

*Quality Enhancement Framework for Icelandic Higher Education*

# INSTITUTION-WIDE REVIEW

**Bifröst University**

September 2015



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## PREFACE

This is the report of an independent institution-wide review undertaken by the Icelandic Quality Board for Higher Education under the authority of the Icelandic Government. The review was carried out by a team of independent senior international higher education experts together with an independent student from the higher education sector in Iceland. Institution-wide Review is one component of the Icelandic Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF) established by the Icelandic Government in 2011. The main elements of the QEF are:

- Quality Board-led reviews at the institutional level.
- A transparent, comprehensive program of subject level reviews led by the institute themselves.
- A programme of annual meetings between members of the Quality Board and individual institutions to discuss institutional developments in quality assurance and enhancement.
- A series of quality enhancement workshops and conferences to share national and international developments in enhancing the quality of the student experience.

Further information on the Icelandic Enhancement Framework is available at the RANNIS web site (<http://www.rannis.is>).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See: [http://www.rannis.is/media/gaedarad-haskola/Handbook\\_complete\\_1558767620.pdf](http://www.rannis.is/media/gaedarad-haskola/Handbook_complete_1558767620.pdf)

# **1. Introduction: The review in context**

## **1.1. The Review**

Institutional Review is one of the main elements of the Quality Enhancement Framework for Icelandic Higher Education (QEF) as described in full in the Quality Handbook for Icelandic Higher Education (2011). All seven Higher Education Institutions in Iceland are being reviewed between 2012 and 2015.

This is the last report of our first reviews, that of Bifröst University (BU).

The review was conducted by the Quality Board with support from RANNÍS, in accordance with the procedures described in the 2011 Handbook. The Review Team (the Team) comprised Dr. Jean-Marie Hombert (chair) and Dr. Barbara Brittingham (vice-chair) – members of the Quality Board, together with Dr. Crichton Lang (independent expert), Dr. Bengt Ove-Boström (independent expert), and Dóra Haraldsdóttir (student representative). Dr Þorsteinn Gunnarsson (review secretary) and Lilja Steinunn Jónsdóttir from RANNÍS provided administrative support.

In preparation for the main visit by the team, the chair commented on the first draft of the institution's Reflective Analysis (RA), which was then revised. After the receipt of the final version of the RA together with additional documentation, the chair and secretary of the team set up the visit schedule in consultation with Bifröst staff. The preparation of the University's Reflective Analysis and the arrangements for the visit were overseen by the Rector Dr. Vilhjálmur Egilsson, and the Director of Quality Management, Dr. Ólafur Ísleifsson. The review visit took place on March 24–26 at the University's offices in Reykjavik and the Bifröst University campus. Following a meeting with faculty in Reykjavik and a campus tour on March 24, the visit included a presentation by the Rector and 13 meetings were held with staff (academic and administrative, all key personnel except the chief academic officer who was not available) and students (including residential students and distance education students), University Council and Executive Council members, alumni, and representatives of stakeholders.

The Quality Board is very grateful to Bifröst University for its preparations in advance of the visit and for its cooperation in organising the proceedings during the visit, and also to RANNÍS for its efficient administration of the review. The team is also grateful to all members of the Bifröst University community with whom we met.

## **1.2. Bifröst University**

Bifröst University began in 1918 as the Cooperative College to educate people for leading roles in business and society. In 1955 the College moved from Reykjavik to its current campus in the Borgarfjörður area and has since 1988 offered university-level education, first in Business, then also in Law (2002) and Social Science (2005). Degree programmes are offered at the bachelor's and master's levels. Bifröst University also offers a preparatory program. While Icelandic law provides the framework for institutions of higher education, in some settings, Bifröst University might more properly be thought of as a university college. Students at Bifröst are older than the average in Iceland, with the largest group being between 30-34, and the average graduate being 37 years of age. Bifröst states its values as Initiative, Cooperation, and Responsibility.

At the time of the visit, Bifröst was recovering from rather severe problems it experienced between 2008-2012, when enrollment declined by 40% for reasons that included a competing preparatory program started by the Keilir educational institute in Reykjanesbær and one at Reykjavik University (RU), the general economic problems in Iceland, and merger talks with RU that cast an air of uncertainty on Bifröst's future. The University now operates with a 20% (inflation-adjusted) decline in government support, compared with 2008, and lower tuition rates, but it did receive a one-off contribution in 2013 that is credited with saving the current operation of the University.

The University is in a period of rapid change. New programmes have been added (e.g., an M.S. in Leadership), a modular system merging the delivery of campus-based and distance education has been implemented, and there are plans for

developing an international summer session and continuing education programmes. Recently the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture has introduced the possibility of a merger with two other institutions (Holar University College and Icelandic Agricultural University). Because of its history and special mission, the University has a cadre of dedicated external stakeholders who have begun to raise funds in support of the institution.

Enrollment has increased 45% between 2012 and 2014, from 425 to 617 students. The goal for 2015 is 700 students which is said to be a sustainable level for the University and one that would allow it to operate with a small positive margin.

## **2. Safeguarding Standards**

### **2.1. Organisational Structure for the Management of Standards**

The reflective analysis provides a clear description of the formal relations between different organisational bodies regarding responsibilities for quality management.

The Rector is the principal authority regarding quality management at the University. The Bifröst University Quality Board and Quality Director are responsible to the Rector and the University Council for quality management at the University and these bodies are tasked with ensuring that the University operates in conformity with its own and external quality requirements.

The Bifröst University Quality Handbook covers ongoing processes to assure and enhance quality within Bifröst, including programme development and periodic reviews of standards and awards. Further, the Bifröst University Quality Handbook contains a range of information on the University, a description of the quality system, and standard procedures.

The Quality Board and the Quality Director are also responsible for ensuring that new procedures and methods are added to the Quality Handbook, that all University employees are informed of procedural changes and that all new employees receive an introduction to the Bifröst quality assurance system. Responsibility for Quality affairs within each Department rests with the head of Department.

However, since educational quality is a dimension of every activity relevant to education, the impact of the total organisation of Bifröst has to be taken into account as well as the quality culture among staff and management. When it comes to safeguarding academic standards formal responsibility as noted in handbooks and organizational charts is important, but the effectiveness of formal systems in overseeing quality and making improvements is key. Acknowledging that much of Bifröst's work in this regard is very current, the review team felt that the demarcation of duties, and in particular the

accountabilities and responsibilities between the various committees and groups is not as clearly outlined as it needs to be in order to progress both quality assurance and quality enhancement agendas effectively. Indeed although enhancement activities were clearly identified, they would benefit from a coherent plan or strategy for taking enhancement forward within the University in a holistic manner. More defined performance indicators and outcome targets would also be beneficial to the University's management of these activities. The Review Team believes that the financial constraints and institutional transition within which the University is trying to take forward a number of developments, makes formal institution-wide processes for the management and monitoring of enhancement all the more critical. The Team also acknowledges the small size of the University, which leads to people having multiple roles, governance bodies having overlapping membership, and the challenges of having formal systems when one benefit of the small size is a certain informality. Also, the economic downturn has led to significant staff turnover and therefore important loss of institutional memory.

All of the committees clearly serve a valuable purpose (for example, the Quality Board is tasked with reviewing and implementing quality procedures, and the Education and Research Board serves as an effective forum for the sharing of best practice and consultation on change), but no single group seems to be tasked with creating and overseeing the overall strategy for Enhancement. The Academic Council would seem to be best placed, both in terms of its position in the committee structure and its membership (although it seems anomalous that the Quality Director is not a member), to undertake that role. This would seem to logically build on the level of accountability from Student Support and Academic Departments to the Vice-Rector for effective management of any issues (e.g. arising from review or feedback) that, as reported to the review team, operated within the Academic Council.

While the team met with a limited number of staff and students, their academic and educational ethos appeared strong and may indicate a vibrant quality culture. Everyone with whom the team met wants to perform well and to contribute to the learning experience of students. From the students' side there



is also a willingness to support one another. However, these aspirations for a quality culture are not sufficiently supported by a structured and coherent development agenda, metrics, data, or plan. For example, there is a lack of relevant indicators for evaluation of quality strategies and the reflective analysis does not show how different forms of evaluations are used in the strategic work of the institution.

The path of the Bifröst quality cycle is not demonstrated clearly. The following question remains largely unanswered: Given where Bifröst University has been, and where it is today, where does it realistically want to go? In addition, on what data and investigations can management, staff and students base the answers to these questions? What are its recognized priorities for improvement? What resources are assigned to each priority?

