

INSTITUTION-WIDE REVIEW

University of Akureyri

May 2022

Preface

This is the report of an Institution-Wide Review of the University of Akureyri undertaken at the behest of the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education under the authority of the Icelandic Government.

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

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

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

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

Dr Andrée Surssock
Chair

Dr Sigurður Óli Sigurðsson
Manager

Contents

Table of Contents

PREFACE	2
GLOSSARY AND LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	5
TEAM	6
1. INTRODUCTION: THE REVIEW IN CONTEXT	7
1.1. OVERVIEW OF REVIEW PROCESS	7
1.2. ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY	8
1.3. FUNDING AND RESOURCES	9
1.4. STAFF	10
1.5. STUDENTS	11
1.6. KEY COMMITTEE AND MANAGERIAL STRUCTURES	12
1.7. THE REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS	14
1.8. SUMMARY EVALUATION	14
2. LEARNING FROM PREVIOUS REVIEWS	16
2.1. LEARNING FROM PREVIOUS IWR	16
2.2. LEARNINGS FROM SLRS	19
3. MANAGING STANDARDS	21
3.1. POLICIES, STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES RELATED TO THE MANAGEMENT OF STANDARDS	21
3.2. EXTERNAL REFERENCE POINTS AND BENCHMARKS	23
3.3. PROGRAMME PORTFOLIO AND PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT	24
3.4. DESIGN, APPROVAL, MONITORING AND REVIEW OF PROGRAMMES	25
3.5. PROGRAMME DELIVERY	27
3.6. ASSESSMENT POLICIES AND GRADING	28
3.7. STAFF INDUCTION, APPRAISAL AND DEVELOPMENT	31
3.8. THE ROLE OF SLRS IN SAFEGUARDING ACADEMIC STANDARDS	35
3.9. SUMMARY ON SAFEGUARDING STANDARDS	36
4. STUDENT LEARNING EXPERIENCE	40
4.1. OVERVIEW: UNIVERSITY'S MANAGEMENT OF QUALITY OF STUDENT LEARNING EXPERIENCE	40
4.2. RELEVANCE OF CASE STUDY TO ENHANCING THE STUDENT LEARNING EXPERIENCE	40
4.3. RESOURCES FOR ENHANCING THE STUDENT LEARNING EXPERIENCE	42
4.4. STUDENT RECRUITMENT AND INDUCTION	43
4.5. THE STUDENT VOICE AND ENGAGEMENT OF STUDENTS IN QUALITY ASSURANCE	45
4.6. STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES	47
4.7. STUDENT-CENTRED LEARNING, TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT	48
4.8. USE OF SESSIONAL TEACHERS	49
4.9. THE LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE	50
4.10. INTERNATIONALISATION	51
4.11. LINKS BETWEEN RESEARCH AND TEACHING	52
4.12. POSTGRADUATE PROGRAMMES	52
4.13. COLLABORATIVE PROVISION	54
4.14. SERVING THE NEEDS OF DIFFERENT STUDENT POPULATIONS	55
4.15. MANAGEMENT OF INFORMATION	56
4.16. PUBLIC INFORMATION	57

4.17. USING SLRS TO ENHANCE THE STUDENT LEARNING EXPERIENCE	58
4.18. SUMMARY EVALUATION OF THE QUALITY OF THE STUDENT LEARNING EXPERIENCE	60
5. MANAGEMENT OF RESEARCH	64
5.1. RESEARCH POLICY AND STRATEGY	64
5.2. MONITORING OF SCIENTIFIC QUALITY OF OUTPUTS.....	65
5.3. EXTERNAL SUPPORT	66
5.4. IMPACT	67
5.5. INSTITUTIONAL ENHANCEMENT OF RESEARCH MANAGEMENT	68
5.6. BENCHMARKS	69
5.7. COLLABORATION	70
5.8. TEACHING-RESEARCH BALANCE	71
5.9. SUPPORT FOR GRANT-CAPTURE ACTIVITIES AND GRANT MANAGEMENT	73
5.10. SUMMARY ON THE MANAGEMENT OF RESEARCH	74
6. MANAGING ENHANCEMENT	75
6.1. GENERAL ENHANCEMENT CONTEXT	75
6.2. STRATEGIC PLANNING AND ACTION PLANNING.....	76
6.3. COMMITTEE STRUCTURE.....	78
6.4. EVIDENCE BASE.....	79
6.5. BENCHMARKS AND INTERNAL SHARING OF BEST PRACTICE	81
6.6. DRAWING ON INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE AND DOMESTIC COOPERATION.....	81
6.7. EVALUATION	82
7. CONCLUSION.....	82
7.1. GENERAL SUMMARY, INCLUDING OVERVIEW OF MANAGEMENT OF RESEARCH	82
7.2. SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS.....	84
7.3. SUMMARY OF AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT.....	85
7.4. JUDGEMENT ON MANAGING STANDARDS OF DEGREES AWARDED.	86
7.5. JUDGEMENT ON QUALITY OF THE STUDENT LEARNING EXPERIENCE.	86
ANNEX 1: VISIT SCHEDULE	87

Glossary and List of Abbreviations

CTL. Centre for Teaching and Learning.

ECTS. European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System.

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

IRIS. Icelandic Research Information System.

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

LMS. Learning Management System.

QEF. Quality Enhancement Framework for Icelandic Higher Education.

QEF1. First cycle of the Quality Enhancement Framework for Icelandic Higher Education, 2011-2015.

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

RA. Reflective Analysis produced by the Iceland University of the Arts in preparation for the IWR.

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

Team

The following experts comprised the Team:

Kimberly Bogle Jubinville, Chair. Chief Academic Officer and Senior Vice President of Academic Quality, Accreditation and Support, Southern New Hampshire University.

Alan Davidson. International Higher Education Quality Assurance consultant. Former Dean of the Department for Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Assessment, Robert Gordon University.

Taina Pihlajaniemi. Vice Rector/Vice President (Research), University of Oulu.

Sandra Kristín Jónasdóttir. Postgraduate Student, University of Iceland.

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

1. Introduction: The Review in Context

1.1. Overview of review process

The Institution-Wide Review of the University of Akureyri (the University) in the second cycle of the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF2) took place virtually from Sunday, November 21, 2021 through Friday, November 26, 2021, with the report published on May 20.

A Reflective Analysis (RA) was submitted by the University in September of 2021 for the purposes of the review and included QEF2 Subject-Level Reviews (SLRs) for several faculties and doctoral studies. The University provided the Review Team (the Team) access to materials throughout the preparation for the visit, as well as during the visit, shared through a One Drive® file. This information was then referenced, along with the documentation provided by the University, in preparing this report. In the previous QEF Cycle (QEF1), the University participated in IWR in 2014 and implemented SLRs during 2015 – 2018.

The present review followed procedures outlined in the 2nd edition of the Quality Enhancement Handbook for Icelandic Higher Education¹. As part of the review, the Team undertook a systematic evaluation of evidence of the University's procedures, with reference to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in European Higher Education (ESG), as noted in Annex 11 of the 2nd edition of the Quality Enhancement Handbook for Iceland Higher Education. The full programme of the virtual visit is provided in Annex 1, with the Team's conclusions included in the summaries of Sections 3, 4, 6 & 7.

¹ <https://qef.is/assets/QEF2-Handbook-for-website.pdf>

1.2. About the University

The University of Akureyri was founded in 1987 as the first public University in the North-Eastern part of Iceland. The University lays claim to leadership status in distance education with its Flexible Learning model, which mixes modalities of online and residency requirements/ programmes on campus/location(s). This modality includes face-to face-classes and laboratory sessions at the University or a partner location; clinical and practical placements on-site with industry; and distance education in all programmes.

The University began with programmes in health sciences and industrial management studies and today has expanded into three schools (School of Health Sciences; School of Business and Science; and School of Humanities and Social Sciences) with nine faculties that collectively offer 59 degrees and diplomas. In 2017, the University received accreditation to award doctoral degrees in selected fields of study. The University is the largest public University in Iceland outside of the capital region, and declares leadership status in Arctic Studies across the globe. Today, the University has more than 200 members of academic, administrative and support staff and an enrolment of over 2,500 students across all programmes.

The vision of the University is to be a learning and academic community that actively participates in international and domestic scientific communities. The University plays a key role in promoting its education and research. Through its vision and work, the University has strong ties to the Northern part of Iceland and rural communities and provides access to public education throughout all of Iceland via Flexible Learning. The foundation of the University's strategic

vision/planning is the Flexible Learning model, which has continued to evolve since the University's inception, and is a core element of the strategy of the future.

A goal of the strategic plan for 2018-2023 was for the University to become one of the primary education and research institutes within Iceland, and to be an active participant within the international higher education community. As the University began to develop strategic goals and plans, the pandemic provided an opportunity to shift and re-evaluate strategic goals for 2023, as well as build the foundation for the next strategic planning process.

The University community has been actively involved in the strategic planning process and has embraced the vision of the University to assist in strengthening the Icelandic society in technological innovation in an ever-changing world of societal and environmental challenges. This was articulated in the current work of determining a new organizational structure for Schools and faculties, as a foundational step in the next phase of strategic planning and maintaining the University's focus on Flexible Learning as a modality for the future.

1.3. Funding and resources

The University of Akureyri is a public Icelandic University which receives government allocations as a major source of its funding (77% of total income in recent years). Contributions are, in part, based on the number of full-time equivalent students (FTE's) and have been impacted by what is reportedly a "frozen" allocation model from the Icelandic Government. In Iceland, public universities with a surplus, such as the University of Akureyri, are required to place surplus funding into an account in case the institution faces a deficit at some time.

The University continues to work with the Icelandic Government and within the boundaries of the funding it receives for its operations. The University noted that, in previous years, it has not been fully funded from government allocations as the government allocation per student has not kept up with rising costs. However, it has balanced the budget through operational efficiencies, partnerships, grants and other opportunities. It has continued to record a surplus annually.

The 2017 approval to offer accredited doctoral programmes provided the opportunity for the University to increase funding for research for both students and staff. Admissions policies require that all doctoral students secure funding for at least three years of doctoral studies, and currently staff and students are capitalising on partnerships with corporations, community, and industry partners to increase access to research funding. A continued challenge for the University is the ability to expand access to research funding, given the current public University funding environment in Iceland, and this has been identified as a challenge to the expansion of doctoral programming.

1.4. Staff

The University reported in its RA that the number of permanent staff at the end of 2020 was 202, with 117 academic staff, adjuncts and doctoral students, as well as 85 administrative support staff. Throughout its history, the University has both hired additional staff and decreased the full-time employed staff, based on both enrolments and economic conditions. The Team noted that the University was in the process of hiring additional academic and administrative support staff, with a goal of hiring 30 new positions over 2022 & 2023.

