there are clear processes in place at the University. The pedagogical model grounded in student-centred learning with extensive project-based activities, enriched by industry links and the practitioner input of sessional staff help to ensure the achievement of learning outcomes.
- ESG 1.3 *Student-Centred Learning, Teaching and Assessment* stresses the need for flexible learning paths, the active engagement in the learning process and an approach to assessment that supports this approach. The University's learning outcomes approach; supporting policies and procedures; active relationships with students; and focus on offering opportunities for learning ensure that ESG 1.3 is comfortably achieved.
- ESG 1.4 *Student Admission, Progression, Recognition and Certification* identifies the importance of the support and monitoring of progression of individual students at every stage of their journey. The University's student-centred approach and supportive culture provide this, along with planned interventions to support at-risk students but improvements to the analysis of reasons for the non-completion rates for students will improve alignment with ESG 1.4.
- ESG 1.5: *Teaching Staff* reflects the importance of formal evaluation, on-going orientation and recognition of excellence in teaching staff. The University is taking active steps to monitor and enhance online teaching design and delivery but the focus of evaluative systems is on procedures, didactics and delivery, rather than ensuring the currency of content. The evaluation systems need to form a systematic and cohesive framework with more sources of data and opportunities for the sharing of good practice.
- ESG 1.6 *Learning Resources and Student Support* is designed to ensure the appropriate provision of resources for learning and teaching, as well as student support. There is evidence of enhanced investment, for example with the virtual learning environment and the appointment of additional professional service staff. If student numbers continue to grow, so will the need for continued investment in IT and other student services to assure the quality of student experience.
- ESG 1.7 *Information Management* points to the need for Bifröst to ensure it collects, analyses and uses relevant information for the effective management of its programmes and activities. More data are collected since the last IWR but there is scope for more data and improvements in the ways in which the University systematically analyses and uses it. This should improve once the ongoing Data Management project concludes in Spring 2021.
- ESG 1.8: *Public Information* involves dissemination. The public information available online is accessible, informative, bilingual and current. Linked to ESG 1.7, increased collection of relevant data will support this requirement further.
- ESG 1.9: *On-going Monitoring and Periodic Review of Programmes* references the involvement of students in programme monitoring and review; the collection of data relating to all students; the policies and procedures pertaining to review; and the implementation of action plans arising from it. The University would benefit from greater involvement of external stakeholders, such as alumni and employers, in these processes and enhancements to the instruments for ongoing monitoring of programmes.

## 5. Management of Research

### 5.1. Research policy and strategy

Bifröst is a small institution of higher education with a permanent academic staff of 17. In its strategy, the University notes the growing emphasis on academic research on the national level, but at the same time acknowledges that it has limited resources to increase academic research output. Management recognises that the University is not one that places strong emphasis on research at present. According to the information that the Team received during the virtual visit, the University has also put on hold any plans to apply for accreditation of doctoral programmes for the next three years, although that is a priority set in the Strategy 2021-2023 and is one of the objectives in the Enhancement Plan for 2020-2024.

The University is, however, ambitious in strengthening its research and states in its research policy that it is part of an international scientific community, which places emphasis on the advancement of research and seeks ways to enhance research in departmental fields of study and related disciplines. In recent years, the University has made a systematic effort to increase the volume of research by increasing the amount of academic staff holding PhD degrees and also by increasing research output measured by research points in the evaluation system for the public universities in Iceland. The University has succeeded in both these efforts, as both the number and share of PhD qualified academic staff and also the volume of research points have increased.

The QEF1 IWR report from 2015 noted that research performance varied considerably across Departments and made a recommendation to rectify this. There has not been a significant change to this imbalance, as in 2014 the Department of Social Science and Law produced 71% of the University's research points, as compared to 66% in 2019. The average research points per staff member have actually decreased from approximately 34 points to 28 research points from 2014 to

2019 in the Department of Social Science and Law, and from approximately 21 to 14 points in the Department of Business, although the total number of research points has increased in this period.

In its research policy, Bifröst emphasises academic freedom in research and encourages staff and student cooperation and active participation in society. Research is the responsibility of the two Departments and they have academic freedom in their choice of subjects and research methods. The role of institutional management is mainly to help allocate the needed resources to academic staff, such as new recruits, funding and required manpower. The research conducted at the University is therefore the effort of individual academic staff members and the focus of research is thus on issues of interest to individual staff.

The University has not defined a comprehensive strategic approach to research and management, regarding such an approach as antithetical to the principle of academic freedom. However, some joint research projects have come about based on the common interests of staff, for example in Nordic Leadership and Servant Leadership. These areas are recognized in the Strategy for 2021-2023 as pillars of academic strength in the Department of Business. In interviews with the Team, it was evident that some staff members also recognise a need for a more comprehensive interdepartmental and university-level approach in the future.