It seems that Bifröst University keeps best track of its development in terms of economic resources. Economic resources are of course an important and inevitable base for all activities, but equally important are the activities themselves and their results. In other words - are the resources well spent? Are students attracted to the programs? Are the programs effective in preparing graduates? Answers have to build on analyses of options, strategy and careful monitoring of results.

## **2.2. External reference points and benchmarks**

A valuable base for the analysis of options is benchmarking. Bifröst University has chosen six institutions for benchmarking.

- Aarhus School of Business, Aarhus University
- Bard College Berlin
- Laurea University of Applied Science
- Syddansk Universitet
- University of the Highlands and Islands
- University of Strathclyde

However, with the exception of a study of “Learning by Developing” at Laurea University, so far Bifröst University has not used this selection of institutions for benchmarking. This is clearly acknowledged in the Reflective Analysis, but the reason for this fact is not discussed. Is it because of a lack of time or staff, or was the selection of institutions after all not that useful for some reason? Bifröst University would benefit from a prioritized set of benchmarking activities supported by enough data to determine whether these will be useful benchmarking institutions. While this is difficult for all universities in Iceland, useful benchmarks are essential as a continuing source of externality to support the management of quality and standards.

The cited agreement with the University of Iceland on evaluation of academic staff is valuable in the work of safeguarding academic standards, and may prove to provide an initial benchmarking exercise.

### **2.3. Programmes and degrees**

Bifröst University is a small institution, even compared to Icelandic measures. A careful selection of programmes and degrees is important in order for the institution to be able to allocate relevant resources to chosen activities. It seems to the Review Team that Bifröst University in this respect has made wise decisions, given their scale of operation. The institution operates on the scale of a small business school with a law school and a branch of more general social sciences, primarily economics and political science.

With the exception of Law, all programmes have for a number of years been taught both on campus and by distance learning. A major shift in the mode of teaching has recently been introduced at Bifröst University. A new modular system, where there is little difference between distance teaching and teaching on campus, is now the common model. The mode of teaching for everyone is the “flipped classroom model”, where all students have opportunity to watch recorded lectures online. Contact hours with the teachers are used for discussions and tutoring. The distance students get their contact hours on scheduled weekend gatherings.

The introduction of the new modular system was prepared with a number of activities and committee discussions, but the implementation was seen by all as rapid. There were some problems in the beginning, but now faculty in general seem more satisfied with the new system due to practice, some training, and support. However, some staff in the Law Department have had more problems than others in adjusting their teaching to the new form of instruction.

Instruction in Law may not lend itself as easily to distance education where the recording of lectures may be more problematic, though the flipped classroom may be said to support the close questioning and discussion common in law school pedagogy.

Students in general felt, in the beginning, uninformed about specific features of the change, and they felt that there were problems in the first term of implementation. Although students reported increasing satisfaction with the new system (see Section 3.5 below), the change to the new system of instruction has so far not been formally evaluated, nor is there a written plan for such an evaluation, and the timing of a follow-up activity had not been decided. The team was not clear on how the implementation of the modular system throughout the University was monitored and evaluated, nor how the changes were communicated to the students. The University may wish to reflect on change management processes it operates during significant developments of this nature.

Subject-Level reviews are important parts of the Icelandic quality assurance system. They are carried out within the different institutions with an external expert involved. The team has had access to the three subject level reviews from February 2015, related to the three departments at Bifröst University. The subject-level reviews were all conducted late in the cycle, making it both difficult for the University to demonstrate that they have taken the findings on board and for the team to understand how the University uses the reviews for improvement.

The three different external experts have testified that the reviews have been carried out in a robust and meaningful way. The reviews all resulted in action plans addressing issues identified. We trust that Bifröst University will give credit to these action plans and monitor the progress and impact of the actions taken.

Sometimes the Subject-Level Reviews are called “evaluations”, sometimes they are called “self-evaluations”. They are of course a mix. The role of the external expert is important, as are reports on how review results are used. In the Reflective Analysis of Bifröst University, the Review Team could not clearly see how earlier reviews and evaluations have been used in the strategic work of the institution. However, the Subject-Level Reviews have been recently completed and we may expect to see more integration of their findings in the future.

#### **2.4. Design, approval, monitoring and review of programmes**

The Bifröst University Quality Handbook clearly states a number of conditions for curriculum as well as for the processes of design, approval, monitoring and review of programmes. What is here stated is sound and shows high ambitions in accordance with the Icelandic National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the European Quality Framework (EQF) as well as Bifröst University regulations and policy statements. The programmes of study are organised in accordance with the Bologna Process.

The weaknesses of the programmes’ management essentially relate to the strategic processes and how these processes relate to evaluations, indicators and follow-up procedures. Staff turnover, limited resources, and competing demands on a small staff contribute to the challenges and therefore the secure management of standards.

To its credit, the University recognizes the need for improvement. For example, the Overview of Enhancement Projects in the Reflective Analysis (p.66) cites the “Need to improve adherence to rules when it comes to the development of new programmes and courses,” which the University will address by working to

“Strengthen decision making processes concerning new programmes and courses at Bifröst University, including by increased adherence to formal processes and documentation of meetings and decisions. Set up a to-do list when introducing new courses.” The team encourages the University to address these issues as a matter of urgency.

The Enhancement Projects also include the “Need to improve reviews of learning outcomes of programmes and individual courses,” which will be addressed by working 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. Conduct such reviews systematically and in conjunction with subject level reviews.” The need to strengthen documentation and the management of records were also listed as an enhancement priority. The team is gratified to note that while the University states its intended learning outcomes, it intends to improve the oversight and evaluation of their effectiveness.

The identification of these priorities, and others listed in the Reflective Analysis, is consistent with the team’s observations from the visit. Rapid change, small size, significant turnover, and the need to concentrate on growing enrollment in an uncertain environment provide the context in which these enhancements can be understood.

By identifying these issues and including due dates and the assignment of responsibility in the section titled “An Overview of Enhancement Projects Ahead” in the Reflective Analysis, the University has demonstrated its commitment to developing its quality agenda, a commitment that will serve it well in the long run. Again, the Team encourages the University to implement the action plans outlined in this section, and develop sub-goals or sub-steps towards reaching their larger, final goals.

## **2.5. Staff induction, appraisal and development**

The Reflective Analysis states that Bifröst University takes pride in hiring competent, qualified employees. The Rector appoints the Vice-Rector, department heads, managing directors and other University administrators. The Rector also appoints professors, associate professors and assistant professors. The Vice-Rector appoints sessional instructors upon receiving the recommendations of the Academic Council. However, 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. Assuring standards depends on the systematic appointment of high calibre staff.

In October 2014, Bifröst University and the University of Iceland came to an agreement to the effect that the University of Iceland annually conducts an evaluation of up to 30 academic staff members of Bifröst University based on the evaluation system for academic work applied by the public universities in Iceland. Previously, each year the Bifröst University Board of Governors appointed an Evaluation Committee to assess the qualifications and progress of academic staff members at the University. This new agreement is a step in the right direction because the quality of staff will be reviewed externally. However, it remains with Bifröst University to act upon the results of these reviews. The actions should be based on strategy and should be documented to allow for coming review teams to follow the quality assurance and enhancement work related to staff qualifications and professional development.

As pointed out above, there is in general a clear dedication amongst staff to the education provided at Bifröst University. However, while it is clear that the institution values quality teaching and offers workshops, there was limited evidence available to the Team as to how Bifröst University operates to strategically develop the pedagogic and standard-setting skills of the teaching staff. Regarding academic qualifications, a little more than one third of the permanent staff holds a PhD. There is an aim to recruit staff members who hold a PhD, and staff members already hired are sometimes given opportunity to follow

a PhD programme. However, the formal academic level of the teaching staff is at this point on average low, understandably higher in social sciences than in business or law. This is also reflected in the amount of research taking place. Bifröst University is mainly a teaching institution. The amount of research is small, and mainly connected to the Social Science department. Thus Bifröst lacks an important base for establishing research-based education. With a dispersed student body and faculty in two locations, the University faces additional challenges to maintain the research-teaching linkage. A clear strategy for ensuring the appropriately strong research-teaching linkages seems to be lacking. These factors compounded the Team's concerns regarding the secure setting and maintenance of undergraduate and postgraduate level academic standards.

There is no regular process for advertising new positions for faculty and teaching and research of new faculty is not evaluated before they are appointed as teachers at Bifröst University.