The number of academic staff with doctoral degrees has steadily increased, with 55% (or 60 of 108) of the permanent teaching staff having doctoral degrees, and a little over 20 more are currently pursuing doctoral studies. The University has also been attempting to evaluate and modify hiring practices, with a goal of ensuring gender equality, as only 34% of the current full-time staff at the University is male. The number of sessional staff has increased directly related to enrolment, and the University's desire is to reduce overtime for the full-time staff.

The Equality plan, which has just been redeveloped, provides a foundation for student recruitment, salaries and promotions and compensation across the University. The University has received an equal pay certification from an accredited certification body, noting the adoption and implementation of an Equal Wage Management system.

1.5. Students

The University is the third largest out of seven Icelandic universities in terms of enrolment numbers, with approximately 2,500 enrolled students. Students are distributed across academic programmes and levels, with the largest enrolments being in the School of Health Sciences. The University's students are older than traditional university students, with only 30% of the student population being 24 years or younger. The student body is approximately three-quarters female and the University has cited this as an opportunity, including for the expansion of programming to reach more male students. Most of the student population works at least part-time and has a family, with more than 53% of the Masters students citing, in a recent survey, that they work more than 31 hours a week. These demographics are one of the reasons students choose the University, especially given the comprehensive Flexible Learning approach.

1.6. Key committee and managerial structures

Managerial structure is set by the government, given that the University is a public institution, and the Rector and University Council oversee and set regulations for the University. Regulations are the foundation, framework and management structure of the University. The Team noted that the University was currently in the process of redefining regulations and that adaptations to the regulations were anticipated to lead to reorganisation, particularly of the Schools and departments / faculties. The University noted a goal to adopt the new regulations in the Spring of 2022, with modifications to organisation and structure in place by Fall of 2022, which would then lead to the next strategic planning process.

The University has incorporated both the internal and external communities into strategic planning processes and demonstrated the ability to adapt strategic goals based on identified environmental, economic, and operational opportunities. For example, the pandemic required the University to be able to adapt its strategic goals for the 2018-2023 plan, thus shifting its work to modification and adaptations of regulations. The University has incorporated a continuous review and reflection on the outcomes/achievements of the current and previous strategic plans into their operations and management.

The Rector chairs the University Council, represents the institution externally, manages the institution's financial issues and prepares the annual budget for the University. The Rector is responsible for quality issues and appoints the Director of Quality and Human Resources, who at the University oversees both quality management and Human Resources. With the current strategic planning work and the development of the regulations, the University Council and

Quality Council have assisted the Rector with disseminating information, acquiring feedback and shaping the regulations with input from all academic and administrative teams.

The Director of Quality and Human Resources and her team work with the academic and support departments on standards and management of all internal quality issues. Included is also the development of a comprehensive quality plan, with University-wide dashboards and metrics, as well as framework for quality activities, such as SLRs. The Quality Council includes members across the University, including students, reviews all documentation, and is responsible for the implementation of the University's quality management system. This includes responsibility for evidence for SLRs; process and support of SLRs; and the development of dashboards with Quality Teams. The Director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) is included in the Quality Council; and this link has provided opportunities and support for staff at the University, focusing on future development of both training and support across academic and support staff. The CTL Learning supports faculties and the work of the Quality Council through training; gathering and reporting data; building and launching assessments and rubrics in Canvas®; and many other activities.

The University Assembly is a consultation platform for the academic community and is authorised to make recommendations on University operations, which are then sent to the University Council. Academic provision at the University is organised into three Schools: Health Sciences, Business & Science, and Humanities & Social Sciences. Schools are then divided into faculties, with some faculties having multiple departments. School Assemblies are the highest authority in matters concerning the schools and are responsible, with the Deans, for issues concerning the operations of the Schools.

1.7. The Reflective Analysis

The RA submitted by the University was considered by the Team to be a comprehensive, coherent and well written document that covered all areas necessary to support the Team's preparation for the review visit. The Team noted the open, reflective nature of the document and the number of appropriate and helpful annexes appended to it. Case studies included were relevant and provided a foundation to assist the Team in understanding key activities and characteristics of the University. Additional information requested by the Team, both prior to the visit and during the visit, was provided promptly and completely. The Team found the information and data presented by the University to be clear and relevant.

1.8. Summary evaluation

The Team formed an initial view from the RA that University of Akureyri was a public University in Northern Iceland that serves a large segment of Icelandic students through a diverse model of Flexible Learning. The Flexible Learning model permits students to enrol and complete degrees while residing across Iceland, and internationally, which served both the University and students well during the pandemic, as they were able to further adapt the Flexible Learning model across entire programmes.

The University's establishment of doctoral studies has been deliberate and ensures that students and staff are prepared and able to manage both the workload and progression through the programme and research, which will culminate in an anticipated graduation date for the first doctoral students in 2022. This was explained in detail in the RA and the Team recognised the

University's deliberate expansion of doctoral programmes, understanding that this will continue to be a goal for the University.

The Team approached the virtual visit with a commitment to implement the QEF2 methodology. Throughout the virtual visit, the Team was impressed with the University team and their dedication to students and the review process. Teams representing the University and its stakeholders were engaged in the process and shared their activities, noting how things had changed during the pandemic and what expectations and plans were for continued development and growth in the future. The culture of the University was evident with each group the Team spoke with, echoing their passion for the institution, programmes, and its impact of on the community and across the region. The Team gained a strong sense of commitment to the students and commends the University on its ability to have engagement across both remote and on-site students.

Throughout discussions with both staff and students, the Team quickly identified that work on quality and standards was evident across the University and all stakeholders are involved in the quality review process, as well as the ongoing work to adhere to and develop practices in accordance with the standards. The Team noted that institutional structures and processes continue to be developed and implemented around quality assurance, including evolution of systems and processes. The University has used both this review process and previous experiences with IWR and SLR processes to continue to improve and develop high-quality programming and set strategic goals in alignment with their academic standards.

2. Learning from previous reviews

2.1. Learning from previous IWR

The QEF1 IWR in 2014 resulted in the University receiving confidence in the present and future arrangements to secure the academic standards of its awards and the quality of the student learning experience. The 2014 report cited the following several areas for further development for the University, including:

- Embedding the role and work of the Quality Council more fully within the organisational structures of the University, both strategically and operationally.
- Evaluating, with a view to assuring equivalencies and sharing best practices, the operational and strategic processes utilized within the schools and faculties for the application of institutional policy in quality-related areas.
- Encouraging and promoting further opportunities for collaborative academic endeavours, for both staff and students across faculties and schools.
- Formulating a full strategy and investment plan to address the challenges of the growing provision of distance-learning, building on knowledge and experience across the University, including those embodied in the case study.
- Formulating and making use of an appropriate set of performance indicators relating to student achievement, including Masters degree students.
- Integrating international students more fully within the University's campus life.

The 2014 report noted that the University structure and staff supported a model that incorporated distance education. However the Team highlighted the need for consistency across faculties and schools in the incorporation of distance education into programming. The report noted as well that the University should support academic and support staff through the “systematic development opportunities” related to the changing technological and pedagogical environment of distance learning. A strength noted in the QEF1 report was the University's use of data and evidence in their management enhancement process, as well as the work of the

Quality Council. One recommendation from the report was that the Quality Council share best practices, both internal to the University and from external groups.

In the 2016 Follow-up Report to the QEF1 IWR, the University's Action Plan cites seven categories where issues were raised:

1. Central significant governing and strategic bodies.
2. Support for teachers, distance learning and standardisation of learning resources (Moodle).
3. Difficulties of communication and sharing across school and/or faculty boundaries.
4. Students' course evaluations.
5. Use of survey data.
6. Integration of internal students into the life and work of the University and the local community.
7. Human Resource Management issues.

In the current review, the Team affirmed that the University has continued to address the areas identified above and would further identify many instances where it has created management structures, or operational processes, that are functioning to address the identified issues. Some examples are noted below.

- A new CTL was developed to directly support staff in their development and implementation of course material for both on-site and Flexible Learning students. The entire University is also now on one Learning Management System (LMS) platform (Canvas®) and there are support and learning opportunities related to this platform and other technologies on a continuous basis.
- The University has an Academic Leadership Group (Deans & Department Heads) that meets on a regular basis and collaborates across schools and faculties. The Team found

this group to be engaged and further found that staff across the University were aware of strategic initiatives, quality enhancements, and many other administrative and operational activities throughout the University. Both the RA and the site visit reaffirmed a sense of community across the University, as well as an inclusive culture. The structure implemented after the 2014 review and cited in the 2016 Follow-up Report is still intact at the University today.

- A new position and office was formed at the University, namely that of Director of Quality and Human Resources. This office and associated team(s) are currently working across the University on both Human Resources and quality, as the University recognises the important links between these two.

While the Team notes the work and commitment the University has shown in addressing areas identified in the 2014 IWR, the Team would also highlight that there are areas where further enhancements can be made. Those areas are detailed below.

The Team noted that there was a lack of consistency in the requirements and models used across Schools and faculties related to Flexible Learning. Differences in expectations for staff in the management of Flexible Learning requirements, even within one programme, were highlighted by students as an opportunity for improvement for the University, as further clarity across the University would assist in their understanding of requirements and completion of courses and programmes. Examples of this will be provided in the remainder of this chapter.

The use of data, and in particular the student evaluations at the University, can continue to be developed and shared across the University. While there is a large amount of data available at

the University, it needs to continue to incorporate the use of this data into institution-wide activities, share best practices and incorporate benchmarking (internal and external), where appropriate.

The Team found a vibrant and engaged student community at the University. However, the Team did note challenges with inclusion and involvement, specifically between on campus and Flexible Learning students. The University needs to continue to develop communities for Flexible Learning students, beyond those available to them during study days when they are on campus. It is important to note that the visit took place remotely and was during the time of the pandemic, which has had a dramatic impact on the ability of the University and students to participate in activities together and to build or reinforce a community.

2.2. Learnings from SLRs

The SLR process at the University for QEF1 included the development of guidelines and a process for the completion of SLRs and associated action plans, as well as a cycle for evaluations. In 2015, the University identified that the follow-up process had slowed down, and recognised the opportunity to continue to refine the process and revisit some of the action plans in the SLR cycle for QEF2. In 2017, the Quality Council proposed the development of standing committees on SLRs to assist the Director of Quality and Human Resources and the School Councils in the oversight and processes associated with completion and follow-up of SLRs. For QEF2, all faculties and programmes conducting a comprehensive review noted the use of SLRs to demonstrate their management of growth, both academically and operationally, and the inclusion of the SLRs in the preparation and completion of the Mid-Term Progress Report, submitted in 2020.