The University has set three Key Performance Indicators for research: proportion of academic staff with doctoral degrees, total amount of research points accrued by staff, and proportion of state financial contribution allocated to the internal Knowledge Fund. The development of these indicators has been tracked in years 2016-2019, but no targets for these KPIs are set in the 2021-2023 Strategy. The objective is clearly an increase in these indicators, but the lack of specific targets for these measures makes it difficult for management to steer the organisation towards implementing the strategy. This also makes it impossible for the University to know if it actually reaches the goals it sets for itself.

Due to the independence of Academic Departments and the academic freedom of teachers, research activities lack a link to the University strategy. It remains unclear to the Team how research contributes to the implementation of overall strategy and the realisation of the University's mission. The section devoted to research in the RA referred to the University's mission statement, whereas interviews during review meetings did not provide evidence of linkages between research activities and the achievement of university goals. Research performance is a result of evolution in the research agendas of individual staff rather than a conscious strategy. There is an ambition and a clear effort to strengthen research, but this activity lacks direction at present.

The Team recommends that the University take a more strategic approach to research activities by setting clear and measurable quantitative and qualitative goals for research, as well as monitoring performance on these indicators. Furthermore, it would be advisable to introduce a systematic procedure for taking necessary measures in case research goals are not met. Further, the Team recommends that Bifröst manage its research activities towards a comprehensive, university-level whole and seek to create synergy between researchers, research teams and departments, in spite of admittedly scarce resources. In the international scientific community, research is very seldom a "solo performance", as achievements are rather gained in research groups. This is not necessarily contradictory to the principles of academic freedom or independence in the University's Academic Departments.

## 5.2. Monitoring of scientific quality of outputs

The University has made constant efforts in recent years to support its research activities. In the previous IWR conducted in 2015, one of the recommendations was to recruit new qualified staff with PhD degrees to strengthen research. In the past two years, The University has indeed recruited three new permanent academic staff members with PhD qualifications and has succeeded in increasing the share of academic staff members with PhD degrees. In 2015, less than half of academic staff held PhDs, whereas nearly two-thirds (10 out of 17) of permanent teaching staff held



a PhD in 2019. The University's target in its most recent Strategy is to increase the research output of academic staff in the coming years and to allocate at least six full-time job equivalents to research in 2023, up from 4.1 in 2019.

The University has focussed its efforts on increasing the overall quantity of research output as measured by research points. Total research points have indeed increased from 290 in 2014 to 335 research points in 2019, which is an increase of approximately 16%. After a sharp drop in 2015, the total amount of research points has increased steadily. In interviews during review meetings, it was evident that the University considers an increase in research points to implicitly translate to improved quality of research, as the criteria in the evaluation system of public universities in Iceland favour peer-reviewed research publications. The positive development in research points shows that the quality of Bifröst's research is increasingly appreciated by the Icelandic and international academic community. In the interviews it was pointed out that the University has in this sense "outsourced" the monitoring of research quality to the evaluation system of public universities in Iceland. The university has not included any other specific or more detailed goals for research quality in its strategy or action plans.

The Department of Business noted in its SLR that peer-reviewed publications should not be a sole measure of the quality of research and innovation in the department. The SLR further notes that many business schools have the same problem, as the teaching approach is practice-oriented and the emphasis is more on development and innovation rather than linking teaching to peer-reviewed academic research. Evidence that the Team received during the virtual visit indicates that external stakeholders appreciate this practice-oriented approach and its regional impact, as well as the value added to the Icelandic business community.

It can be concluded that Bifröst University has in recent years been able to strengthen its research by consolidating academic qualifications of staff and has increased total research points in line with

institutional goals. The focus has mainly been on guaranteeing a sufficient resource allocation in research. The Team recommends that the University define more specifically what research quality at BU constitutes besides peer-reviewed publications and define what difference its research makes to the Icelandic business community and society at large, taking into consideration the nature of the academic disciplines and expertise areas within its departments.

### 5.3. External support

The University encourages its academic staff to apply for external funding and research grants. According to the research policy, the University makes an effort to raise funds from various sources to finance research activities. The University states in its research policy that it encourages its departments and staff to raise funds from external sponsors in order to finance research, provided that such relations do not in any way raise doubts about academic independence. Regional funding is also available for applied research.

It was noted in virtual visit interviews and the SLR of the Department of Social Science and Law that faculty members have not applied for grants from the largest research fund in Iceland, the Icelandic Research Fund, since 2014. Management encourages grant applications, as researchers can retain more external funding instead of the University having to allocate more budget money to research. It was at the same time evident that academic staff can be encouraged to be more active in applying for Icelandic and European competitive research funding and be assured that they will be allotted time for funded projects and control of the research funding that they receive.

The University endeavours to develop domestic and international partnerships to increase external research funding. As a small university, Bifröst has relied on other institutions to lead research projects of external funding and there are good examples of these kinds of projects described in the SLR of the Department of Social Science and Law. According to the information received in virtual review meetings, Bifröst has five active EU-funded research partnerships, with total funding of each

project between 200,000 – 400,000 EUR across all partners. The Team encourages the University to continue strengthening its research, especially by maintaining and building partnerships. The internal Knowledge Fund has been successful in giving academic staff possibilities to participate in international conferences, which, according to the virtual visit interviews, have been important for networking and building rewarding research partnerships.