This is not to say that education at Bifröst University is not based on scientific knowledge. Scientific knowledge is documented in text books and elsewhere, and even academic teachers who are experienced researchers and hold a PhD often have to teach outside their own research areas. However, experienced researchers can, when teaching outside their specific field of expertise, use the skills and knowledge acquired during PhD training and in their own research. This is not to deny the value that can be added through exposure of students to experienced, and often senior, practitioners. The issue here is one of balance.

## **2.6. Use of management information**

A basic source of information is the learning management system, the MySchool system. There is some concern among staff about the functionality of the system, not least in terms of interactivity, a particularly important factor in programmes offered to students at a distance. There are better systems on the market, but the university management wants to give the system one more chance before

considering a change of platform, which would be expensive, time-consuming, and disruptive.

There is a limited availability and use of crucial statistical data, for instance dropout rates, completion times and employment rates of graduates. These and other related indicators are key measures of institutional success and management of quality both in Iceland and internationally.

Another point that the Review Team would wish to emphasise is the relative lack of formal statistical analyses and evaluation within the formulation and monitoring of enhancement activities (or indeed in the underpinning standard setting and quality monitoring processes). In the meeting with the Quality Board in particular, it was acknowledged that although not completely lacking (students are able to give some online feedback about their study experiences), the collection and subsequent use of statistical information, performance data and broader student management information needed to improve within the University. The Review Team would urge the University to view this as a key priority, and the University has already in the RA captured this work as one of its planned enhancement projects.

## **2.7. Summary evaluation of security of standards**

While the Bifröst University Reflective Analysis and its Quality Handbook outline a structure for safeguarding standards, the operation is challenged by four factors.

First, the quality system is relatively new and therefore largely untested. As described above, Bifröst University while true to its founding mission is operationally reinventing itself, given the decline in enrollment, the move to the modular system, and the significant financial challenges it faces. The system is also challenged by the fact that the principal physical location is in Borgarfjörður district, yet, approximately 80% of the tenured faculty live away, mostly in Reykjavik, providing limited opportunity for residential students to interact outside of class with the faculty. Also, Bifröst University has multiple governance



bodies (committees, councils) with considerable overlapping membership. Some overlap might be good and useful and indeed heightens the sense of ownership and participation, and in a small institution perhaps more overlap is to be expected. However, especially in a new system, it is difficult to discern the extent to which the overlap is helpful versus the extent to which it is inefficient or too heavily influenced by individuals who have voice in multiple venues; a review of this matter would be in order. The Subject-Level Reviews were concluded in January 2015, so there has been little time to implement the findings. While the Reflective Analysis notes that follow-up will be carried out through Enhancement Projects, the list provided does not specifically reference the findings of any of the Subject Level Reviews. Here, the direction of travel is encouraging, but at the time of the team visit, the work was at early stages.

Second, Bifröst University operates with very little useful data. For example, while the team was told that not all students attend the intensive weekend sessions, there was no data available on what proportion (estimated at 15%) were not physically present. An absentee rate of 15% would in itself be of concern; of greater concern is that the University does not know the rate and cannot therefore estimate the effect on student achievement. Similarly, student retention, progression, and graduation rates are not available. The University has little useful data on the success of its graduates, though it is working to develop a database. The student record system, MySchool, has very limited capacity to serve as an LMS (Learning Management System), forcing students and faculty to communicate by email and social media and therefore depriving the University of useful data on participation, progressions, and indicators of success. The system works for posting and collecting assignments and preserving grades, but lacks the functionality of other systems to extract data and support student:faculty and student:student interaction or provide statistical information on student engagement with their learning.

While the University is committed to giving MySchool one more trial before moving to a new system, it appears to the team that Bifröst University must either accept a system that will never become robust, keep track of key statistics by hand, or undergo a transition process to a new system, which will be

expensive in terms of both time and money. Because the University has little useful data, it does not have a strong culture of using data in decision-making.

Third, the University lacks formal plans. Under the leadership of the Rector, the University has affirmed its central mission, confirmed its niche as providing access generally to somewhat older students, articulated its values (initiative, cooperation, and responsibility), and laid out a general strategy for the future. Indeed the “Annual Enhancement Programme” Strategic Session in September identified over 100 issues or tasks to be performed. However, at the time of the visit, with a very few laudable exceptions, these had not been prioritized, nor did the team see the formal assignment of responsibility, the assignment of resources, or expected dates of accomplishments for this list. While Bifröst University has identified a general list of areas that need attention, the lack of formalized planning decreases the likelihood that the most important improvements will be made in a timely manner.

Fourth, the University will need to focus its attention on the qualifications, support, and development of the faculty. While the team has every reason to believe that the current faculty are dedicated to their students and bring an array of academic and professional qualifications, fewer than half of the academic staff hold the Ph.D., limiting the amount of research that can reasonably be expected; and there does not appear to be a systematic way of defining the need for new staff and undertaking a strategic search. Rather, recent hires, who may themselves be solid additions to the staff, were hired in a rather opportunistic way without open advertisements and proper evaluation by peers. The University needs a proper faculty hiring plan and formal systematic means for new hires.

Given the factors discussed in the above section, in concluding this section, the Review Team would highlight its concern regarding the limited confidence that can be held in the institution’s present ability to manage the standards of awards.

## **3. The student learning experience**

### **3.1. Overview**

This section of the report analyses the student experience, from recruitment, through learning environment, student services, to students' relationship to society. It is based on discussions with students, staff, alumni and stakeholders during the Team's visit, as well as on documentation submitted to the team. The systematic assessment of student evaluation of teaching at Bifröst University as well as the processing and following up of the results is based on a procedure outlined in the Bifröst University Quality Handbook.

### **3.2. Student recruitment**

Bifröst University has a clear student target group that is somewhat unorthodox for a higher education institution. Students are on average much older than in other universities in Iceland and many have a non-traditional learning background or journey. Bifröst University emphasizes its role in giving back-to-school chances to individuals who have, for some reason, taken a break in their studies or dropped out of the educational system and to students with family responsibilities. That is part of the University's mission. Bifröst University certainly appears to be true to its ethos and provides a suitable campus and learning experience for its target group.

Students with whom the team met reported that Bifröst University appealed to them because of its family-friendly and distraction-free environment. Students who have difficulties concentrating in the more urban capital area due to its various distractions, or for other personal or circumstantial reasons do not view Reykjavík as a desirable place to live, find Bifröst to be a suitable place for pursuing studies. They also appreciate the small classes.

The campus-based students interviewed are very positive about campus life. The location and size help them concentrate on their studies and support a social environment of mutual support amongst students. In connection to the new

mode of instruction it is relevant to note that a majority of the students do not live on campus. The same applies to most of the teachers. Most of the faculty is based in the Reykjavík office. Many lecturers are professionals and involved in daily running of businesses or teaching somewhere else. One of the benefits of the location and the close community of the Bifröst campus is therefore not fully exploited.

Students were sympathetic with the demands on faculty to respond to student calls and emails. Most students with whom the team spoke seemed to have heard of Bifröst University through friends and acquaintances who studied there. A good reputation from former students therefore seems to play an important role in the school's recruitment, and is an important asset for the University.

In recent years Bifröst University has had difficulties in recruiting students. After a series of unfortunate events, including the economic downturn, the student number dropped significantly between 2008 and 2012, but is now rising again. The estimated student number for the school to be sustainable is 700. Bifröst University currently mainly focuses on recruiting Icelandic students. However, Iceland's population is small and regarding the school's limited target group, it raises the question if the target group will be big enough in the years ahead to support the school as needed. The University's appeal to a non-traditional student body could be an asset or a limitation.

In academic year 2014-2015, the focus was mainly on recruiting distance learners. This resulted in relatively few on-campus students, a challenge for the University. Distance learning programmes might have originally been thought to serve students who wish to take their studies over a longer time (part-time) while working, but the number of distance learning students in full-time studies is growing. Indeed, the University said it was "recruiting against itself," attracting students to distance learning programmes whom they might have hoped would become residential students. The school plans to put in place measures to attract more on-campus students, especially those who choose full-time study. This might be a challenge because the studies are becoming more blended, and the difference between being on-campus and off-campus has

diminished. Bifröst University is working to balance the strategies for recruiting and teaching distance learning and on-campus students.

### **3.3. The student voice**

Students have representatives on boards and councils within the University, where they can bring up their own topics and have a say in operational or strategic decisions. These representatives are elected by students. The number of students in each council or board is large in proportion with the total number of members, for which the University is to be congratulated. In the University Council there are 5 students out of 12 members. In the Academic Council there are 2 students out of 8 members, and in the Quality boards the ratio is 3 out of 7.