SLRs were used as a foundational element in the RA and were highlighted by the Quality Council and the University leadership teams (academic and support staff) as key elements in the quality work at the University. It was also noted that the format for QEF2 SLRs designed by the University for these reviews was very time consuming for the academic staff, support staff and students involved. The Team noted that the perception of academic and other staff on SLRs was very positive, and that the strain felt in completion of SLRs or the IWR might have been a combination of the timing, given both the pandemic situation and the comprehensive nature of the SLRs. The University has worked collaboratively to develop a template and support provision from the Quality and Human Resources Team for all future SLRs, including a continuous review process for follow-up and action plans.

All SLRs noted included both a student representative and an external expert, in addition to a University committee of academic and other staff. In each of the SLRs, common elements were identified, including issues related to Flexible Learning, study progression, student workloads, teacher workloads, and research. Each of these areas were highlighted for further exploration, process/policy development and management/operational support by the University.

For Flexible Learning, a lack of consensus was highlighted across the University on a definition and requirements/format for Flexible Learning across faculties, programmes, Schools and the University as a whole. For study progression, the University acknowledged the need to determine study progression for programmes and define elements, such as average time to completion for the students who have different demographics than “traditional” university students. Student and staff workloads have been identified as areas which need further investigation at the

University, and it has identified research, including the development of additional doctoral programmes, as a key strategic goal for the future.

3. Managing Standards

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

The RA submitted by the University for the present review provided details on the University's governance and management structure, with a special focus on responsibilities for quality. In line with the respective university regulations and laws, the main responsibility for quality lies with the Rector, with responsibilities for quality in the three Schools delegated to the Deans. In essence, however, all staff members bear responsibility for the quality of their duties and operations.

In terms of overseeing the actual Quality Assurance system, however, a key role falls to the University's Director of Quality and Human Resources, who manages the everyday quality operations. In these duties, the Director is supported by the Quality Council, which she chairs. The Quality Council further consists of one representative from each school, two University Office representatives, and two student representatives. The structure and tasks of the Quality Council are clearly laid out in the publicly available Regulations on the Quality Council of the University of Akureyri². The Quality Council is itself supported by three teams composed of key academic and other staff: the Survey Team, the Key Statistics Team, and the Bologna Team.

² <https://www.unak.is/static/files/Haskolinn/law-and-regulations/regulations-quality-council-of-unak-with-amendments.pdf>

A Quality Manual dating from October 2020 outlines the core of the University's understanding of quality and briefly explains key elements and instruments of the quality assurance system. In the view of the team, the collection of materials in the manual is eclectic; and distinctions between standards, principles, procedural requirements and political statements are somewhat blurred. The Manual itself does offer a good insight into the areas the University deems important with regard to quality, but contains little information on the University's actual quality standards, in particular in terms of standards set for study programmes and teaching provision (i.e. methods of teaching, pedagogical approaches, and standards related to qualifications of academic staff). The University is encouraged to further specify minimum threshold standards in these areas that are agreed upon and implemented across the entire institution in these areas. The University's strong discursive culture will certainly be an asset in this regard.

Carried by a strong improvement-orientation, the University is taking the quality of its processes seriously, with visible progress since the QEF1 IWR. Although some plans and operations were impacted by COVID, the University has been systematically and diligently working on addressing issues raised in previous reviews; and progress is clearly traceable through various reports, including the QEF2 RA and SLRs sampled by the Team. The key actors involved in quality assurance are well informed and clearly dedicated to their jobs. Overall, the University's quality culture is evident through the commitment and sense of pride in the University, its achievements and its future expressed by all students, academic staff and support staff, with whom the Team met.

Various members of the University community with whom the Team met praised the progress made in the last few years in linking the quality assurance system with institutional decision

making. The Team commends the University on these achievements in recognising the considerable degree to which institution-level support for strategy-driven quality enhancement is aligned with the strategy of the University. Nevertheless, the University should continue to implement and further develop systematic, evidence-based approaches in order to inform quality enhancement and decision making, in particular via the use of data dashboards.

3.2. External reference points and benchmarks

The University seeks inspiration and benchmarks primarily from Nordic universities, but also from Europe at large. In terms of methodology, study visits to higher education institutions featuring best practice processes or informal exchanges within theme-specific networks seem to be the primary approaches. This is complemented by occasional analyses of publicly available data from other Icelandic universities. Faculties and individual teachers also gather information from other institutions and aim to learn from them. As expressed by the University in its RA, benchmarking efforts are predominantly informal and not systematic.

The University recognises that there is some room for improvement in this area and has already outlined a plan to identify and select suitable benchmarking institutions and to define key performance indicators and key areas for future comparisons. The Team underlines the importance of starting this process as soon as possible, especially in light of a number of important strategic decisions to be made in the near future. The University is also urged to define better what constitutes a benchmark for its work. For example, does a benchmark represent an aspirational peer, a competitor or another university sharing similar characteristics or contextual factors? At the same time, benchmarking efforts should be aligned more clearly with strategic

planning processes (for example, as preparatory environmental analyses) and with the institutional quality assurance system.

3.3. Programme portfolio and programme management

The University has a very broad programme portfolio of more than a dozen programmes on the undergraduate level and several dozen programmes on the graduate level. The programmes typically are “owned” by the faculties, which is in line with how the portfolio is depicted on the University website. Correspondingly, the main responsibility for a given programme usually lies with a faculty head, in addition to other duties of that role. The University does not have a uniform system of designated programme directors across the university. In some cases there are identified program directors and in other instances, the Head of Faculty serve as program directors; while in other programmes there are support roles (for example, to assist with student clinical placements) attached to some programmes; all of which have a responsibility to the curriculum and programme. In the view of the Team, refining and providing clarity across the University for the organisation and institutional oversight of programmes will provide transparency to students and staff, as well as permit further collaboration and increased efficiencies. The University is strongly urged to consider this recommendation.

For a university of its size, it can be said that the University of Akureyri is engaged in a considerable number of programmes jointly delivered with other higher education institutions. The *modus operandi* of collaborations depends to a large degree on the given programme and whether the University actually holds responsibility for the quality of the programme, or whether it can be rather regarded as a “service provider”. Irrespective of the case, quality assurance is

competently handled in the view of the Team. Respective efforts are also informed by a document containing guidelines and a checklist for setting up joint programmes, which was issued in 2016. The guidelines do contain a considerable amount of the appropriate information, yet suffer from the same shortcomings as the overall curriculum development process (see Section 3.4) in that budgetary considerations are underrepresented in the guidelines and corresponding checklist.

3.4. Design, approval, monitoring and review of programmes

In 2016, the University enacted a policy document titled “Procedure concerning new programmes at the University”. New programmes are also launched in accordance with the relevant higher education laws and the National Qualification Framework; and typically are initiated bottom-up via the curriculum committee of a given faculty. The ultimate decision lies with the University Council on the approval of new programmes. The Director of Quality and Human Resources and the Quality Council (also involving the Bologna Team) check compliance with the relevant guidelines and make recommendations to the faculties. Although this process ensures staff “buy-in”, it is missing a component of checking alignment of proposed programmes with the University’s overall strategy and strategic positioning.

It was unclear to the Team, from the policy document referenced above and from interviews, on the basis of what criteria a new programme is finally approved and launched. Information on how many proposals were not approved or were in progress was not readily available. The Team therefore wants to strongly encourage the University to integrate those criteria for final recommendation (approval or rejection), more clearly into its curriculum development

processes. This issue becomes more of a concern when viewed in light of the University's resource situation and critical workload concerns (see below). While the Deans monitor the overall resources for schools, including programmes, there are currently no systematic processes in place for calculating or budgeting a new programme. The University is hereby urged to create clearer rules for budgeting new programmes and programme changes that acknowledge teaching workload and quality standards. These rules should also be clear on the ideal contribution of sessional staff to teaching loads at individual programme level.

The Quality Council supports process for annual review and monitoring of programmes as outlined in the work process for curriculum and course catalogue (annual monitoring) and the Procedures for periodic program review. The basis for any changes, however, remains largely faculty-driven and the University has yet to systemically integrate the perspectives of other stakeholders (most notably students, alumni and employers/industry) into the process. The Team noted that in the current quality assurance system, there is a distinction made between the process for annual review and monitoring of programmes in the process for curriculum and course catalogue (which is the annual review process) and the procedures for periodic programme review (which is the ongoing monitoring of programmes and cyclical programme reviews). It might be helpful bearing in mind that systematic reviews incorporating different sets of data and stakeholder perspectives are typically not conducted on an annual basis in universities in the European Higher Education Area. Systematic monitoring might require a set of pre-defined performance indicators that would also allow for comparisons of programmes' performance on the portfolio level – an aspect that appears to be currently missing within the broader programme management setup at the University.

In conclusion, it needs however to be noted that the University makes good use of the SLR process and consequently follows up on the actions proposed in those reviews. In the process of SLR, a broad range of areas is evaluated by the project team nominated by the Department Head, including teaching methods and assessment on the course level. Even though SLRs usually focus rather on formal aspects and procedures of quality assurance and their role in safeguarding academic standards is somewhat difficult to assess, they are arguably related to programme level reviews. Ongoing programme review should ideally feed into SLRs and be in essence a summary of a faculty's internal quality assurance of its programmes. The University has developed templates for this work that are well-received by the staff members organising the respective SLRs and the overall process appears to be effective and efficient. Lessons from this process could thus easily be incorporated into its revision of programme monitoring and review processes.

3.5. Programme delivery

The University has, since its inception, focused on a Flexible Learning model which permits student to incorporate their studies into working and family commitments. Given that Flexible Learning is a mix of in-person and online learning, it provides higher education opportunities to students from across Iceland and Internationally.

The RA included a case study which scrutinised the strengths and weaknesses of the Flexible Learning model from the viewpoint of both students and staff. This case study noted that there is an opportunity for the current model to be developed into a consistent model for Flexible Learning across the University and with guidelines supported by all faculties and programmes. This includes development of guidelines for the student phases, including dates when students

who are normally online were expected to be on campus or on site (clinical, research studies, etc.). This was noted in conversations with the Team, as students shared their appreciation for the Flexible Learning model and study days, but expressed a desire for more clarity and consistency on format within programmes and across the University.

A second element to programming at the University that was highlighted in both the RA and the Team visit is the incorporation of both off-site and on-site practical/clinical training and the incorporation of laboratory studies/research. The University has incorporated clinical placements across many programmes and coordinates these placements both in the community of Akureyri as well as other locations, mostly around the capital. Students in these placements noted the strength of the programmes and coordination of the faculties at the University with those on site. An opportunity highlighted by students was the desire for clear articulation of assessment and outcomes associated with clinical placements. Students noted that they understood the outcome of the work in the field, however they found, at times, the link between the instruction/requirements coming from the institutional staff member and the instructor on site to be missing or conflicting. The Team found that there was inconsistency between programmes, faculties and external sites related to faculty responsibilities and processes, which students and external partners noted as an opportunity. Students also noted that this might have been due to the COVID-19 pandemic and may hence not be occurring during periods of normal business.