#### 5.4. Impact

The University's strategy is summarised in the strategic pyramid that sets its role as a "business school educating leaders for business and society". In the mission and strategy, the impact of education is emphasised, whereas research does not play as significant a role. In the Strategy 2020-2023, it is stated, however, that the strategic pyramid is the main guiding light for all activities of the school. The strategic pyramid was reviewed at a special session held in Autumn 2017, with wide participation of all stakeholders. Further, the annual strategic plans are based on the strategic pyramid, as are all policies and activities in the University. Accordingly, the University attaches great importance to social participation and good relations with the economic sector in its research policy. In the policy, the University encourages its employees to connect their teaching and students' research with actual economic and social topics.

Bifröst does not in its strategy, however, set any performance indicators to evaluate the impact of research on the region, nor on Icelandic society or the business community. Consequently, according to the information received in the virtual visit interviews, the impact is not monitored or followed in any systematic way and thus the University does not make sure that the research done by individual academic staff members contributes to its overall strategic aims or those of the Departments. Departmental management recognises that the University could raise its profile of research and that goals regarding research impact would be beneficial.

The Department of Business, in particular, conducts applied research for the regional and wider business communities in Iceland, but this impact is not captured very well by the indicators of peer-reviewed publications that the University includes in its strategic goals. The impact and value of research by the University's students and staff on the region and society more broadly are, however, recognised by external stakeholders, who provided good examples of successful research and development collaboration.

The Department of Social Science and Law noted in its SLR that the evaluation system for public universities does not reward specifically public (non peer-reviewed) dissemination of research findings, but does reward citations in other peer-reviewed publications. That Department considers the research evaluation system of Reykjavík University, which is based on a panel evaluation rather than research points, to be better suited to evaluate the societal impact of academic research. The Department believes that this type of evaluation may be appropriate for Bifröst University, and possibly be linked to an institutional reward system.

The Team recommends that Bifröst broaden in its strategy the scope of research to cover development and innovation in addition to the goals set for research points. Practice-oriented applied research is valued by stakeholders, teachers and students and would make Bifröst's societal impact more visible. This would be in line with the suggestions both departments make in their SLRs. The Team also recommends that Bifröst sets goals for capturing the impact of its research, at the same time acknowledging that measuring impact is not a straightforward task. At the moment, Bifröst allocates resources to research and plans to increase that input further in hopes of a positive outcome, but there is no follow-up of what impact this investment actually brings to the region, society or the Icelandic business community.

## 5.5. Institutional enhancement of research management

The University has two separate funds to enhance research performance: the Research Fund and the Education Fund, also known as the Knowledge Fund. The Research Fund was established in 2014 but has remained largely inactive and has not served as the driver for research activities that it was initially meant to be. When the fund opened for applications in 2019, it supported projects for 2.5 million ISK. In the University strategy it is stated that the Education Fund has, on the other hand, been quite effective in supporting academic staff in presenting their research at academic conferences and giving staff the opportunity to establish and maintain good relations with international colleagues.

The Education Fund has also created opportunities for research cooperation and subsequent publication of research. Staff pursuing their PhD degrees have received special support in the form of work hours explicitly allocated to dissertation writing and payment of various expenses such as tuition and travel costs. According to the information received in the virtual visit interviews, staff members appreciate this funding to support their work in enhancing research activities.

Management creates incentives for academic staff to focus more on research. The general remuneration system divides academic staff into different pay grades depending on points awarded for various activities. According to this strategy, research output is now defined as the single most important factor in determining the pay grade of academic staff. The new Rector also plans to recruit a Research Director to further support the academic staff in applying for research funding and to provide administrative support in research projects.

In addition to the efforts to improve administrative support for research, the Team also recommends that the University should clarify the system of internal research funding. The need for two separate internal funds remained a bit unclear. Enhancement of research management should also benefit from a comprehensive approach to applying for external research funding for research

projects that bring together department-level or university-level research interests, instead of individual staff applying for funding for their own research interests.

## 5.6. Benchmarks

The QEF1 IWR in 2015 concluded that although Bifröst had identified benchmark institutions, little practical use had been made of them and systematic data was not gathered for benchmarking purposes. In the University's RA for the current review, there is little evidence to be found of progress in benchmarking. The SLR of the Department of Social Science and Law stated that benchmarking with national and international universities has not been done in a systematic way and benchmarking is hence included in the Department's enhancement plans. There is no special mention of benchmarking in research and no evidence to this effect was received in virtual visit interviews.

The University participates in the Icelandic evaluation system of public universities, which can be used as a research benchmark nationally. In the RA, Bifröst noted that partnerships with national and international Higher Education Institutions should be addressed and a formal position taken concerning benchmarking activities. It is stated that the new Rector will take actions to shape a new vision related to international activities and benchmarking is included in the future enhancement plans of the university.