When the Team spoke to the students during the interviews, all students expressed a united feeling of being heard 'loud and clear' and that they got rapid responses to their concerns. Teachers as well as other members of the staff and administration, including the Rector, are easily reachable and all lines of communications are short. From Rector down there seems to be an open-door policy. Students provided several examples of how they had brought up an issue and how it had been heard, discussed, and dealt with appropriately. Students had difficulties in finding negative points regarding the University. One of the reasons might be that in such a small community it is easy to address the issues early and find compromises. All problems therefore seem to be solved quickly after they are brought up. Faculty also mentioned that students were not shy to express their opinions, for example on the new modular system and the online lectures. They said that lecturers would soon find out if the lectures were not comprehensible or well enough executed.

Over all the interviews that the team had with students, the only negative point they could come up with was that a couple of times students felt that they had not been notified well enough in advance about upcoming changes. Overall, the students with whom the Team met reported that they appreciated the opportunities to engage with staff individually and through the committees and

boards, and felt that their concerns and suggestions were heard through both formal and informal channels.

### **3.4. Student support services**

Given the size of the campus, BU appears to offer a good library. The library is a part of the Icelandic library network, so inter-library lending is available for students if they want to look outside of the 12,000 titles and 19,000 volumes that the library has to offer. The library also recognizes its position in the small community and is expanding its role of service according to demand, adding, for example, children's books to its line of titles.

Students at Bifröst University can speak to a professional and trained student counsellor, offered by the University, if they have any problems, either personal, or regarding their studies. Students seemed to be well aware where to look if a problem of any kind would occur, whether this relates to their studies, facilities or the campus, or to pastoral issues. Students also are keen on helping each other, having come up with an unofficial 'buddy' system, where students who are strong in one field help those who are not. The environment in Bifröst therefore appeared to the team to be very friendly and supportive.

The IT support seems to be effective, giving students the support needed, although the office seems to be relatively understaffed. Now that the majority of studies takes place online, this may represent a risk for the University, as well as less training and support for faculty and students. During working weekends for distance-learning students, IT support is available on-hand, and students with good knowledge of the MySchool environment are asked to help their peers. Masters students as well as undergraduate students seemed to be equally comfortable in the IT environment.

### **3.5. The student learning context**

It is hard for the Team to come to a conclusion on whether the new modular system and the blended learning approaches are working effectively, as both are

very new to both students and teachers and little data was available. However, it seems that the new system imposes a more even pressure and workload on students throughout the semester. Students generally expressed appreciation for this facet of the change. For example, students with children expressed satisfaction with having fewer exams at the same time, feeling it was easier to prepare for only 2-3 exams when they also have children to care for.

Reviews of the modular system were mixed, though tending toward the positive; and as with faculty, students indicating a growing comfort with the new system. Students in general felt, in the beginning, uninformed about specific features of the change, and they felt that there were problems the first term. Now the system works better, and the students that the team met are in general positive to the change. The new way of studying, with shorter terms and fewer courses to juggle at the same time, is regarded as more efficient.

The blended learning blurs the line between distance learning and on-campus teaching. However, on-campus students do still get more direct contact with teachers. For distance learners the working weekends are very essential as the residential weekends are their only opportunities for direct contact with the faculty. This direct contact with the instructors was reported as being important for the learning process, as students seem to get a clearer view on the subjects during this time when it is given over to engaged learning activities. One problem seems to be that approximately 15-20% of the distance learning students cannot attend the intensive sessions on campus. Another challenge is that some instructors reportedly use the residential weekends as an opportunity to deliver their lectures live. The Team was informed that this habit will likely disappear as faculty become more comfortable with the new system.

All students whom the team met, on campus and distance learning, talked about the importance of this direct contact and also the opportunity to have a forum for informal discussions on the subjects with other students. MySchool does not provide this forum. Facebook is used by teachers to create a forum for discussion and sharing. The importance of face-to-face time is emphasized, and therefore the issue of the approximately 15-20% of students who cannot or do not attend

the on-campus session is one that deserves serious attention. As indicated in the previous section, it is important that this is accurately monitored and appropriate action undertaken.

The mixed composition of students was reported as having positive benefits as students learn to work better with a diverse group of people from different backgrounds. The University seems to boost the student's confidence as they expressed the feeling of being in advantage over others as a consequence of their experience at BU, of being more capable of addressing challenges and problems, having had to deal with realistic problems throughout their studies.

In general, students are not especially trained in entrepreneurship; only the Business Department offers courses preparing students to be entrepreneurs. It seems to be more in the students' own hands to gain experience in that field, and they have outfitted a special room to support student entrepreneurship. Students informed the Team, however, that they could ask for help with their personal projects from teachers, who are willing to help at any time.

### **3.6. Teaching and research**

Teaching at Bifröst University is project-driven. According to students this arrangement is well executed and does result in better learning. Students are given lots of small assignments, so teachers can see early on if students are having troubles and need support. The team heard that this has resulted in fewer dropouts.

As mentioned above, Bifröst University has just started using a new modular system that includes transferring all of the lectures into an online video format. While it is hard for the Team to comment on a system which is new and still in the adapting phase for both teachers and students, a couple of points can be noted that the Team observed during its visit to BU:

- Face-to-face teaching contact is less under the new system, but teachers seem to be under more constant pressure, as the contact



is more through emails, Facebook and by phone. Students can email at any time of the day, any day of the week, expecting a rapid response. The pressure increased with the new system as students have shorter contact time with teachers in classes and therefore have more unanswered questions. As mentioned in section 3.5., students feel that the contact time they have with the teachers and other students is of high importance.

- Reportedly, some instructors view the new system as a challenge and are not using the contact time they have with students in courses in a most advantageous way. That is, they use class time to repeat the online lecture rather than using activities that further advance student understanding. This challenge does of course vary between teachers and in the Team's view, this is a matter for monitoring and staff development.

This modular system with its online lectures had been in use for the distance learning programs for some time. The Team would have liked to interview students who were or had been instructed through distance learning only, that is, students who were not currently living on campus and never had done so. This would have added a different perspective, as all of the students spoken to seem to have lived on campus at some stage.

Teachers who are undertaking research seem to be able to share this with students and integrate their research into their teaching. However, as discussed in section 2 above, the problem is that research seems to be limited overall, and uneven between disciplines. These disciplinary differences between social science as compared with business and law may be representative of or influenced by the disciplines in general, but because these are the only three academic fields at Bifröst, the differences are more apparent. In the view of the Team, it is important that students in all disciplines are exposed to developments at the frontiers of all subjects.

### 3.7. Grading and workload

It seems that the modular system puts a more even pressure to study on students, so that they put more consistent concentration on the particular subject they are studying in the moment. Postponing studies until the last minute is less of an option in this case. Also, having fewer exams at a time seems to be more suitable for students with families and therefore seems that the system is more suitable for BU's target group.

According to the *Stefnumótun* slides provided by Bifröst to the Team, there seems to be a problem regarding student cheating: the answers to exams are kept in an area accessible to many and campus officials cannot have an overview through MySchool on whether students follow the rules regarding academic integrity. The slides also mention that there is a need for a more effective workflow regarding the administration of exams. It is clear that Bifröst University realizes the importance of addressing this problem in order for the university to keep its standards high.

Free riders are a problem at Bifröst University as with all institutions that use group projects. It was interesting to see that teachers felt they were dealing with the problem by making evaluations more dependent on individual contributions, as intergrading evaluation sheets for students to evaluate each other in the group. Students however did not seem to be aware that these measures being taken by the lecturers were designed to address the free rider problem and felt that they themselves dealt with the free riders. They reported that groups are not assigned by lecturers but formed by the students; free riders are recognised early and will feel the pressure from their peers to contribute so they continue to be asked to join productive groups. Both teachers and students believe that there were fewer free riders now than before. The modular system might also play a role in that, as the pressure and workload is more even over the semester.

As mentioned before, it is hard to evaluate how effective the modular system and the new online lectures are, as they are so new. However, the team is concerned that the University through its governance system has not set out a detailed plan

on how to evaluate the effects of this new system. For example, the University could not provide any data on whether the system was producing more dropouts than before, and it was not clear that being able to have this information, or related information, was part of any systematic plan of evaluation. As indicated in section 2 above, this lack of data and effective monitoring affects the ability of the University to monitor effectively both the student experience and the standards of the awards.