3.6. Assessment policies and grading

The University's assessment framework incorporates formative and summative assessments. Assessment forms are usually not coordinated at the curriculum level and across courses, but are

in practice the responsibility of the individual teacher. The University policy is, however, intended to ensure that students are informed in a timely and informative manner via course syllabi. A document titled *Regulations on Course Assessment at University of Akureyri*, which was approved by the Quality Council in 2017, describes the relevant assessment processes.

Rules and responsibilities concerning assessment forms and processes, including for external examiners, are laid down in *Regulations on Course Assessment at the University of Akureyri*³ which were first issued in 2009 and amended in 2020. The document provides detailed and clear descriptions, with the exception of the “hot topic” of online assessments, for which regulations and information are rather sparse in the view of the Team. The University is aware of the challenges facing online assessment and has embraced this as an opportunity with recent efforts, including additional teaching support and improved feedback mechanisms. A clear, coordinated and strategic approach to online assessment remains a priority in the view of the Team, especially in the light of increased online learning and assessment during (and potentially after) COVID-19. Teaching staff have documented time limits for providing feedback and grades to students, but it was reported to the Team that these deadlines are not met in a considerable number of cases. Students are regularly surveyed about the timeliness of teacher feedback and the numbers seem to be gradually improving based on documented actions on behalf of the University. However, this remains an area where firmer follow-up may be required. Delays in teacher responses to student work may be connected to the University’s workload issues (see Section 3.9). One way in which the University and the individual Schools have attempted to address this challenge is by

³ <https://www.the University.is/english/student/study-information/regulations-on-course-assessment#Article2>)

funding additional tutors. Students with special needs also receive additional assistance as defined in the *Policy on Equal Access to Study and Work*⁴. As noted in the RA, the University is planning to move to a system of examination numbers for the sake of anonymity and to promote transparency and fairness wherever possible.

As noted above, teachers are individually responsible for keeping their teaching and assessment skills up to date and to maintain the quality of their assessments. There appears to be considerable variability across the different academic units in this regard. Interviews with the teaching staff show a great collegiate culture with plenty of exchange and collaboration but in essence, assessment knowledge and skills are basically obtained in a “learning by doing” mode and by borrowing from the approaches of more experienced colleagues. There is a need for providing more direction at the institutional level and potentially making assessment a focus area for the well-lauded CTL. There is room for coordinating assessment more effectively on the curriculum level. This might also have positive effects for student workload and retention. In a nutshell, the University is strongly advised to provide additional guidance that is clear and consistent on the “how” of teaching, learning and assessment. This would benefit both students and staff. Involving external examiners in the respective quality assurance activities would further support these processes.

The University has implemented the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and provides support on how student workload should be calculated in the course and assessment design. However, uneven workload was a frequently brought up during student interviews. The

⁴ <https://www.the University.is/english/university/strategies-and-policies/policy-on-equal-access-to-study-and-work>

University has also identified this as a current area for improvement and is urging faculties to apply the guidance model with associated recommendations and set guidelines accordingly. The Team agrees with the self-assessment, yet would encourage the University to aim for standardised workload guidelines at the institutional level, as student workload calculations and quality assurance mechanisms to safeguard correct assignment of workload are not subject to disciplinary differences and/or preferences.

The University's work on ensuring consistency is also supported by the use of intended learning outcome assessment grids, even though the University itself admits that there is still room for improvement concerning effective feedback for learners. Apart from surveying students, there are no quality assurance mechanisms in place for evaluating the effectiveness and transparency of assessment and grading processes. The University is encouraged to develop further measures accordingly, in part as quality of examinations is becoming a focus area at the European level.

3.7. Staff induction, appraisal and development

As a preamble to this section, the Team wants to emphasise that all the staff members interviewed during the virtual visit were highly motivated and enthusiastic about their work. Academic and support staff alike enjoy working at the University, particularly emphasising its culture and atmosphere.

In recent years, the University has worked on addressing a number of issues related to Human Resources that had been noted as areas of improvement in the QEF1 review. Structurally, the creation of a new post of a Director of Quality and Human Resources (assisted by an additional project manager) appears to have been one of the most important steps towards furthering this

agenda. The work and mindset of this Director, who has been working in this function since 2019, was positively remarked on across numerous interviews.

One of the first actions involved revising the process of staff induction in early 2019, creating a new onboarding scheme that has since been continuously updated. It is important to mention in this context, however, that in terms of teaching and assessment forms and skills, no mandatory onboarding activities take place, neither for permanent nor for sessional teaching staff. The CTL provides much lauded support to staff. The Centre offers a 10-ECTS course on teaching methods as a prerequisite for permanent positions, but still the overall approach to any matters of didactics appears to be an autodidactic one. It is recommended that the University update its approach to establishing and maintaining common quality standards across all faculties for developing staff competences, especially in the light of its ambition to shape the institutional profile via its teaching and learning modes. Linking staff development to the new Flexible Learning framework is a critical step in this development.

The rules for academic promotion are clearly laid out in the University's Regulation on the promotion and permanent appointment of academic staff⁵. Regular development interviews support staff development, and are in practice conducted every two years. As with many universities, "managing" the work of staff members represents a challenge, in particular when public service rules apply. There appears to be, however, untapped potential of linking individual development to structural change in the University, especially for detecting common patterns of strengths and weaknesses identified in these development interviews.

⁵ <https://www.the University.is/static/files/Haskolinn/law-and-regulations/regulation-promotion-and-permanent-appointment-1010-2016-with-amendments.pdf>

There has certainly been useful investment in support services for students and staff, including the hiring of more support staff. This has benefitted the CTL and the library and supported quality enhancement across the University. Additional support staff for research-related and grant-capture activities, as well as the planned increase in staff from one to two to support internationalisation, are also to be applauded.

Well-being and stress levels of the University's staff are regularly monitored with the help of an annual nation-wide survey. The University conducted an additional survey in 2021 in order to gauge the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on its employees. Overall, stress levels are moderately high but reportedly comparable to other institutions in the education sector. Throughout the visit, however, the issue of the workload of the academic staff was frequently noted, in particular in relation to unfavourable student-faculty ratios. The University's resource situation has been discussed earlier in this report, but it is the view of the Team that workload issues might also be related to the way workload is managed at the University. The strong bottom-up culture (for example, in the process of starting new programmes and initiatives), the small-scale organisational structure and the resulting cost for academic self-governance, coupled with a lack of systematic documentation of how staff time is spent, all exacerbate this issue. There is, for example, a rule of thumb that states that 10% of staff time should be dedicated to administration. Even though the actual share appears by and large much higher, no one the Team met with was able to point to concrete evidence to that fact. The Team would therefore strongly recommend the University conduct a comprehensive evaluation of staff workload and subsequently devise actions necessary to address any identified shortcomings.

A comprehensive workload evaluation would also dovetail with the fact that the University is currently working on professionalising its management operations. It has identified a lack of support and training for its academic management staff, which reportedly impacts quality assurance processes. Some first steps towards improvement have been taken already, for example, in the form of the publication of an *Administrator Handbook* and additional training, but the planned action of increasing the number of hours those managers spend on administrative and managerial tasks might not be feasible, considering the overall workload situation, and may lead to a lack of motivated and skilled managers and add to stress. This further hints to the need for a more holistic evaluation and carefully devised corrective actions, as noted above.

Last but not least, developing clearer structures and guidelines for Flexible Learning modalities across programmes will provide an opportunity to systematically document staff workload, and in turn ensure appropriate levels of contribution from full-time and sessional staff across the University.

To promote equality, at least on the staff level, the University is already engaging in actions to address gender equality. The University's Equal Rights Committee and the new Gender Equality Plan (valid until 2024) are important pillars for the respective efforts. There might be a need, however, in the near- to mid-term future to take a broader view on equality beyond gender-aspects and moving towards diversity management.

3.8. The role of SLRs in safeguarding academic standards

As is evident from the RA, the Quality Handbook and other materials provided to the Team, the University considers student evaluations of teaching (in particular, the most recent iteration of this evaluation), as well as other surveys, to be the key instruments and resources for its internal quality assurance. Before 2019, teaching evaluations were mainly conducted via a questionnaire at the end of a semester with the goal of providing feedback to individual teachers. Response rates were variable and low in general, which may have been linked to the fact that those evaluations were organised as online surveys.

The University has acknowledged the room for improvements in this area and implemented a number of reforms, which is a source of pride to the University and which students find to be effective. Most notably, results are now made available to students only if a certain response rate has been reached and the questionnaire itself has been changed in several aspects. This has arguably led to higher response rates, but response rates are uneven across different semesters and overall still below 50%. The University is urged to explore further the reasons for low rates and to extrapolate differences in response rates across different faculties and schools.

Building on the apparently positive experiences with the new dialogue-oriented format for teaching evaluations, which has been in pilot since Spring 2020, the Team encourages the University to further diversify quality assurance methods, in particular when it comes to systematically involving external stakeholders. Instruments such as corporate focus groups and surveys, systematic peer-observation of teaching and study progress/drop out/retention analyses would offer the potential for valuable information for the University.

3.9. Summary on safeguarding standards

The Team sees the considerable progress the University has achieved since the 2016 IWR. For example, the University has updated its quality assurance system in a major way, strengthening the link to institutional decision making and issuing/renewing various guidelines (e.g. quality manual, regulations related to academic programmes and assessment policies). The University has clearly and cleverly invested in its support staff, which not only improves the overall service quality, but also, due to the professionalism of the actors involved, paves the way for the institution's ambitions regarding Flexible Learning, student satisfaction and internationalisation. As a further result, the University has managed to perform well during COVID-19 – and continues to monitor the well-being of students and staff alike.

These achievements are to a considerable degree made possible by a number of strengths: The University's academic and support staff appears to be professional as well as highly motivated and dedicated, caring for students and their learning progress. The University's quality culture is characterised by a strong improvement-orientation and principles of discourse and dialogue, which allows the institution to tackle any issue in a collegiate manner. The Team experienced a clear awareness of potential shortcomings and areas of improvement, and the processes that the University has installed to deal with those areas and to follow up on planned actions seem robust and effective.