The Team recommends that Bifröst conduct an analysis of its international partners, define the most important criteria for beneficial partnerships, choose among these partners a limited number of strategic or key partners according to predefined criteria, and develop true and deep benchmarking relationships with these.

## 5.7. Collaboration

According to its research policy, Bifröst University endeavours to develop research collaborations with institutions and companies, provided that the autonomy of its academic staff and their freedom in choice of subjects and research methods is not violated. It became evident in interviews with external stakeholders in particular that Bifröst is very well networked regionally and in close contact with the local business community. The external stakeholders seem to appreciate especially the applied, practice-oriented research that it could provide. The Department of Business recognises this applied research to be significant in their collaborations with business and industries. The University recognises that it makes important research, development and innovation contributions in fields of retail, populism, cultural management and business law, as became evident in interviews with management and staff and as was also corroborated in interviews with external stakeholders.

The University and its two departments do not have a comprehensive approach to international collaboration. In interviews with teaching staff, it was evident that international collaboration is based on individual teachers' personal contacts and has not really developed into collaboration on an institutional level. The teachers are satisfied, however, with the possibilities to participate in international research conferences, where they have been able to network with colleagues. Based on the information provided in the RA, the issue of internationalisation and international collaboration will be tackled in the next strategy period. The Team agrees that the University should in the next strategy period plan for more strategic international partnerships, as such partnerships aid in applying for international research funding.

## 5.8. Teaching-research balance

The University research policy emphasises students' involvement in research. The QEF1 IWR in 2015 concluded that the link between teaching and research was a weakness. It was noted in that report that teachers undertaking research share it with students and integrate their research into their

teaching, although the volume of research was limited overall and uneven across the disciplines of business, law and social sciences. In these respects, the situation has not changed significantly since 2015. The imbalance in research performance between the three disciplines in the two departments remains, and students in Social Science benefit from teaching based on the University's own research to a greater degree than others. In the Business Department, teaching is based on a more practice-oriented approach. It also remained somewhat unclear if teaching is based on the latest research or developments in the subject area, and this particularly holds true for sessional staff as already pointed out in Section 4.12 of this report, where links between research and teaching are discussed.

However, in interviews with staff it was evident that some instructors are able to use their own research and peer-reviewed publications in their teaching and were able to give examples of this. Students and alumni were also able to give good examples of applied research projects that they had taken part in. The two Departments do not systematically monitor if teaching is linked to research conducted by Bifröst staff or to research in the disciplines in general. However, the issue is discussed in the annual meetings or performance reviews that Department Heads conduct with individual staff.

The University has a special remuneration system for academic staff that divides academic staff into different pay grades depending on points awarded for various factors. Staff are encouraged and motivated thus to enhance research, as research output is defined in the system as the single most important factor in determining the pay grade of academic staff. The system also deals with the allocation of time for different staff activities, such as teaching, administration, development and academic or service-based research. The University considers the main characteristic of this system to be flexibility, based on the aspirations and strengths of the individual. Staff members active in academic research will normally have around 40% of their time allocated to research. Allocations for



time to conduct service-related and applied research are evaluated on the basis on revenue generation.

The University has made an effort to secure and improve the academic standards by recruiting staff holding a PhD and by encouraging and supporting existing staff to complete PhD degrees. This has undoubtedly strengthened the link between teaching and research. As the share of part-time sessional teachers is significant, the Team recommends that the University create systematic quality assurance mechanisms to make sure that the sessional teaching is linked to relevant research.

### 5.9. Support for grant-capture activities and grant management

The University Research Centre has one employee, who devotes part of his time to providing administrative support to academic staff applying for research funding. According to the RA, academic staff members are encouraged to seek external grants but, as was mentioned earlier, Bifröst University has at the moment no grants from the Icelandic Research Fund.

Management plans to hire a full-time Research Director, and this position is included in the budget proposal for 2021. The aim is to be able to provide systematic support to faculty to apply for international grants and become members of international research groups. The Team encourages Bifröst to go forward with this plan as part of a more comprehensive, university-level approach to research management.

As mentioned in Section 4.12 above, in order to support research-teaching linkages there is a need to develop a formal system to monitor and evaluate the ways in which staff integrate their research into their teaching. At the moment there is no systematic approach to assure this and the University just assumes the linkage exists or the linkage is functioning.

## 5.10. Summary on the management of research

In its RA and in SLRs, the University and its two Departments recognise that research is still a weakness and that there still is a clear imbalance in research performance across the two Departments. The Team notes that as Bifröst is a small university with 17 permanent members of academic staff, it is very vulnerable in its dependency on a few individuals. The Team recommends an emphasis on building national and international partnerships in the next strategy period to minimise this vulnerability. Furthermore, it is recommended that the University encourage the two Departments to collaborate more closely, which can result in larger research entities and thus create synergy in research.

## 6. Managing enhancement

### 6.1. General enhancement context

Procedures for strategic planning have been evolving at Bifröst University in recent years and with the appointment of the new Rector, practices from the immediate past are already being modified. The first formal annual strategic plan was adopted in 2015 (for the six-year period 2015–2020) and a revised five-year strategic plan was adopted the following year (for 2016–2020). A rolling four-year plan is now prepared every fall.