### **3.8. Evaluation**

The Team concluded that the overall expression of satisfaction from students during the meetings at Bifröst should not be overlooked. It seems to the team that Bifröst University successfully creates an enjoyable and effective student experience. Bifröst successfully appeals to its target group and creates for them a suitable environment. However, questions were raised on whether the target group is large enough (and will be so in the future) for the University to be sustainable.

Bifröst University successfully involves students in its governance, which results in much happier students who also feel empowered. Students are independent and self-motivated to make the environment suitable for themselves; they seem proud that they can solve their own problems and also both help other students and count on them for assistance.

The new modular system is hard to comment on, as it is so new. It is clear that it still needs some improvement, but it also appeared to the team to contain very positive qualities that are particularly suitable for BU students. The team is, however, concerned that the university does not seem to have a plan on how to effectively evaluate the system.

The team felt that the voice of distance learners not living on campus was missing in the Reflective Analysis and in the Team's visit to BU. Also, the team would have liked to get more data on graduated students and their destinations and experiences after graduation. It is not clear how much of this information on

graduated students is available to the University in a useful way. In fact, the Team was not aware of any systematic evidence on graduation rates or destinations, which was available to the University to assist it in its policy development and monitoring.

## **4. Managing enhancement**

### **4.1. Background to managing enhancement**

It is clear that there is much development work ongoing within the University and that this development work is potentially informed by a number of structures and processes, including:

1. The implementation of the strategic plan and the mission statement of the University under the direction of the Rector.
2. Progression of academic business development and efficiency agendas, including new programmes of study, accommodating the changing balance between distance-learning and on-campus student numbers, and the introduction of the new modular system.
3. Outcomes of Subject-Level Reviews and other periodic reviews of standards and awards, including the institution-level review itself.
4. Issues raised by the student body, through student feedback, or through the work of committees including the Academic Council, the Bifröst University Quality Board and the Education and Research Board.

The review team is aware that the University is going through a period of transition and considerable change. Many activities are running in parallel. Subject-Level Reviews have very recently been completed for all three Departments, and these each capture a number of priorities for further

development, which (to a significantly variable extent) define actions, and assign responsible individuals and timelines.

The Reflective Analysis in section 4.5 presented a distillation of these actions by the Executive Board in February 2015, with a view to identifying key Enhancement Projects to be undertaken in the future (The team notes that the Executive Board is advisory, with the decision made by the Rector). The Review Team would note that a number of these projects are related to securing core quality assurance processes, systems and responsibilities, rather than relating to enhancement of the student experience per se.

The Review Team is also aware that a broader range of circa 100 quality-related actions has also been developed in September 2014 across all of the academic and support functions of the University. While all of the above is commendable, it was less clear to the Review Team how progress on these actions was going to be monitored moving forward, and which individuals or committees would have primary responsibility for overall monitoring.

The Reflective Analysis states in section 4.1 that “the Quality Assurance system at Bifröst University aims at a clear structure and demarcation of duties. Bifröst University seeks to carry out its quality management in an open and transparent manner with a view to enhance the academic quality of teaching, learning and research on a continuous basis” and “Responsibility for Quality affairs within each Department rests with the head of Department”.

The Team noted the University’s intention to evaluate the new modular system, both in terms of student and staff feedback, as a positive feature, and notes that surveys have been conducted. However, much of that current feedback was captured in an informal manner within Departments and planning was unclear in terms of the formal processes that would broaden the types of information gathered and manage and make use of these evaluations.

Similarly, there is to date somewhat limited evidence of reflection on progress against the outcomes of earlier evaluations, or indeed clarity about how all

evaluations are formally drawn together to identify institutional priorities. However, beginnings of the distillation of common themes arising from Subject-Level Reviews, and indeed the approach taken by all Departments in recent reviews by reflecting on earlier strategies and progress against these, is indicative of such approaches developing within the University. The development is early and uneven, and the team encourages a more deliberate approach on the part of the University.

The University also identifies (in section 2.2 of the Reflective Analysis) a number of 'benchmark' institutions that it identified, in 2011, as being of interest in a number of areas of operational development or enhancement of curriculum or other activity. Although this activity potentially represents good practice in terms of enhancement, the University acknowledges that it has not yet taken significant steps in following this up, and neither is it explicit in the Reflective Analysis how this relates to specific current priorities within Bifröst University itself. This is perhaps again indicative of the need for the development of a more formal strategy and plan for enhancement.

Notwithstanding the above comments, it is clear from the Team's meetings with key University staff that, across the breadth of its current operation and planning processes, the University is demonstrating a significant level of self-awareness of the challenges and opportunities that it faces and is formulating an appropriate range of developments and enhancement activities to address these. The review team would, however, again emphasise the need for these actions to be prioritised, monitored against set targets or outcomes by appropriate senior groups, and progress reviewed on a regular basis at an institutional level by specified accountable bodies.

#### **4.2. Academic enhancement: learning and teaching**

The relevant section (4.2) of the Reflective Analysis deals in a large part with underlying quality assurance or management processes rather than with enhancement of curriculum or student experience per se. This is unfortunate, as there are significant examples of enhancement activity within the University.

All individuals that the Review Team met demonstrated a strong understanding of and commitment to the Bifröst ethos, of its particular model and of the student population it aimed to serve. Staff were clearly able to articulate the specific features of the student body that they were engaging with and both the benefits and challenges of teaching such a body of learners, whilst at the same time focusing on the needs of each student as an individual. Students, governors, alumni and external stakeholders were equally supportive of the University's model and mission.

Students that the Review Team met with very clearly articulated support for the Bifröst model, in particular the residential on-campus experience, but also their experiences of distance learning, and of the University Gateway programme as an effective articulation route into higher education. Students were positive in general about the opportunities that Bifröst offered students, many of whom were coming from non-traditional backgrounds, from remote and rural communities or who are 'second chancers' re-engaging with study after earlier failure to enter or progress within higher education.

Students stated that the campus provides a focused environment, without the complications and distractions of the city, with more interactions with faculty while providing a family-friendly and supportive community. The supportive campus environment clearly allows students to concentrate on their studies, especially students taking non-traditional routes through higher education or those with family commitments, helping them not only with academic development but also with personal development. Indeed, the opportunity for personal development was seen by students as a key additional benefit of living on campus as part of the student community.

Students appreciated the 'open-door' policy that they reported as operating in all areas from the Rector down to student support services, and indicated no issues with being able to access support or voice concerns in relation to any aspect of their student experience. The student experience is further enhanced by an undoubtedly strong and mutually supportive student community within Bifröst,

helped perhaps by the relatively small student body, its relative maturity in terms of average student age and the isolation of the campus. Students reported a number of initiatives to enhance the social experience on campus including family events, equipment of the gym facility and the development of a dedicated entrepreneurial space for students. They also noted that the Departments had funding available to support student activities that students could apply for.

The University acknowledges that a key challenge being faced is a historic downturn in student numbers on campus. Student numbers are rising again, and the University has put targets for growth in place at an institutional level, but much of this growth may be achieved through distance-learning rather than on-campus study. This raises a number of challenges and opportunities.

The University is moving to more extensive use of technology to support delivery, and in particular the recording of formal lectures and use of the 'flipped classroom' approach to delivery. Both distance and on-campus students expressed support for and (on balance) positive experiences of the use of recorded materials in this way. Distance-learning students (or those who had previously studied by this mode) indicated that in many cases this was how they had studied in the past in any case, so the transition was not a significant one for them. Staff were generally positive about the change, and enthusiastic about the use of innovative and technology-enhanced approaches to teaching, although there seems to be more reluctance within the Department of Law than the other Departments to move down this route.

This change in delivery is part of a shift to a new modular system presented extensively in the Reflective Analysis. The modular system is in large part aimed at making the co-delivery of curriculum to on-campus and distance learning students more sustainable and operationally efficient, and to improve comparability of learner experience on the two modes of study. To this end, the duration of modules, the number of modules being studied concurrently, channels for distance-learning students to communicate with staff, and enhancement of "term projects", were also reviewed. The reinforcement of



projects and group work within the model appeared to be pervasive, and also both motivating and practical from a student perspective

For a relatively small institution this is an ambitious project, which seems to have been driven forward primarily by a small group of staff, including the Vice-Rector, the Head of Student Support and the Heads of Department. Although student experience of the new model does seem to be positive, there was a generally held, and quite strong view from the students, that they had not been adequately informed about the changes. It was suggested that the team would have received quite different feedback from the students had the review taken place earlier in the academic year. Plans for the ongoing evaluation of the new modular system, by both staff and students, are noted in the Reflective Analysis and it will be important for the University to ensure that this evaluation does indeed occur and leads to any necessary refinements in the model, or to the necessary underpinning staff or student support, and that communication with staff and students around further developments is carefully managed.