On the other hand, the Team also found a number of areas of concern that the University should address rather sooner than later. With regard to quality standards and key policy areas (e.g. Flexible Learning, student selection procedures) many decisions are taken on the micro-level of

departments and faculties, yet the University would benefit from a data-driven push towards more uniformity. This seems to be particularly true regarding key components of the University's academic programmes (e.g. oversight of programme quality, resource management of programmes and stakeholder involvement). Teaching workload is an issue that came up throughout the entire visit, and ensuring that teachers are not overextended, also for the sake of the quality of teaching and learning, needs to be a high priority and will require differentiated measures. Additional quality instruments, in particular with regard to stakeholder involvement, teaching effectiveness and student assessment would help to further strengthen the institutional quality assurance system, along with a more focused approach to benchmarking.

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

The text box below relates the linkages between ESG and the evidence of secure management of standards of degrees and awards, which underpins the confidence judgment.

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

- *ESG 1.1 Policy for quality assurance.* Key policies are set out in the *Handbook for Quality Assurance* and the *Strategy for the University of Akureyri 2018 – 2023*. The Team considered evidence supporting effective implementation by internal stakeholders and continuing development of policy, strategy and recent investment and development of services to development of enhancement.
- *ESG 1.2 Design and approval of programmes.* The University has clear and established processes for the design and approval of new programmes, which are largely faculty-driven and in accordance with the relevant higher education laws and the National Qualification Framework. Although this process ensures faculty “buy-in”, it is missing a component of checking alignment with overall strategy and strategic positioning. The Team encourages the University to integrate university strategy and resource criteria for final recommendations more clearly into these processes.
- *ESG 1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment.* The *Strategy and Handbook for Quality Assurance* emphasise a personalised learning environment and attitude towards students, using Flexible and / or blending Learning. There is evidence that students value this in terms of enabling access to studies. Student-centred, Flexible Learning methods are the primary current focus for enhancement of taught programmes; the Team found extensive evidence of this, including active involvement by students. The University has recognised needs to develop its strategic approach to Flexible Learning -see also comments relating ESG 1.5 below regarding staff development
- *ESG 1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification.* The University has internal processes for managing admissions with reference to government regulations and funding; recent increases in applications has required the University to manage numbers admitted. The University has systems to manage progression recognition and certification.
- *ESG 1.5 Teaching staff.* The University acknowledges funding challenges and impacts on staff capacity and workload. Recent development of Human Resources processes, including linking Quality Assurance and Human Resources, are promoting enhancement of processes and of staff development. Formation of the CTL has created a very effective capability to support staff to develop approaches in student-centred Flexible Learning. The University is encouraged to promote wider uptake. The University is supporting development of doctoral supervision and staff research capability.

- *ESG 1.6 Learning resources and student support.* Despite a reported shortfall in government funding, the University maintains effective on-campus and virtual learning environments. The University has a comprehensive set of support services for students, fully aligned to the nature and needs of the student population. The University is continuing to invest in the development of environments and services to enhance the experience of students.
- *ESG 1.7 Information management.* The University collects and uses a comprehensive set of performance indicators. Collection of information on students' satisfaction has recently included student-led dialogue approaches. Student support services present information on their services clearly to students, aiming to provide equality of services to all students both on- and off-campus.
- *ESG 1.8 Public information.* The University websites are the primary means of publishing information, with versions in Icelandic and in English targeted towards the needs of users. These are complemented by use of social media.
- *ESG 1.9 Ongoing monitoring and periodic review.* Evidence available to the Team related primarily to SLRs and monitoring of follow-up actions from these. The Team received documentation about processes of ongoing monitoring and periodic review but there is in the view of the team a need for better monitoring of follow-up of these processes. The University would also benefit from increased engagement of a wider range of stakeholders in periodic review and SLR. Overall, the University is encouraged to consider effectiveness and efficiency of its approaches to monitoring and period review and their linkages to SLRs.
- *ESG 1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance.* The University has engaged fully with IWR, and has used preparation of the RA as a major focus for self-evaluation and development.

4. Student Learning Experience

4.1. Overview: University's management of quality of student learning experience

A headline objective in the University's Strategy and the Quality Handbook is that "Students have trust in and are pleased with their studies." The University's management of the quality of the student learning experience emphasises a number of key points. Ownership of responsibilities for quality are clearly defined from institutional leadership and the Quality Council and noted by members of faculties and staff. University quality processes focus on the student learning experience and its enhancement, recognising opportunities which exist for clarity and development with Flexible Learning and study days. The University works at all levels in partnership with students, especially the Student Union. Externality and international perspectives inform activities, and the University team acknowledges an opportunity to further incorporate benchmarking into evidence-based decision making. There is effective institution-level support for implementation of quality processes; enhancement of teaching and learning; and support for students and staff.

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

The University provided three case studies, all of which were directly relevant to strategic development priorities.

Two case studies related to Flexible Learning. The first focused on developing the model for Flexible Learning, and following from this developing institution-level support for teachers and students to enhance Flexible Learning experiences. The second related to active learning classrooms. This was a pilot study in which a formal classroom was changed into an active

learning classroom with changes to classroom practice over three years. The objectives were to promote enhancement through reducing attrition and failure rates; increasing attendance and student participation in learning activities in-class; and improving student satisfaction.

Both were informed by institutional evaluation, including from review processes; research on international best practice; and partnership working with students, teachers and support staff. There was a very clear focus on student-centred learning, rather than on technology for its own sake. Developments were supported by significant institutional investment in, and rapid development of, resources to develop Flexible Learning environments, and support for staff and students in particular through the CTL. Developments were driven by an aspiration to achieve international leading-edge standards. There was also a realistic understanding by the CTL staff of ways of working effectively with academic staff. The Team recognises the relevance and value of these developments, and consider them to be genuinely leading-edge. The Team commends the developmental approach, and recommends continuing in this direction. This should include promoting wider engagement by teachers, to help achieve the institutional objective of getting more common understanding of what Flexible Learning entails, to benefit all students.

The third case study described an approach to exploring the gender imbalance of males in nursing studies. This recognised the prevailing gender imbalance across the University and the strategies of the relevant School. The study included significant externality, both within Iceland and more widely across Nordic countries. This included award of a grant from the Nordic Gender Equality Fund. The outcomes included a report identifying a range of improvements and additional grant awards. The wider significance of the project was recognised in invited participation in conferences, seminars, and discussions in Icelandic media on the importance of increasing the

number of men in nursing. The Team commends the project staff in addressing this important challenge for the nursing profession, the University, and for gender equality, and would encourage continuing development.

4.3. Resources for enhancing the student learning experience

Academic staff have a responsibility to commit time to enhancing the learning experience of their students. They are expected to do this through both developing their own practice and through engaging with University quality processes. Evidence submitted and gained during meetings with staff and students indicated that academic staff take their teaching seriously, but that staff workload issues, and for some staff a preference for more traditional approaches to teaching, are constraining enhancement activity and impact (see also Section 3.6)

The University provides a range of resources to support academic staff in enhancement. The University operates staff induction, appraisal and development processes and offers development opportunities including grants, seed money, CTL courses (see also Section 4.7), and sabbaticals.

CTL provides a range of support services and resources, including consultancy advice and resources like recording facilities. It offers a course on University Teaching which is open to all, and is a recommendation for all permanent new hires. CTL has responsibility for maintaining and supporting the University's IT infrastructure for teaching. The system has recently been enhanced with the adoption of the Canvas® (LMS). The Team on Quality and Human Resources provides a range of support services to assist academic staff in engaging with quality processes, including SLRs. Recent developments, including provision of information dashboards, have been designed

and are being implemented to reduce the time required by academic staff to collect information. The University provides a comprehensive range of support services to students. These are discussed in Section 4.6, including examples of recent developments to enhance experience of students. Learners in specific programmes also benefit from additional resources through off-site activities involving local stakeholders and collaborative organisations.

The Management Board has responsibility for allocation of resources. The Board recognises the contributions by academic staff and has overseen the recent increases in supporting resources, including to CTL, Counselling Services, Library, Quality Assurance office and improving learning environments, including the LMS and the Active Learning Classrooms project.

4.4. Student recruitment and induction

As a public university, the University is subject to the entrance requirements established by government acts and fixed quotas of student numbers based on government funding limits. Within the Icelandic context, a matriculation exam entitles all students to access the first cycle of higher education. Under this national legal framework, the Rector – and by delegation the Deans of the respective Schools – are responsible for regulating and organising student admissions. The law also allows universities to admit students without a matriculation exam or equivalent, provided they can evidence the necessary experience and skills for starting their studies. The University limits admission of students without a matriculation exam or equivalent to 10% of all student admissions but this percentage can also be much lower depending on the number of overall applications, as has happened in recent years. Since 2014, the University has experienced a considerable increase in applications, and relatedly, admissions. Given the fact that Icelandic

public universities only get a certain number of FTE students funded from the government, this has also led to a rising number of rejections. Overall, however, the ratio of admissions to rejections is low.

Individual faculties are free to set their own detailed admission and evaluation criteria, and also to limit the number of places on offer (*numerus clausus*). Admission criteria for the second cycle are set at School level but can also vary in terms of ECTS units required for starting an advanced degree.

No irregularities in student admissions were reported to the Team and no issues were raised by admitted students. However, there is considerable variety of admission criteria and approaches employed by the University. While that is understandable given disciplinary specificities, the variability is considerable for an institution of this size. The Team hence urges the University to pursue the action identified in the RA about evaluating the effectiveness of the different faculties' admission criteria and procedures. This will not only help determine merits and shortcomings of the current system, but also help identify best practices and suitable minimum standards. The University is strongly advised to also match the results of this evaluation with data on student success, for example in terms of progress and retention.

The Rector and Deans have responsibility for managing admissions. Over recent years, the University has become increasingly attractive to applicants and has seen increases in student numbers. It is now at the stage where it has to limit admissions to recognise the fixed quotas in some programmes, due to the availability of external, clinical and practical placements. It was reported to the Team that government funding has not been increased in line with allocated student numbers, and the University has been having to cope with significant under-funding for

many years. This has resulted in excessive overtime teaching by permanent staff and the need to employ additional temporary staff.

The support department of Marketing and Public Relations is responsible for promoting the University through preparation of materials, media and events. Promotional activities and media emphasise the self-discipline and workload associated with Flexible Learning. Induction days are planned based on fields of study. They involve the Rector, academic staff, the Student Union student representatives, and student support services.

All students who met with the Team reported that key factors influencing their application choice were the programme of study, including its reputation; the regional location of the University; and flexibility. The University's evaluation of student numbers by mode of study, and surveys of student satisfaction, indicate the importance of Flexible Learning in students' choices.

4.5. The student voice and engagement of students in Quality Assurance

Students are a vital and valued dimension of the University's approach to quality. The Student Union has key roles within the University, including a member of the Student Union, elected by the Student Union on an annual basis, being a member of the University Council. The Student Union has its own comprehensive strategy that covers the following aspects: international, employment, family affairs, quality, housing, equal rights, learning and teaching, and environmental and transportation issues. Student representatives are members of Quality Councils at University, School and faculty levels.