The QEF1 of 2015 initially found that limited confidence could be placed in the soundness of Bifröst's present arrangements to secure the academic standards of its awards based on several concerns including limited data to support evaluation and planning, no practical use of benchmark institutions, and a lack of long-term strategic planning.

A subsequent follow-up report and meeting with a representative of the Team and the Chair of the Quality Board resulted in the Report of February 2016, which concluded that confidence was placed

in the soundness of Bifröst University's present and likely future arrangements to secure the academic standards of its awards.

The annual process for strategic planning developed through the QEF1 review now includes informational discussions by the University staff in the spring followed by internal meetings in August and September to develop ideas and proposals for the new annual plan. In mid-September, a staff strategic planning session is held, and the outcome of this meeting is the basic input for the annual strategic plan. The Rector then prepares the first draft, which is reviewed by the University Council and Board of Governors, with final approval of the strategic plan and financial plan by the Board of Governors in November.

## 6.2. Strategic planning and action planning

Each rolling strategic plan provides a review of main achievements and weaknesses; priorities for the coming year; priorities in the three following years; and long-term goals with key performance indicators. Themes for the 2016 Annual Report were "Do More; Be More Efficient; Do Better" (Strategic Plan 2016 – 2020). Goals were aimed at improving research, increasing enrolments, and maintaining student satisfaction.

In the 2018 Strategic Plan, the Strategic Pyramid (See Section 1.2 above) was reaffirmed with some modifications. Goals presented in this Plan echoed the work of the 2016 plan with a focus on increasing enrolments, research productivity, student satisfaction, and finances. Tactical action steps are identified yet there is a lack of a sense of building from one Plan to the next.

The 2020 – 2023 Strategic Plan reviewed the University's progress as being good. Financial issues were in the process of being resolved. Student enrolments had increased, online education was more embedded in the institutional culture, new programmes were introduced, new IT systems

implemented and student satisfaction was maintaining the targeted level of 4 – 5 on student surveys.

While priorities for 2020-2023 carry forward themes from prior years – increased enrolments, improvements in research productivity, financial stability, and investments in technology – the Annual Plans lack a clear unifying strategy for the overall direction of the University and action items are more tactical in approach. A number of the items listed in the Enhancement Plan are continuations of prior years' efforts, yet lack specific targets for achievement (Key Performance Indicators) and consideration of the inter-relationship of the various efforts. Additionally, the new Rector has added priorities for the 2020 – 2023 plan and it is not evident how the new priorities will relate to or replace the existing priorities. (Additional Information Request IB, Highlights from the New Rector). Development of a University-wide strategic plan, with clear priorities and allocation of resources, coupled with a comprehensive evaluation plan that includes Key Performance Indicators and timelines, is highly recommended.

### 6.3 Committee Structure

An overview of key committees for governance oversight are described in Section 1.6. Organisational changes implemented in 2016 were intended to lead to a simpler organisational structure with greater autonomy for departments and clearer demarcation of responsibilities. The authority and responsibilities of individuals and groups are discussed in Section 3.1. The RA states these organizational changes served their intended purpose and that the University is more flexible and agile than before. Discussions with staff also indicate a generally positive view of these changes.

In 2017, the Academic Departments of Law and Social Science were merged into one. The rationale for this change was described as efficiency, given the small size of the two prior Departments. The staff views of the merger are positive. However, the student surveys indicate significant differences of satisfaction between students from the Department of Social Science and Law as compared to

students from the Department of Business. These results call for further examination, including separating the data between Law students and Social Science students to determine any action that might improve the student experience in the Department of Social Science and Law.

#### 6.4. Evidence Base

A recommendation in the QEF1 report was to develop a better system for the use and management of statistical data. The resulting product of a Data Collection Plan was introduced in November of 2015 and has been updated periodically. The Plan provides a schedule of the type of data, variables, collection methods, frequency of data collection, responsibility for collection, as well as the destination and transmission of the data. Evidence of the actual use of the data was limited. It is evident that survey outputs could be better utilised , not only for deeper analysis but also for better communication to students and staff. Key Performance Indicators are published annually in the rolling Strategic Plan; however, regularly updated dashboards needed for day-to-day operations are not available (ESG Standard 1.7).

As referenced in Section 3.1, the Plan is still described as a “working document” and it would be beneficial to advance the efforts from data collection to evidenced-based decision making and quality assurance. A major review of this Plan is part of the Enhancement Plan included in the RA for this QEF2 review. In conducting this review, consideration of expanded measures of teaching quality would be beneficial (See Section 4.5).

Similarly, the commitment to evidenced-based decision-making needs to be imbedded in the work of all staff. Documenting the rationale for new programmes, changes of practice, and setting of goals should be demonstrated across all aspects of University work and clearly aligned with the strategic direction of the University. Such efforts are essential for the on-going monitoring of quality and the efficient use of resources (ESG Standard 1.9).