Staff, for example, indicated some concern about the suitability of the MySchool platform for delivery of the IT-facilitated elements of the curriculum and interaction with students (although this view was not expressed by the students). IT technical staff confirmed the concern, but said that MySchool may be fit for purpose as an all-round system. The University intends to have one further review of MySchool functionality before considering any potential change of platform. The team finds this a reasonable response, given the cost in funds, staffing, time, and disruption in employing a new system. However, if MySchool cannot be made to respond satisfactorily to give the University the support and information it needs for teachers, students, administrative ease, and data for evaluation, then the University should develop a systematic plan to migrate to a new, more robust system.

Significant growth in Distance Learning, while enhancing flexibility and opportunity for study, will have a number of other consequences for the University. Students articulated very strongly the benefit of on-campus study for reasons outlined earlier. When asked what was the one thing they would change

about the University, they were unanimous in stating growth of on-campus numbers (and in fact presented some ideas for achieving this). Growth in off-campus cohorts has the potential to erode one of the features seen by students as most significantly enhancing their learning, and the University will have to consider how it can reconcile this issue. The Review Team met several students who had initially studied by distance learning (often as part of the University Gateway programme) but who had elected to relocate to the campus after visiting it and discussing the benefits with other students, and being persuaded of the added value that on-campus study presented. It also seemed clear that the study weekends, which form a core part of the distance learning experience, are both academically and socially beneficial to the students, including the on-campus students. The University may wish to consider how these events and other initiatives might help to strengthen a sense of student community that spans both cohorts.

The study weekends raise another, less-positive, issue in relation to the students who cannot for various reasons attend these, or who choose not to do so. This leads to non-equivalence in the learning experience, further distances these students from the social benefits of learning, and places demands on staff time in setting up bespoke arrangements for individual students in order to cover the necessary work. The University should consider strategies for addressing this issue as its numbers of distance-learning students increases. Similarly the demand on staff time in dealing with online communication from students may become an issue and the University may wish to consider how best it might manage such aspects of support for distance-learning cohorts. Overall, and repeating earlier points, it will be imperative for the University to develop student management information and feedback systems that allow it to robustly monitor student outcomes and satisfaction within specific cohorts, including by mode of study.

The Review Team were also presented with the view that the student cohorts were themselves 'blended' i.e that distance-learning and on-campus students were a single cohort, not separate cohorts, and that future strategy may be towards synchronous delivery of scheduled (non-recorded) classes to all

students on and off-campus using video conferencing. If this is indeed an emerging strategy, the team would suggest that the University fully considers the advantages and disadvantages of such an approach, and whether or not it is pedagogically beneficial, robust and sustainable.

One further consequence of the 'flipped classroom' approach that students reported was that many courses were being delivered by staff who themselves were off-campus for much of the time. So, in effect, on-campus students were studying by distance learning and access to staff for face to face meetings was reportedly limited, and had to be arranged through communication with the staff member rather than being scheduled. This is not in itself necessarily an issue given the University's commitment to the distance delivery model, and indeed it arguably enhances the curriculum if it allows teaching contribution from a broader staff base without the constraints of location. However, it is another example of how the on-campus experience may change as a consequence of curriculum strategy that the University may have to reflect on alongside student expectations.

Given the strong links between professional practice/theory and teaching in many areas of the University's staff base and its curriculum (which in some respects balances those areas of the curriculum where staff engagement in primary research is relatively limited), the review team found it slightly surprising that entrepreneurship and employability, including work placement and internships, were not reported by students as being key elements of the curriculum design or of active support from the University. However, no students reported this as a concern and most seemed confident about their career prospects upon completion of their course, indeed many graduates were reported to have secured graduate employment opportunities prior to completing their studies, so this may be an issue of student perception rather than reality. However, noting certain aspects of the Bifröst mission statement of the type of graduates it seeks to produce, and the links with industry that it is seeking to develop, this would seem to be a lost opportunity for the University in promoting the added value it provides. Clear data on embedding

entrepreneurship or on graduate destinations was certainly not evident during the review.

In addition to the review of the modular system, there was clear evidence of development of new programmes of study, including BA in Food Business Administration, MSc in Leadership and Management, and MA in International Political Economy, MA in Cultural Management, the development of an International Summer School (from 2016) and a joint initiative at graduate level in Law being discussed with two European partner Universities. In discussion with the Rector, the Team was happy that, although such initiatives arise from within Departments, the strategic and business cases for such developments at an institutional level were given due consideration. Such developments have the potential to underpin the required growth in student numbers but also to enhance study progression opportunities for students and to enhance the internationalisation of the University's activities. Bifröst University may also consider investing resources in resolving some of the challenges with its existing programmes and processes and structures (as noted in this review) before heavily investing resources in development and launch of new programmes.

### **4.3. Academic staff**

This short section of the Reflective Analysis (4.3) acknowledges the willingness of the staff to embrace innovation in teaching methods that was also clear to the Review Team. The benefits of this are well considered in other sections of the Reflective Analysis in terms of curriculum sustainability, new markets and the implementation of the new modular system.

There is a reported need and desire to increase the number of staff with Ph.D.'s and with an interest in academic research. The Review Team would support this goal, but the University needs to express how such a shift in staff profile would enhance curriculum and learner experience. The direct links between research and teaching are areas of weakness within the institution. The Team was also unclear as to the formal link, if any, between staff recruitment or professional

development strategies, and priorities for curriculum growth or enhancement. If these links are in place it was unclear to the Team how they are managed.

The formulation of a Bifröst employee policy and the development of staff web pages on the Bifröst website was evaluated positively. Again, in the context of the review, it would be helpful for the University to articulate how these actions will enhance curriculum and student experience.

Section 4.1 of the Reflective Analysis also makes reference to an agreement with the University of Iceland on evaluation of academic staff on the same basis as that carried out by the public universities in Iceland. Again it is unclear from the Reflective Analysis precisely what enhancements of academic output or student experience are being sought through this development.

As noted earlier, the staff of the University were all highly supportive of its mission and ethos, and on balance, of the direction of travel now being pursued by the University leadership. Two general points were raised on more than one occasion however:

1. In some operational or curricular areas it was perceived that the rate of staff turnover led to the risk of a loss of 'cultural memory' within the institution which could be to the detriment of efficient ongoing institutional development.
2. There was a perception within the staff that there was insufficient representation of academic experience within the Executive and Non-Executive leadership of the University to an extent potentially at odds with its primary mission as a University.

The team offers no views on these matters, but the University may wish to reflect on whether or not they have significance given the rate, volume and nature of change being taken forward at this time, and the capacity of the institution to absorb and benefit from the changes.

One further matter that staff raised repeatedly was the ongoing discussions around the potential alignment of activities between Bifröst University and two other Icelandic HE institutions. Again it would not be the place of the team to offer any specific comment on these discussions. However we would note that in some respects the discussions may be or may become a distraction for staff who should be focusing on key developments within Bifröst University, and also that the discussion as far as it was reported to the team has to date been largely political and has not involved a detailed evaluation of any potential benefits or disadvantages that such alignment might, directly or indirectly, generate for staff and/or students. The team understands that the discussions were initiated by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, and hopes they can be conducted without becoming a distraction for the University or having an adverse impact on its operations.

#### **4.4. Support Services**

The Library appears well stocked and appointed and offers, along with other dedicated rooms, appropriate study space for students on campus.

Developments of the University website are planned to further support learners in accessing the physical and e-resources that are available.

Student counselling is available at Bifröst where there is appropriate space for meetings between students and counsellors and at the University offices in Reykjavik by arrangement.

IT services provide technical support to both students and staff and also training for staff (through scheduled seminars and on request) in the use of MySchool and development tools for blended curriculum. The Team notes that with the transition to more on-line teaching, the University will need to ensure that it has sufficient IT staff to support teachers, students, and administrative functions of its electronic resources.

Students and staff all indicated satisfaction with the support services relevant to their needs and indicated that they knew where help could be obtained when

needed, although there was an indication that distance learning students could be less pro-active in seeking help than those on-campus. The learning weekends provide an opportunity for students to access support, and IT services indicated that they deliberately made themselves visible during the learning weekends to facilitate this. The students suggested that clearer indications of who to approach for particular types of problems would be beneficial, rather than relying on word of mouth or the 'open-door' policy.