The student voice is heard through evaluation surveys, membership of councils and committees, and student involvement in quality review processes. The University and Student Union have

recognised limitations in response rates in conventional evaluation surveys. They have been working on new ways of engaging students in quality enhancement, with support from the Quality and Human Resources Office. This has included student-led dialogues, around the student learning experience. The approach was informed by external references from another Nordic University and student representatives were involved in the design and development of the approach. Both students and staff involved in this initiative were very positive about the outcomes and impacts, explaining that this approach added a new dimension to student evaluations.

Students with representative roles were very positive, stating that they felt respected, listened-to, and that at all levels of the University take account of students' views and wishes. Students and staff were very positive about the roles of students in University review processes. Students were enthusiastic about opportunities to contribute, and the support provided to them from the Quality and Human Resources Office. They did, however, suggest that there could be more recognition of their contributions in the form of payment and / or credits. Staff involved in quality review processes reported that they really valued student contributions, and reported that it was always easy to attract student participants.

Students are also involved as partners in University initiatives. For example, the Student Union Strategy includes a strand on Equality. Students are members of the University's Equality Working group. Staff members of this group reported that they had learned a lot from the students, considering them to be open-minded and inspiring

The student voice is welcomed and valued throughout the University. However, the University and the Student union recognise that action is required to involve distance learning students

more actively in student representation and enhancement. The University, in partnership with the Student Union and student representatives, has been active in exploring and developing new approaches to engage students in quality enhancement. The Team commends this and encourages the University and students to continue these types of development.

4.6. Student support services

The University has a comprehensive set of support services. These are aligned to the University's strategy and structure, and recognise the characteristics of the student body. A number of these support services provide support to both students and academic staff. In addition to its staff-facing services, the CTL provides support to students on a range of learning and Information Technology services and resources.

The Library provides a comprehensive range of resources and services. It aims to provide identical services to on-and off-campus students, with the only exception being short-term loan of hardcopy texts. Services to students include "Book a Librarian" to provide support and help develop information literacy skills. The Writing Centre is located within the Library and provides support on writing skills.

The Student Counselling Service is staffed by counsellors and a psychologist, and provides a range of services, support and guidance. Counselling covers both study / academic and personal aspects, recognising the interplay between the two, as well as the predominant characteristics of Icelandic students, namely that, many are working and have family commitments. Support is also available on study techniques, anxiety management, job counselling, and psychological services.

The Registry manages student applications processes, certificates, payments, examinations and graduations. The International Office (see also Section 4.10) supports students on outgoing and incoming placements. Support for doctoral students is coordinated through the Centre for Doctoral Studies and Research Management (see also Section 4.12).

Across the set of services, the Team found a real service culture committed to students, with a concern to reach, be accessible and offer equality of services to all students, whether on-or off-campus. These services are connected to University quality processes and to the Student Union. The services are reflective in terms of evaluations and future enhancement and development of services, and informed by external references and international best practice.

The University has made significant investment in developing support services since the QEF1 IWR. This has included recent developments recognising challenges to students of studying under COVID-19 restrictions. The Team commends the commitment of the University and the staff in these services to really engage with the contexts and characteristics of the student body.

4.7. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment

The University strategy emphasises Flexible Learning and student-centred approaches, and that teachers are responsible for maintaining and enhancing the professional quality of their teaching. The University acknowledges a number of areas for development around student-centred learning, including that there is a lack of consistency in approaches to Flexible Learning. There is also some lack of clarity about information for students and expectations: on the "how" of learning, and about on-campus sessions. Finally, there is acknowledgement of a general weakness regarding feedback to students on their assessments.

The University has made significant investments in the CTL and the Active Classroom development to provide support for academics in student-centred Flexible Learning. The ethos and focus are on learning rather than technology for its own sake. Discussions with the CTL staff indicated a realistic recognition of the challenges and also some very creative solutions of promoting engagement by academic staff (see also Section 4.2). Discussions with staff and students illustrated examples of student-centred approaches and also confirmed the areas for development identified above, including the observation that some academic staff are very reluctant to change their teaching practice.

The University is commended for its realistic recognition of areas for development. It is also commended for its investment in development and staffing of a CTL that is fully aligned to University strategy and context, and is informed by international best practice.

The University is recommended to consider how it can work on the areas for development, including engaging more academics in orienting towards increased student-centred approaches. This could include further emphasis on the "how" of learning, teaching and assessment in quality processes, evaluating and aiming to enhance further development of student-centred approaches.

4.8. Use of sessional teachers

The University makes use of sessional teachers to contribute to specialist topics, and to complement full-time academic staff resource. Discussions with academic leaders indicated that sessional teachers are very important, adding external perspectives to programmes. They were optimistic that use of sessional teachers could reduce overtime teaching by full-time academic

staff and free-up time for research. The Team and the University recognised that the use of sessional staff was an opportunity to address some of the workload concerns for academic staff, acknowledging that a long-term process for building both sessional and full-time staff is a strategic goal.

Discussion with representatives from external organisations indicated great enthusiasm for engaging with the University, including contributing to teaching sessions. There are several corporations which share laboratory and office space with the University and many of the employees of these organisations contribute to the university as sessional staff and in guiding research projects. Students and staff highlighted this opportunity, for students to work directly within industry and on industry research projects while participating in their studies.

4.9. The language experience

The University's Language Policy acknowledges two aspects associated with its role. First, as an Icelandic public university to promote the Icelandic language and culture. Second, as a University with an international perspective, there is a need to use English. The teaching language is primarily Icelandic, however a number of courses taught in English are on offer.

The Team met with a number of international (non-Icelandic) students. They reported no problems. They were studying on programmes taught in English and also valued support on offer to learn some Icelandic. A need was noted by the Team in interviews with doctoral students for a higher levels of support for doctoral students who do not have a good command of the Icelandic language to support them becoming full members of the community of doctoral students and researchers, such as when attending meetings.

4.10. Internationalisation

Internationalisation is a key commitment of the University. The University sees itself as international in two ways: learning and benefiting from international perspectives and participation; and being recognised for its contributions internationally. Academic and support staff who met with the Team emphasised and demonstrated international awareness in the context of their subject or service, with a commitment to learn from this and, where appropriate, contribute internationally.

Masters students who met with the Team were very positive about a range of international dimensions. In general, they had chosen to study at the University because of prestigious, specialist courses. They considered that their experience at the University compared very well with their experience in their home country. As noted in the previous section, they reported no problems with language. They valued the diversity of contributions to the courses, including international exchange opportunities.

The International Office has a range of responsibilities relating to both teaching and research. It provides support for incoming and outgoing students, including managing learning agreements. The predominant Flexible Learning model is challenging in terms of encouraging students to go abroad, although virtual mobility is increasingly an option. Incoming students are generally very positive about their experience at the University, and many choose to extend their stay. The capacity and capability of the International Office has recently been expanded, recognising a wider role to support growth of research, including through international networking and support for international funding applications.

The Team commends the University for its international perspective and encourages it to continue to see internationalisation as both an enabler and a focus for ongoing enhancement and growth of research.

4.11. Links between research and teaching

The University reported a number of links between research and teaching. A number of staff have dual employment, working externally and for the University, enabling them to draw on emerging practice from elsewhere in their teaching. Student projects within courses often focus on topics linked to staff research, and students are invited to attend seminars and conferences. Students who met with the Team were positive about opportunities to learn from and engage in research and would like to see these extended. External stakeholders identified one of the key strengths of the University being its approach to getting students to participate in laboratories.

In the RA, the University identified an expectation that faculty research strategies should include consideration of research-teaching linkages, as well as an action point to create and implement a framework at University, school and faculty levels to strengthen the link between research and teaching. The Team would encourage the University to progress this action point.

4.12. Postgraduate programmes

The University offers postgraduate programmes at both Masters and Doctoral level. Masters programmes include both follow-on from Bachelor's level courses and specialist courses. The introduction of Doctoral programmes is a very recent development, with the first students admitted in 2018 and currently a total of eight students on course. Quality processes for Masters

and doctoral programmes follow the Quality Handbook and associated quality review processes, with the doctoral programmes having additional quality processes.

Doctoral students have, in a sense, a split relationship with the University. They enrol at the Centre for Doctoral Studies and Research Management under the jurisdiction of the Doctoral Council. As staff members, they belong to a school or faculty within the University, normally the unit of their main supervisor.

Doctoral students who met with the Team were aware of their pioneer status. They recognise that they are a very small group, that the programme was new, and that there had been, and would be, “bumps” along the road. They were generally very positive about their experience. They emphasised the sense of community, support, supervision and designated spaces for doctoral students. They valued international opportunities but recognise that COVID-19 restrictions are a current constraint. With reference to their split status, they sensed some tension between academic departments and the Centre for Doctoral Studies and Research Management, but valued the Centre as a neutral channel, in particular for its support system including monitoring of students’ progress.

Doctoral supervisors who met with the Team were very positive, recognising commencement of doctoral studies as a major strategic goal. They acknowledged the importance of central supervisory review processes. They were unanimous in their view of the benefits of international opportunities for doctoral students, and saw the University's experience of online teaching as an aid in keeping in touch with doctoral students abroad.

The Graduate School Director and members of the Graduate Council explained the working of the centralised administration of doctoral services. This included oversight of student progress, including annual and midway monitoring and multiple milestones, including requirements for presentations and publishing during the course. They explained how the University ensured the new programme was genuinely at doctoral level, including benchmarking against other universities, seeking high-quality admissions and managing the application process carefully, with all applicants required to undertake the TOEFL® (English language) examination, for example.

The University has been well-served by its cautious approach to accepting its first doctoral students. It is encouraged to expand the doctoral programmes as additional external funding becomes available. Training of doctoral supervisors has commenced, and this should be extended to support future development.

4.13. Collaborative provision

The University has a number of collaborative programmes. The primary reason for engaging in collaborative activity is to increase access to higher education, including in remote areas of Iceland. This is highlighted in Sections 1.3, 3.3 and 3.5 of the report.

Criteria and processes for establishing a collaborative programme are set out in an approved quality process for Joint Programmes, with instruction and checklist. In general, quality procedures for joint programmes follow the procedures of the individual institutions.

4.14. Serving the needs of different student populations

The University's commitment to Flexible Learning promotes wider access to higher education, including for a population of students who would find it difficult to travel and / or attend university full-time. It also means that taught students can be predominantly on-campus, off-campus, or a blend of both. Faculties have the primary responsibility for ensuring study programmes meet the needs of the students admitted. There are ongoing discussions about the nature of the blend, in particular requirements to attend on-campus, and learning activities and environments on-campus. Across all of the student support services, the basic approach is to aim to provide equivalent services to all students, irrespective of their location.