## 6.5. Benchmarks and internal sharing of best practices

Systematically comparing performance to peer and aspirational institutions is a valuable approach to validating progress towards goals. Similarly, identifying and sharing best practices from both internal and external sources is proven to improve overall quality of academic experiences. The QEF1 IWR and SLRs recommended use of these processes to ensure effective monitoring of quality. At the time of the Team's visit, Bifröst had not established formal mechanisms for either practice (see Sections 3.2 and 5.6). Utilization of benchmarks combined with processes to share best practices within the University could provide a foundation for evidence-based decision making to promote continuous quality improvements (ESG 1.9) and Bifröst is encouraged to undertake these efforts as soon as feasible (ESG 1.7).

## 6.6. Drawing on international experiences and domestic cooperation

The new Rector has identified international affairs as one of her priorities with the intent of being more strategic in the University's efforts in this area. The application that has been submitted to the European Association for Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) is a key element of this work. Presently, the University has over 80 cooperative agreements with international universities, including both student exchange opportunities and research programmes. Faculty members regularly participate in research, training or other cooperative programmes through the ERASMUS+ programme. Other opportunities are secured through organizations such as the European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) and the University of the Arctic. Many of the international connections are through individual faculty networks.

More recent international efforts include collaboration on a diploma in Education Leadership and Management with Hjallastefnan and Kaospilot a business school located in Aarhus, Denmark. This work has been slowed due to the pandemic but is expected to resume in the future. The Department

of Social Science and Law has a programme with multiple international universities, *LawWithoutWalls*, exposing students to different aspects of international law.

On the domestic front, the University's mission is "to advance and strengthen Icelandic businesses and society by offering superior quality education in the fields of business, law, and social sciences." There is evidence of extensive engagement with businesses, social agencies and the government to provide students with real-world experiences that prepare them for the world of work. For example, the Department of Business launched in 2018 a diploma programme in Retail Management with the University of Reykjavík. Identifying opportunities to combine international and domestic efforts to maximize efficient use of resources guided by the strategic direction of the University is needed.

## 6.7. Evaluation

The University's Quality Enhancement and Assurance document provides guidelines for the preparation of SLRs, monitoring and periodic review of programmes, design and approval of programmes, and the preparation of the RA. It does not have, nor did the RA provide, a systemic quality review at the institution level. The Enhancement Plan has projects that would move the University towards this institution-level review, including: reviewing and clarifying the division of responsibilities between Academic Departments and academic administration; strengthening the process for fulfilling the quality work procedures; and systematically reviewing the University's organizational structure. Identifying Key Performance Indicators, as well as establishing specific targets for the overall effectiveness of academic and administrative efforts and recognizing the interrelationship of the various components of the different departments is a matter of some urgency.

## 6.8. Summary on managing enhancement

Since the QEF1 IWR in 2015, many policies and procedures have been developed to guide the work of the University and a process for strategic/annual planning has been implemented. These efforts

do not, however, provide comprehensive strategic guidance for the University nor are the institutional structures and processes to monitor the effectiveness and efficiency of the policies and procedures in operation. The University should develop a comprehensive multi-year strategic plan that provides long-term goals to achieve the vision of the University. Within this plan, the University can reconcile its multiple priorities and determine the appropriate allocation of resources to support strategic efforts. An institution-wide evaluation of the use and effectiveness of these various policies and how effectively the University is achieving its goals through careful monitoring of internationally benchmarked KPIs is needed. This is of great importance in general for all University operations, but particularly important in relation to the management of academic standards. The implementation of new information systems should aid this process. (ESG Standards 1.1 – 1.7, 1.9)

## 7. Conclusion

### 7.1. General summary, including overview of management of research

The Team is very grateful to the Rector, Board of Governors, Council of Representatives, University Council, staff and students for the warm virtual welcome to The University. The Team acknowledges how constructive and helpful all who met with the Team were. Without exception, all contributed in meetings with positivity, candour, and were genuinely concerned to give their views of the University's approach to standards, quality and research. These included very helpful examples and instances from their own practice and experience.

The Rector has been in her post for a short three months and there is evidence of her efforts to reinforce priorities and emphasize quality. The RA presented a picture of an evolving university that has adapted well to the current pandemic environment. In several areas there has been progress in development since the IWR in QEF1 and subsequent follow-up reports. The Team found sufficient evidence to confirm the RA and to enable the Team to make the confidence judgements noted in 7.4 and 7.5 below.



In relation to management of research, the Institutional Team wishes to highlight the following conclusions:

- An increased number of permanent staff has taken PhD degrees according to the goals set by the university.
- There is evidence of a link between research and teaching from permanent teaching staff, although the research does not frequently emanate from the University faculty.
- Research output has improved, as measured by the modest increase in research points.
- Research performance lacks a comprehensive, strategic approach and specific goals for the research indicators are not defined. Even if research at the University relies on individual teachers' academic freedom, the university and its two departments would benefit from a more coordinated effort to link research to the University's vision and strategy.
- Research performance still varies considerably between the two departments by the research point measure that the University has chosen to use and the University has not been able to implement the recommendations of the QEF1 in this respect.