All support services stated an aspiration to provide the same level and range of support services to distance learning as to on-campus students, but there is as yet little evidence of the use of data to evaluate service provision and student satisfaction.

The Reflective Analysis indicates that work on the development of a Bifröst University Records Management Policy has now been initiated, as part of the implementation of records management at the University that started formally in April 2014. The team would encourage the University to view the full implementation of records management and the effective use of the data collected as a key priority, given the essential nature of these data for evaluation of and reflection on a number of key enhancement agendas.

#### **4.5. Subject-level reviews**

The team notes the recent successful completion of Subject-Level Reviews for all Departments and the intended actions arising from these. The team commends the University and its staff for their full engagement in this part of the quality framework and for aligning elements of the emerging institutional enhancement activity with the themes arising from Subject-Level Reviews. It will be interesting for the University to use this first cycle of Subject-Level Reviews as a baseline from which to fully reflect on and evaluate the impact of enhancement over the coming years. Here, the team again notes that the reviews were conducted late in the cycle. The Team would encourage the University to ensure that it follows through systematically with the outcomes of these reviews.

## **4.6. Alumni**

The Team met a small number of alumni and was impressed with their commitment to the University and the positive experiences of their studies that they related. We are aware that the Alumnus Society is making good progress as a fund-raising body, partly to help with the refurbishment of those parts of the Bifröst campus where this is becoming necessary. The alumni are important ambassadors for the University, and in real terms part of the wider student community that is such a strong feature of the institution, and we would encourage the University to explore all possible ways of working with the alumni, not only to support the University's interests but also to support current students and particularly their transition out of study and into the world of work.



## 5. Conclusion

The Review Team is very grateful to the Rector, staff and students of Bifröst University for their cooperation during the review process and wishes to acknowledge explicitly the awareness that the institution has of many of the key issues raised in this report. Indeed, some of the information on the key points was reinforced by communication with the Rector. The University is in a period of rapid change. New programmes have been added, and a modular system merging the delivery of campus-based and distance education has been implemented. Enrolment has increased. It appeared to the Team that Bifröst University successfully creates an enjoyable and effective student experience. Bifröst University successfully appeals to its target group and creates for them a suitable environment. Bifröst University successfully involves students in its governance, which results in much happier students, who also feel empowered. The new modular system is hard to comment on, as it is so new. It is clear that it still needs some improvement, but it also appeared to the Team to contain very positive qualities that are particularly suitable for Bifröst University students.

While the Bifröst University Reflective Analysis and its Quality Handbook outline a structure for safeguarding standards, the operation is challenged by four factors. First, the quality system is relatively new and therefore largely untested. As described above, Bifröst University is operationally reinventing itself, given the historic decline in enrolment, the move to the modular system, and the significant financial challenges it faces. Also, Bifröst University has multiple, potentially confusing, governing bodies with considerable overlapping membership. Second, Bifröst University operates with very little useful data.

Third, the University lacks formal plans. Under the leadership of the Rector, the University has affirmed its central mission, confirmed its niche as providing access generally to somewhat older students, articulated its values (initiative, cooperation, and responsibility), and laid out a general strategy for the future. While Bifröst University has identified a strong list of areas that need attention, the lack of formalized planning decreases the likelihood that the most important improvements will be made in a timely manner. Fourth, the University should

restructure its rules and policies regarding recruitment, development, and evaluation of new faculty. In this regard, the University should focus attention on increasing the proportion of faculty with Ph.D's through a formal structured process of hiring new faculty staff who can help build the research capacity of the institution.

In concluding this section, the Team would highlight its concern regarding the limited confidence that can be held in the institution's ability to manage the standards of awards. Given the implementation of an appropriate action plan to address the key issues highlighted in this report, (many of which the University is already aware of and seeking to address), we could look forward to upgrading to a judgment of "confidence", as outlined in the Quality Enhancement Handbook for Icelandic Higher Education.

In particular, the Team wishes to commend the following strengths and elements of good practice:

- Staff, students and the Board of Governors all demonstrated a strong commitment to the Bifröst University ethos.
- Bifröst University demonstrates a clear self-awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of the institution and of the challenges that need to be addressed.
- Bifröst University has an openness to using innovative approaches and new technology to ensure that the curriculum is sustainable and fit for purpose.
- The project-driven pedagogy and opportunity to work in groups appeared to be pervasive and found motivating and practical by students.
- There is considerable evidence of linkage between teaching and practice.
- There are fora for staff to work together on a cross-institutional basis to share practice and jointly address issues.

- Students and faculty work collaboratively on a regular basis.
- The student voice is well represented in all important bodies, and students reporting that their voice is both heard and receives rapid responses. This is all reinforced by an open door policy from the Rector down.
- Students regularly support each other, complementing the University's support.
- The supportive environment allows students to concentrate on their studies, especially students taking non-traditional routes through higher education, helping them not only with academic development but also personal development.
- The campus environment, which students valued for several reasons. It provides a focused environment without the complications and distractions of the city, more interactions with faculty, and a family-friendly and supportive community.
- The use of the Gateway program is effective in managing admissions for non-standard applicants.
- The University exhibits a focus on each student as an individual from the application process and onwards.
- Bifröst University describes clearly, and publicly, available course content and learning outcomes for its academic programmes which are reviewed and approved by their Academic council.
- The Subject-Level Reviews were completed successfully allowing the University to identify and work on areas of improvement.

As the University continues to refine its practice in the management of quality and standards, the Team would ask the University to consider:

- 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 Reflective Analysis that was largely descriptive and lacked analysis.
- Although benchmark institutions have been identified, little practical use has been made of them or systematic data gathered on them.
- The evaluation and development of the modular system did not appear to be underpinned by effective systematic planning.
- 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.
- 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.
- A lack of clear data on the employment of graduates or embedding of entrepreneurship.
- The quantity of research varies considerably among departments, and overall the link between teaching and research could be improved.
- 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 in light of the low number of academic staff that possess doctoral degrees.

. 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.

In closing the Review, the Team concludes that:

- Limited Confidence can be placed in the soundness of Bifröst University's present arrangements to secure the academic standards of its awards. Given the implementation of an appropriate action plan to address the key issues highlighted in this report, (many of which the University is already aware of and seeking to address), we could look forward to upgrading to a judgment of "confidence". **See note below.**
- Confidence can be placed in the soundness of Bifröst University's present and likely future arrangements to secure the quality of the student learning experience.

Following publication of this report, there was a series of very positive and productive interactions and follow-up activities between Bifröst University and the Quality Board. Following agreed procedures, this resulted in the publication of a follow-up report as an Annex to this original report. The follow-up report concluded that:

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

The Annex is available at:

<https://en.rannis.is/starfsemi/gaedarad/quality-enhancement-framework/review-reports/>

# Appendix I

## Schedule for Bifröst University Visit, March 24-27, 2015

### Review Team

- Jean-Marie Hombert, Quality Board Member, Director of Research, Institute of Human Sciences, University of Lyon, Committee Chair;
- Barbara Brittingham, Quality Board Member, Director, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Co-chair;
- Crichton Lang, Deputy Principal, University of Highlands and Islands, Scotland;
- Bengt Ove-Boström, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University of Gothenburg;
- Dóra Haraldsdóttir, Student Representative

### Rannís

- Þorsteinn Gunnarsson, Manager of the Quality Board
- Lilja Steinunn Jónsdóttir, Project Manager

**March 24, 2015**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Meet with</b>	<b>Bifröst attendees</b>
9:00 – 12:30	Team training at Rannís	
12:30 – 1:30	Lunch	
1:45 – 4:00	Team visits Reykjavík office of Bifröst University	Dr. Magnús Árni Skjöld Magnússon, Associate Professor Dr. Eiríkur Bergmann, Professor Dr. Francesco Macheda Gunnar Sigvaldason, Adjunct Professor Dr. Njörður Sigurjónsson, Associate Professor
4:00 – 6:00	Transport from Reykjavík to Bifröst	
6:30 – 7:15	Guided tour on Bifröst Campus	Dr. Vilhjálmur Egilsson, Rector
7:15 – 9:00	Dinner: Team and Bifröst group	Dr. Vilhjálmur Egilsson, Rector
9:00 – 9:30	Team meeting	