Discussions with staff from Student Counselling Services demonstrated their awareness of the typical characteristics of the University's students, which are also typical in the Icelandic higher education sector. Many students are working and many have family commitments. Student counselling service aims to recognise these life factors in addition to academic concerns. Additional specific needs of international students are discussed in Section 4.10 and specific needs of doctoral students are discussed in Section 4.12.

The University has a Strategy on Equal Access to Studies and Work⁶. This applies to both students and to staff. In this strategy, emphasis is placed on the understanding that disability is situational, and that special solutions refer to actions intended to provide students with equal conditions for pursuing studies. Student Counselling Services supervises the daily work in implementing the strategy relating to students.

⁶ <https://www.the University.is/english/university/strategies-and-policies/policy-on-equal-access-to-study-and-work>

Flexible learning makes it possible for students to study with a mix of distance and on campus coursework, permitting them to find a balance of the two that is to their liking, within the parameters of the programme(s). The Team noted during its interviews some concerns about the student community both within the on-campus experience and when students were studying at a distance. Students reported that there was not a strong sense of community when they were on-campus for study days, noting that they did not observe social or communal benefits associated with attending campus. This was the experience shared by students both during the COVID-19 pandemic and prior to the pandemic. Given that students participate in a mix of distance coursework and on campus course work, it can be a challenge to create a sense of community within programmes and across the institution. The team noted an opportunity for the University of Akureyri to create a sense of community with students both within their programme of study and across the University. Creating an effective on-campus sense of community with appropriate activities, which can continue through times when students are participating in distance coursework, is a matter that requires some urgency.

4.15. Management of information

The University manages a range of data on its provision and operations, and works to the requirements of the relevant Higher Education Institution Act to make information on its operations public. Information is available on the internet and the intranet (Ugla). Ugla is used by all public universities in Iceland and is developed and operated by the University of Iceland. This is significant in that the University has to work with others in future development of the system. A wide range of student- and quality-related information is available on Ugla.

Syllabi are intended to provide information to students on how, when and where teaching takes place. The CTL has produced instructions to assist teachers in preparing syllabi, promoting the concept that a syllabus should be an agreement between the teacher and the students.

The University has recently introduced the Canvas® LMS replacing Moodle®, and CTL offers support to staff in effective use of system. The University's RA acknowledged student criticisms of information flow between teachers and students, and students' preference for Canvas® to be used consistently for communication.

Quality and Human Resources have been developing data dashboards to communicate quality-related information, in particular to inform internal quality review processes and increase efficiency by reducing the time required by academics to collect and interpret information. The University is continuing the development of Canvas® and Ugla, with the latter including national, public level business intelligence and research information. The Team would encourage this. Early actions should aim to improve consistency of information flows between teachers and students, as well as continuing implementation of data dashboards in quality processes.

4.16. Public information

The main platform for public information is the website (Icelandic version), which is intended to fulfil the requirements of the relevant government Acts. The Icelandic website was redesigned and relaunched in 2018 following evaluations and a needs analysis. It has been designed to meet current web design standards, including accessibility. The effectiveness of the website is monitored and evaluated. Effectiveness of the design was recognised by the nomination for the *Icelandic Web Award* in 2019.

An additional English-language website was created in 2020. The main targets were exchange students, as well as international students and scholars. The layout is identical to the Icelandic website, but scope and content are different, reflecting the different target audiences. Preparation of the RA in advance of the current review identified scope for improvement to better meet the needs of target groups and to enhance visibility of research groups and individual researchers. Sampling by the Team of the English website indicated that it was very well designed and informative. In addition, a range of social media is used by the University, faculties and other units. Conditions for using such accounts are provided in the intranet.

The Team commends the University for its systematic and evaluative approach to public information, and encourages it to continue on its developmental path.

4.17. Using SLRs to enhance the student learning experience

The University's instructions for SLRs state that they should focus on studies, teaching and research, as well as the importance of emphasising enhancement projects effectively and making them visible in these self-review reports. The University's Quality Handbook refers to processes for follow-up actions and monitoring status of enhancement projects.

In its RA, the University reflected on learning points from SLRs, including common topics identified, follow-up processes, and action points regarding the process itself. Common topics in faculty-level SLRs were Flexible Learning (the most prominent topic), study progression, student workload, teachers' workload, and research.

The SLR of doctoral studies focused on a different context, as doctoral studies had only commenced in 2018 and no students had completed. The purpose of this SLR was to identify

ways to uphold and enhance the quality of the University's doctoral education and the student learning experience in line with international standards. The guiding questions of the SLR were two: "How does the University ensure the International standards of its PhD degrees"? and "how does the University ensure that each PhD candidate has an adequate learning experience"? The analysis identified a list of urgent actions for quality enhancement of PhD education organised under two broad headings: 1) management structure and organisation of the PhD education; and 2) professionalism and support of the scientific community. As the SLR of doctoral studies is very recent, the University has not yet had opportunity to further develop these action points.

The University reflected that the SLR process was considered to be arduous, and identified a number of action points to enhance implementation of the process, including templates and training. The University also identified a wider action point "to make quality work a part of the faculties DNA" - this included provision of evaluative information to the faculty and proposals regarding follow-up reporting.

The Team sampled reports from implementation of SLRs and noted that they consistently included a comprehensive focus on the student learning experience, based on evaluation of an extensive evidence base. The Team also noted that the student voice was very prominent. This observation was confirmed in discussions with staff and with students, with both groups emphasising the value of student inputs to the process. Sampling also confirmed that the process was enhancement-oriented, leading to reflective identification of action points. Discussions with groups of staff and with students indicated the importance of SLRs as a tool to drive change.

Discussions also highlighted improvements in implementation of the processes both for the review and follow-up. These included provision of evaluative reports by the Quality and Human

Resources Team, aiming to take the groundwork away from academic staff, as well as the student-led dialogues to explore the student voice in student-friendly ways.

The Team concluded that the University is using SLRs to inform enhancement, considering all aspects of the student experience, including focusing on challenges of key strategic developments of Flexible Learning and introduction of doctoral studies. The student voice is very prominent, including in the recent innovative development of student-led dialogue. The University is continuing to reflect on, and take action on, how to make the process more efficient in terms of academic staff time. The Team commends the University's reflective, developmental approach and encourages it to continue in this direction.

4.18. Summary evaluation of the quality of the student learning experience

The Team found an informal quality culture with a commitment to enhancement and development. This is informed by evaluation, partnership working with students, and learning from best international practice. The Student Union takes a strategic approach and is engaged in enhancement of all aspects of the student experience.

The University has invested strategically in support services to promote enhancement for both students and staff. These have included creation and rapid development of the CTL, as well as additional resources for the Library and Student Counselling Service.

The University is continuing to improve its management of quality and quality processes. A distinctive and positive aspect is the "people / human" approach to quality. Combining the roles of Director of Quality and Human Resources, and creating the Office on Quality and Human Resources has enabled actions to make quality processes more effective and more efficient.

These include reducing the administrative burden on academic staff, strengthening support for follow-up actions and supporting engagement of students.

The doctoral programme is a milestone development for the University. There is a sense that enhancement has been built-in from the start, including scheduling a SLR so early on in the programme's development.

There is open and realistic recognition of challenges and some contested aspects of Flexible Learning. These include consistency of academic practice and the extent and nature of on-campus learning activities, as well as impacts on the campus environment. The University identified an opportunity of the current Flexible Learning model is the development of a University-wide model for Flexible Learning and with guidelines, supported by all faculties and programmes (see Sections 2.2 & 3.5). The team strongly encourages the University to complete this work, for the benefit of both students and staff.

The University has made rapid progress in recent years. It has taken an evaluative, developmental approach to engaging with IWR. There is clear evidence that the University is using the QEF2 IWR process to shape enhancement actions for the student learning experience. The Team encourages the University to continue to do so.

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

The text box below relates the linkages between ESG and the evidence of quality of the student learning experience, which underpins the confidence judgment.

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

- The Team finds the University to be aligned with ESG 1.1 *Policy for Quality Assurance*. The University has a clear and publicly accessible quality assurance policy document as well as a quality manual.
- Regarding ESG 1.2: *Design and Approval of Programmes*, the University has clear processes in place, which are outlined in the quality manual as well as in a separate policy document. Programme design is oriented at qualification profiles, following the National and European qualification frameworks. Internal processes are clear and strong. Programme design is, however, largely staff-driven and the involvement of students and external stakeholders is an area to work on, in particular when it comes to ensuring student progress and a fair workload.
- *Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment*, as suggested by ESG 1.3 seems to be a principle that strongly informs the University's pedagogical approaches, also with regard to the University's Flexible Learning approaches. There is, however, a need to work on a shared understanding and common standards in this regard.
- The University has established processes regarding ESG 1.4 *Student admission, progression, recognition and certification* and seems aware of any potential current shortcomings. Monitoring of student progression is somewhat underdeveloped, though, with drop outs and non-completion rates a particular problem that deserves more attention.
- The University has established various policies and processes in order to meet the requirements of ESG 1.5. *Teaching Staff*. Criteria and procedures for staff recruitment and promotion is clear and the staff development activities are well appreciated. The University might benefit, however, from more mandatory didactic trainings for junior staff and needs to pay attention to the well-known workload issue.
- Regarding ESG 1.8 *Public information* the Team finds the University in full alignment, with an impressive array of analyses, policies and other types of information which are publicly available on the University's website.
- ESG 1.9. requires ongoing monitoring and periodic review of programmes. Regular programme reviews are conducted, yet with limited variants of (external) stakeholder involvement and an over-reliance on staff perspectives in the Team's view. It might be helpful to further clarify the inclusion of external stakeholder involvement in both the Curriculum and Course Catalogue Processes (annual monitoring) and the Procedure for Regular Review of Study Programmes (periodic review) to work out a clearer distinction between ongoing monitoring and periodic reviews and in turn develop separate processes for each.

5. Management of Research

5.1. Research policy and strategy

A focus for the University has been research, with recent focus being on the build, launch, management and growth of doctoral programmes, which received accreditation in 2017. The University's previous research policies and strategies for 2012-2017 aimed to strengthen research and develop benefits for Icelandic society and business in rural areas. Emphasis was placed on research related to the Arctic, increasing collaborations, and the aforementioned establishment of doctoral studies.

The University's present strategy for 2018-2023 aims at research relevant to Icelandic society, as well as increased knowledge of an international perspective. The objectives include providing adequate facilities and environment for research and innovation and strengthening research groups. Increased efforts for obtaining domestic and international grants for funding students is considered the main driver for research. Some faculties have formed research strategies that are related to the University's research strategy and explicitly link research with teaching. The University also works with industry on innovation and strengthening entrepreneurial thinking in the community.