More generally, the Team found a University that is deeply committed to its students and the student experience. Its distinctive student population benefits from the real-world, practical pedagogy and the connections to the businesses and community. The Team found a University that has identified its strengths, is aware of areas in need of improvement and is moving to fulfil its mission and commitment to students.

## 7.2. Summary of strengths

- The full range of stakeholders (students, staff, governing entities, alumni, etc.) were involved in the development of the RA and are engaged in the strategic planning for the institution.
- The new Rector is having a positive impact on the campus community in setting quality standards expectations; professionalizing student and business services for the University; and aligning annual, strategic, and enhancement planning.
- Leadership and staff recognize areas of limitations and are committed to improvements in research, technology, data gathering, and evidence-based decision making.

- A strong sense of the University's commitment to students was expressed throughout the visit by students, teachers, administrators, and alumni. Alumni are proud of their alma mater.
- Students with diverse academic backgrounds who may not have succeeded elsewhere, succeed at the University. Student survey results are positive regarding the quality of teaching as well as interactions with teachers. Students are knowledgeable about where to seek assistance as needed.
- Positive developments have been made on enhancing academic standards since the 2015 IWR, including clear learning outcomes and assessment criteria.
- The pedagogical model that combines theory and practice resonates well with students and is supported by sessional teachers from the business community, allowing for real-world experiences and preparation for the world of work.
- The SLRs directly feed into the departmental enhancement plans and there is strong emphasis on quality improvements.
- The University has achieved significant improvement in financial strength allowing for investments in personnel and technology to improve the student experience.
- New technology systems have been implemented and, while not yet fully operational, offer great promise for greater ease of course offerings, improved data collection, and increased efficiency of staff.
- The University's response to the COVID pandemic was very effective with seamless continuation of courses and support for students and staff.

### 7.3. Summary of areas for improvement

Areas for further development that the University will need to consider include:

- 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.

- 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.

#### 7.4. Judgment on managing standards of degrees and awards

Overall, the Team concluded that limited confidence can be placed in the soundness of the University's present arrangements to secure the academic standards of its awards.

Given the new leadership at the University, the stable financial forecast, and action plans to address the key issues in this report, the Team believes a judgement of “confidence” is attainable in the future. [See note below.](#)<sup>2</sup>

## 7.5. Judgment on managing quality of student learning experience

Overall, the Team concluded that confidence can be placed in the soundness of the University’s present and likely future arrangements to secure the quality of the student learning experience.

Since the publication of this report, a follow-up review was conducted resulting in a report available at the QB website: <https://gef.is/gef-review-reports/>

The follow-up review report, published in March 2023, 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; and that
- 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.

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<sup>2</sup> The section in red was added to this report in March 2023.

## Annex 1: Visit Schedule

### Monday October 26

Time	Meeting	Attendees
10:30-11:00	<b>Briefing with Rector</b>	Dr. Margrét Jónsdóttir Njarðvík, Rector
11:00-12:30	<b>University Showcase</b>	Dr. Margrét Jónsdóttir Njarðvík, Rector Jón Snorri Snorrason, Head of Department, Business Dr. Njörður Sigurjónsson, Head of Department, Social Science and Law
13:30-14:30	<b>Executive Board</b>	Dr. Margrét Jónsdóttir Njarðvík, Rector Elín Jónsdóttir, Supervisor of Law Education Hafsteinn Sæmundsson, Director of Finance and Operations Halldóra Lóa Þorvaldsdóttir, Director of Academic Services Jón Snorri Snorrason, Head of Department, Business Dr. Njörður Sigurjónsson, Head of Department, Social Science and Law Stefán Kalmansson, Director of Quality Management
14:40-15:15	<b>Self-Evaluation Team</b>	Einar Svansson, Department of Business Hafdís Jóhannsdóttir, Student Jón Snorri Snorrason, Head of Department, Business Dr. Magnús Árni Magnússon, Former Dean of Social Science and Law Dr. Sigrún Lilja Einarsdóttir, Department of Social Science and Law Stefán Kalmansson, Director of Quality Management

### Tuesday October 27

Time	Meeting	Attendees
10:30-11:25	<b>Board of Governors</b>	Leifur Runólfsson, Chair, Alumni Society Dr. Auður Ingólfssdóttir, University Council Gunnar Egill Sigurðsson, Federation of Icelandic Cooperative Societies Inga Dóra Halldórsdóttir, Borgarbyggð Municipality Marteinn Jónsson, Confederation of Icelandic Employers
11:35-12:15	<b>Council of Representatives</b>	Andri Björgvin Arnþórsson, Alumni Society Hannes Karlsson, Federation of Icelandic Cooperative Societies Helga Kristín Auðunsdóttir, University Council Helgi Haukur Hauksson, Borgarbyggð Municipality Sara Dögg Svanhildardóttir, Confederation of Icelandic Employers
12:45-13:30	<b>Open Meeting with Undergraduate Students</b>	Not disclosed. N = 2
14:30-16:00	<b>University Council</b>	Dr. Margrét Jónsdóttir Njarðvík, Rector Dr. Arney Einarsdóttir, Academic Staff Representative Bjarni Heiðar Halldórsson, Undergraduate Student Representative Halldóra Lóa Þorvaldsdóttir, Director of Academic Services Júlíus Andri Þórðarson, Undergraduate Student Representative Margrét Vagnsdóttir, General Staff Representative Ragnheiður I. Sigurgeirsson, Undergraduate Student Representative Dr. Sigrún Lilja Einarsdóttir, Academic Staff Representative Sævar Finnbogason, Academic Staff Representative Vignir Már Sigurjónsson, Masters Student Representative