## March 25, 2015

Time	Meet with	Bifröst attendees
9:00 – 11:00	Bifröst University time at their discretion	<p>Dr. Vilhjálmur Egilsson, Rector, Brynjar Þór Þorsteinsson, Director of Marketing and Communications, Helga Kristín Auðunsdóttir, Head of the Department of Law Hulda Ingibjörg Rafnarsdóttir, Director of Preparatory Studies Magnús Smári Snorrason, Director of Continuing Education Dr. Ólafur Ísleifsson, Director of Quality Dr. Páll Rafnar Þorsteinsson, Head of Department of Social Sciences Sigrún Jónsdóttir, Director of Academic Services Sigurður Ragnarsson, Head of the Department of Business Þorvaldur T. Jónsson, Director of Finance</p>
11:00 – 11:30	Meeting with Executive Board	<p>Dr. Vilhjálmur Egilsson, Rector Brynjar Þór Þorsteinsson, Director of Marketing and Communications, Helga Kristín Auðunsdóttir, Head of the Department of Law Hulda Ingibjörg Rafnarsdóttir, Director of Preparatory Studies Magnús Smári Snorrason, Director of Continuing Education Dr. Ólafur Ísleifsson, Director of Quality</p>



		<p>Dr. Páll Rafnar Þorsteinsson, Head of Department of Social Sciences</p> <p>Sigrún Jónsdóttir, Director of Academic Services</p> <p>Sigurður Ragnarsson, Head of the Department of Business</p> <p>Þorvaldur T. Jónsson, Director of Finance</p>
11:45 – 12:15	Meeting with University Council	<p>Dr. Vilhjálmur Egilsson, Rector</p> <p>Björn Líndal Traustason, Student Representative</p> <p>Guðmundur Ólafsson, Assistant Professor</p> <p>Guðrún Erna Hafsteinsdóttir, Student Representative</p> <p>Halla Tinna Arnardóttir, Staff Representative</p> <p>Hallgrímur Tómasson, Student Representative</p> <p>Hallur Jónasson, Student Representative</p> <p>Jóhannes B. Pétursson, Student Representative</p> <p>Jón Freyr Jóhannsson, Adjunct</p> <p>Jónas Halldór Sigurðsson, Student Representative</p> <p>Dr. Sigrún Lilja Einarsdóttir, Assistant Professor</p>
12:15 – 1:00	Lunch	
1:00 – 1:30	Meeting with Education and Research Board	<p>Dr. Magnús Árni Skjöld Magnússon, Associate Professor</p> <p>Auður H. Ingólfssdóttir, Assistant Professor</p> <p>Ástráður Haraldsson, Associate Professor</p>

		<p>Einar Svansson, Assistant Professor</p> <p>Geirlaug Jóhannsdóttir, Adjunct Professor</p> <p>Helga Kristín Auðunsdóttir, Head of the Department of Law</p> <p>Dr. Ingólfur Arnarson, Assistant Professor</p> <p>Jón Freyr Jóhannsson, Adjunct Professor</p> <p>Dr. Páll Rafnar Þorsteinsson, Head of Department of Social Sciences</p> <p>Sigurður Ragnarsson, Head of the Department of Business</p>
1:45 – 2:15	Meeting with Academic Council	<p>Maj-Britt Hjördís Briem, Adjunct Professor and Project Manager of the Education and Research Board</p> <p>Berglind Guðmundsdóttir, Student Representative</p> <p>Helga Kristín Auðunsdóttir, Head of the Department of Law</p> <p>Hulda Ingibjörg Rafnarsdóttir, Director of Preparatory Studies</p> <p>Ólöf Hildur Gísladóttir, Student Representative</p> <p>Dr. Páll Rafnar Þorsteinsson, Head of Department of Social Sciences</p> <p>Sigrún Jónsdóttir, Director of Academic Services</p> <p>Sigurður Ragnarsson, Head of the Department of Business</p>

2:30 – 3:00	Meeting with the Quality Board	Stefán Kalmansson, Adjunct Professor and Chairman of the Quality Board Berglind Guðmundsdóttir, Student Representative Kári Joensen, Assistant Professor Dr. Magnús Árni Skjöld Magnússon, Associate Professor Maj Britt Hjördís Briem, Adjunct Professor Ólöf Hildur Gísladóttir, Student Representative Svanberg Halldórsson, Student Representative Dr. Ólafur Ísleifsson, Director of Quality
3:15 – 4:00	Meeting with Faculty (who teach on-campus and distance education students. At Bifröst, on-campus teaching and distance education is integrated).	Ari Karlsson part time lecturer Dr. Francesco Macheda, part time lecturer Guðrún Sesselja Arnardóttir, part time lecturer Kári Joensen, Assistant Professor Dr. Magnús Árni Skjöld Magnússon, Associate Professor Dr. Njörður Sigurjónsson, Associate Professor Dr. Sigrún Gunnarsdóttir, Associate Professor Dr. Sigrún Lilja Einarsdóttir, Assistant Professor Þórir Páll Guðjónsson, Lecturer and Project Manager
4:15 – 4:45	Meeting with Distance Education and Support Services	Halldóra Lóa Þorvaldsdóttir, educational and vocational counsellor Hjalti R. Benediktsson, LMS Manager

		<p>Hulda Ingibjörg Rafnarsdóttir, Director of Preparatory Studies</p> <p>Jón Freyr Jóhannsson, Adjunct Professor</p> <p>Sigrún Jónsdóttir, Director of Academic Services</p> <p>Sigurður Kristófersson, System Administrator</p> <p>Þórný Hlynsdóttir, University Librarian</p>
5:00 – 5:30	Meeting with Board of Governors	<p>Guðsteinn Einarsson, Chairman of the Board</p> <p>Björn Bjarki Þorsteinsson, Board Member</p> <p>Ingibjörg Ingvadóttir, Board Member</p> <p>Leifur Runólfsson, Board Member</p> <p>Marteinn Jónsson, Board Member</p>
5:45 – 6:15	Meeting with Alumni and External Stakeholders	<p>Guðrún Björg Aðalsteinsdóttir, Rector, Borgarnes College</p> <p>Leifur Runólfsson, Attorney at Law</p> <p>Signý Óskarsdóttir, Principal, Borgarnes Primary School</p>
6:30 – 7:00	Team meeting: What have we learned? Who do we want to see tomorrow?	
7:00 – 7:15	Meeting with the Rector for feedback and requests for the next day	<p>Dr. Vilhjálmur Egilsson, Rector</p> <p>Dr. Ólafur Ísleifsson, Director of Quality</p>

**March 26, 2015**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Meet with</b>	<b>Bifröst attendees</b>
8:30 – 8:50	Meeting with undergraduate students	<p><b>Graduate studies</b></p> <p>Law: Hafdís Hrönn Hafsteinsdóttir Björn Líndal Traustason</p> <p>Business Studies: Svanberg Halldórsson Guðrún Erna Hafsteinsdóttir</p> <p>PPE: Gauti Skúlason</p>
8:50 – 9:15	Meeting with graduate students	<p><b>Master's studies</b></p> <p>Law: Þórunn Unnur Birgisdóttir Andri Björgvin Arnþórsson</p> <p>International Political Economy: Helga Margrét Friðriksdóttir Candice Michelle Goddard</p> <p>Leadership and Management: Hallur Jónasson Sæunn Tamar</p>
9:30 – 10:00	Distance education students	<p>Helga Margrét Friðriksdóttir Candice Michelle Goddard Hallur Jónasson Sæunn Tamar</p>
10.15 – 10:45	Elected student leaders and representatives	<p>Snorri Guðmundsson Aðalheiður Bj Sigurdórsdóttir Andri Már Ágústsson</p>

		Ívar Örn Þráinsson Arnar Snær Pétursson Elín Eva Lúðvíksdóttir Hjörtur Benjamín Halldórsson  Jóna Dóra Ásgeirsdóttir Ólöf Hildur Gísladóttir Hallgrímur Tómasson Jóhannes Baldvinsson Berglind Guðmundsson Jónas Halldór Sigurðsson
11:00 – 11:30	Individual meetings with Faculty members	
11:45 – 12:15	Individual meetings with Student members	
12:30 – 2:00	Lunch and team meeting	
2:00 – 4:00	Transport from Bifröst to Reykjavik	
4:00 – 4:30	Meeting with the Rector in the Bifröst office in Reykjavik	Vilhjálmur Egilsson, Rector Ólafur Ísleifsson, Director of Quality
4:45 – 6:45	Team meeting at Rannis	

**March 27, 2015**

<b>Time</b>	
Various	Team members depart Iceland