**Wednesday October 28**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Meeting</b>	<b>Attendees</b>
10:30-11:25	<b>Heads of Departments</b>	Jón Snorri Snorrason, Head of Department, Business Dr. Njörður Sigurjónsson, Head of Department, Social Science and Law
11:35-12:15	<b>Department Councils</b>	Dr. Njörður Sigurjónsson, Head of Department, Social Science and Law Bryndís Gunnarsdóttir, Student Representative Elín Jónsdóttir, Teacher Representative Jón Snorri Snorrason, Head of Department, Business Bryndís Inga Reynis, Student representative Brynjar Þór Þorsteinsson, Teacher Representative
12:45-13:30	<b>Teaching Staff: Department of Business</b>	Dr. Arney Einarsson, Assistant Professor Brynjar Þór Þorsteinsson, Assistant Professor Einar Svansson, Associate Professor Dr. Ingólfur Arnarson, Assistant Professor Jón Freyr Jóhannsson, Assistant Professor Dr. Sigrún Gunnarsdóttir, Professor
14:30-15:15	<b>Teaching Staff: Department of Social Science and Law</b>	Dr. Eiríkur Bergmann Einarsson, Professor Dr. Francesco Macheda, Associate Professor Helga Kristín Auðunsdóttir, Assistant Professor Dr. Magnús Árni Skjöld Magnússon Dr. Sigrún Lilja Einarsson, Associate Professor Unnar Steinn Bjarndal Björnsson, Assistant Professor
15:15-16:00	<b>Undergraduate Students: Dept of Social Science and Law</b>	Not disclosed. N = 6
15:15-16:00	<b>MA Students: Dept of Social Science and Law</b>	Not disclosed. N = 5

**Thursday October 29**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Meeting</b>	<b>Attendees</b>
10:30-11:15	<b>Academic Services staff</b>	Elfa Huld Haraldsdóttir, Student Counselling and Guidance Helena Dögg Haraldsdóttir, Project Manager - Service Director Hjördís Dögg Grímarsdóttir, Project Manager - Teaching Consultant Jóhanna Marín Óskarsdóttir, Project Manager - Head of Examination Sólveig Hallsteinsdóttir, Project Manager - Student Registration Teitur Erlingsson, Project Manager - IT Service
11:30-12:15	<b>Undergraduate Students: Dept of Business</b>	Not disclosed. N = 5
11:30-12:15	<b>MA Students: Dept of Business</b>	Not disclosed. N = 7
12:45-13:30	<b>Student Representatives</b>	Not disclosed. N = 6
14:30-15:15	<b>Sessional Teaching Staff</b>	Andrea Guðmundsdóttir, Department of Social Science and Law Ari Karlsson, Department of Social Science and Law Haraldur Daði Ragnarsson, Department of Business Húni Jóhannesson, Department of Business Ragnar Már Vilhjálmsson, Department of Business
15:20-16:00	<b>Open Meeting with MA Students</b>	Not disclosed. N = 3
15:20-16:00	<b>Open Meeting with Staff</b>	Not disclosed. N = 2

**Friday October 30**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Meeting</b>	<b>Attendees</b>
10:30-11:15	<b>Administrative Heads</b>	Dr. Arney Einarsdóttir, Director of Human Resources Hafsteinn Sæmundsson, Director of Finance and Operations Halldóra Lóa Þorvaldsdóttir, Director of Academic Services James Einar Becker, Marketing Director Þorbjörg Valdís Kristjánsdóttir, International Coordinator Þórný Hlynsdóttir, Library Director
11:25-12:00	<b>Bifröst Research Centre</b>	Kári Joensen, Research Centre Manager
12:30-13:30	<b>Alumni</b>	Not disclosed. N = 6
14:30-15:45	<b>Follow-up with Key Staff</b>	Dr. Margrét Jónsdóttir Njarðvík, Rector Hafsteinn Sæmundsson, Director of Finance and Operations Halldóra Lóa Þorvaldsdóttir, Director of Academic Services Jón Snorri Snorrason, Head of Department, Business Dr. Njörður Sigurjónsson, Head of Department, Social Science and Law Stefán Kalmansson, Director of Quality Management
15:45-16:15	<b>Debriefing with Rector</b>	Dr. Margrét Jónsdóttir Njarðvík, Rector