The identified research strategy was found to be meeting the goals set by the University. Continued development and expansion of the strategy, aligned with the strategic goals of the University and expansion of the doctoral programs, will be vital in the future. However, doctoral programme development and incorporation of expansion across the University's academic programmes needs to be fully explored and planned. A clear vision for doctoral programming

and goals for achievement over time need to be developed and managed. Doctoral students have their own well-equipped space and consider the student community adequate. The students also consider it important to be well connected with faculties/departments, which is an aspect that could be stronger. The respective responsibilities of the Centre for Doctoral Studies and Research Management, the individual staff members and individual supervisors need to be further clarified in the relevant strategy documents, and the ongoing work on the forthcoming handbook will undoubtedly provide opportunities to address this issue.

5.2. Monitoring of scientific quality of outputs

The University has continued to focus on research across the University with academic staff expected to spend about 40% of their working time on research activities. This has been a challenge to maintain; and the additional workload faced by staff due to the COVID-19 pandemic has been a further impediment to achieving this percentage, although the Team found both administration and staff committed to increasing their time spent on research activities.

The activities and achievements assessed by the Team on research and innovation were found to be meeting the strategic goals set by the University. As measured by the National Evaluation System for Public Universities in Iceland, both the University's research activities and research funding has increased since 2017, except for 2019-2020 when there was a decrease that the University noted could be due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Central to the University's research strategy was gaining accreditation for doctoral training and establishment of a Centre for Doctoral Studies and Research Management, which represent a key component in strengthening research at the University.

The University noted that the establishment of the doctoral programme would further strengthen research across the University, presuming that obtaining accreditation and the continued enrolment in doctoral programmes has expanded opportunities and outputs for research at the University. The Centre of Doctoral Studies and Research Management provides centralised services for students and supervisors and has been essential in the building of research groups, as well as strengthening collaboration with both domestic and foreign universities, institutions and companies on research projects and funding opportunities. Doctoral programmes have also attracted international students, which is a key factor in strengthening the academic and research culture at the University.

The Team recognised that the University's total point values for research, as captured by the Evaluation System of the Public Universities in Iceland, have increased in recent years. This has been one of the University's strategic goals and the Team encourages the University to continue on this positive trajectory, to the extent that the Evaluation System captures outputs that are meaningful in the University's view. At the same time, the University is encouraged to look more closely at the composite scores that make up a total point value in this system to further understand how the scores from this are capturing important aspects of staff performance.

5.3. External support

The University has regional strengths in its research activities, including the links with regional industries, including shared laboratories and hosting corporations on campus. The ability to utilise these links to enhance lectures and supervise research projects is a clear strength of research programming at the University.

An example of these links was presented at the stakeholders' meeting, involving a biotech company that was able to connect with the laboratories in the University and collaborate on research with the nursing department. Another example highlighting these links involved collaboration with the local hospital. Plans for further developmental activities include expansion of doctoral programmes in biomedical and chemical fields, as well as plans for industrial doctoral degrees.

Stakeholders that met with the Team stressed the importance of the University as an intersection between research and practice, as well as its paramount role for high-tech and high-value companies in the region. This cooperation benefits both the companies and the University, and has a tremendous impact on attracting talent to the companies, as well as building the local community.

5.4. Impact

The University's research strategy emphasises Arctic issues and alliances with various national and international organisations operating in the Arctic arena that are important for the University's research activities and collaborative networks. The University was one of the founders of the University of Arctic, a large cooperative network of higher education institutions concerned with education and research about the North. One of the University of the Arctic's Research Institutes, the *Northern Research Forum*, is based at the University and provides an international platform for dialogue between a wide range of stakeholders on issues relevant to the Northern Agenda. It is clear that the University's participation in this network is fully in line

with its research strategy, and that this network brings important resources to support the University's research agenda.

The University staff and students have contributed to numerous research, learning and cultural activities in the community through programming with school-aged children. For example, the University offers the Science School of Young People and the Fishery School as summer schools in the community every year. The University also shares spaces with several research companies, providing an opportunity for both collaborative research between staff, students and corporations, as well as teaching opportunities where the companies train students on laboratory activities and hire them to assist with research projects, for example, Arctic Therapeutics and ProMat. Research at the University also led to the formation of the Fisheries Science Centre.

The University in its current research strategy did not set goals for the impact of research in the community, nor were performance indicators included to evaluate the impact of research on the region. Based on the RA and information obtained during the visit, the impact is not monitored or tracked in any systematic way, and is also not linked to the overall research strategy for faculties or the University. There is an opportunity for the University to develop and understand the impact of these research activities on both the external communities as well as their internal communities, namely students.

5.5. Institutional enhancement of research management

The research strategy includes goals that have been reached, such as securing accreditation for doctoral training and establishing a Centre for Doctoral Studies and Research Management. The Centre manages the systematic data collection at the University level for research activities,

including research collaborations, grant applications and available resource tracking. The University noted that there was a gap in the functional information on the systems of research, including application for funding and grants. A focus of the Centre has been to assist staff with grant applications and, more broadly, to aid with the bridging of research and teaching across schools.

The University will be one of the first Icelandic institutions to adopt the Icelandic Research Information System (IRIS) as a tool to register and disseminate research information. IRIS contains information about institutions' and companies' research projects, grants and outputs, with a goal to increase collaboration and opportunities. IRIS will enable the University to document and track research activities in one place, along with providing an opportunity for benchmarking. While this system was not operational at the time of the visit, the University did share with the Team that they are in the process of hiring a project manager and beginning a project implementing IRIS.

The University has taken measures to reduce overtime teaching of faculty to reduce overall workload and the facilitated use of sabbaticals systems to encourage staff to utilize research time effectively, increasing the proportion of staff time allocation to research activities to 40%. Continued development and expansion of the strategy aligned with the strategic goals of the University and expansion of the doctoral programmes will be vital in the future.

5.6. Benchmarks

The University gathers data on research activities according to the criteria outlined by the National Evaluation System for Public Universities in Iceland. This data is used as an internal

comparison and the Team noted that the University's research activities have increased by 20% in 2017-2018 and 17% between 2018-2019, which exceeds the 7% increase in research points per year anticipated for the current strategy period. In addition, research funding has increased since 2017, although between 2019-2020 there is a decrease.

The Team found that the University did not benchmark with other institutions, with the exception of the University of Iceland. The RA noted, as an example, a benchmark comparison between the University and the University of Iceland on the average research points per academic staff. There is an opportunity for the University to increase its use of benchmarks as a tool to understand research activities and funding, and the implementation of IRIS will assist with this.

5.7. Collaboration

Collaboration with companies and other universities in Iceland and abroad are a key component in the University's research strategy. The RA noted collaborative agreements for both teaching and research that were confirmed in conversations with various groups. These agreements are with both local and international corporations, as well as Icelandic and international institutions. Collaborative activities are undertaken with staff and students, ensuring their freedom and autonomy in the choice of students, partners and research methodology.

It was evident in conversations with external stakeholders that the University is well networked regionally and within the Arctic studies community. Numerous staff across the University have partnerships within the community for research activities and are essential partners. These partnerships were noted with local schools, community service organisations, health care facilities and several research industries that share space on campus. Collaborative activities with

these groups encompass both research and teaching activities, and students noted the strength of these research activities throughout their programmes of study.

The Team noted an opportunity to create a comprehensive, University-wide approach to international collaboration to assist staff in development of these partnerships and being able to recognise opportunities, including those for funding and grants. The University is encouraged to expand internationalisation opportunities for research and involvement for students in this regard. One example would be to support faculty in building international networks for the purpose of applying for research funding available through international mechanisms. Cooperation with companies, research institutions, hospitals and other external stakeholders should also continue to be a high priority. A systematic dialogue with the various stakeholders is essential and should be expanded in support of the current system where contact persons, both internal and external, monitor activities and learning plans.

5.8. Teaching-research balance

It was evident to the Team that teaching takes up the largest share of staff time, which impinges on the time staff would like to allocate on research (see Sections 3.1, 3.7 & 4.3). There is a tradition of covering significant amounts (as much as 33%) of teaching through overtime work. In the meeting with Deans, it was noted that fewer staff now want overtime teaching and would rather dedicate more time to research instead. Under the present work allocation model, 12% of staff time is to be devoted to administration. It was reported to the Team that there is not an agreed way to document how staff contribute to management and administration, which was

especially noteworthy as Deans and academic staff pointed out that the time staff devote to administration is increasing.

Accreditation for doctoral studies was noted by the Rector and doctoral supervisors as an invaluable step in the ongoing development of the University. The RA and interviews with the Doctoral Council, the doctoral students and their supervisors evidenced a carefully managed start-up of the doctoral programme, including funding for at least the first three years of all students as a requisite for admission. The Centre of Doctoral Studies and Research Management provides centralised services for students and supervisors, and the practices are harmonised across the activities and faculties.

The doctoral student body now consists of eight students. Admissions began in 2018 and continue to date. A detailed process is in place to evaluate doctoral applications and all applications are evaluated by three persons, including one evaluator who is external to the University. Monitoring of progress is in place and the first students are expected to finish in 2022. The experience of the doctoral training as relayed to the Team by students was overall quite good. They reported the helpfulness of the Centre for Doctoral Studies and Research Management when problems arose and noted good support by their supervisors. Students appreciated the procedures that are in place to make complaints in a confidential manner, as well as having secure funding for their studies. Doctoral students feel connected to the academic community and appreciated the opportunities for international networking and training that is built into their programmes, although these opportunities are presently hindered by the COVID-19 pandemic. The students noted that their programmes were not fully developed on their admission, but that the University has since steadily developed and implemented them.

Both students and supervisors noted that a handbook for doctoral students and supervisors is under preparation, and this was anticipated to improve students' experience in the programme. Several of the doctoral supervisors indicated that the doctoral programme has had a large impact on developing competitive international-level research at the University. The supervisors also voiced appreciation for the clarity provided by the one set of rules established by the Doctoral Council for all doctoral studies.

5.9. Support for grant-capture activities and grant management

An expansion of the doctoral programme is planned, although the goal of having 30 funded doctoral students in the near future was acknowledged as ambitious by those interviewed by the Team. The Team agrees with that sentiment, as institutional goals need to be well aligned with available resources. To continue the development of external funding opportunities, including those available for research and those available for funding doctoral students, is imperative for both continuation and expansion of doctoral programming.

At present the Icelandic Centre for Research (RANNÍS) is the most important funding source for doctoral students, while success in competitive international funds is the long-term goal of the staff research. Thus, a strong focus on the European Union's new Horizon programme will be vital for future success, and international collaborations or joint applications are very important for an institution the size of University of Akureyri. The University's researchers will also need assistance in identifying suitable funding calls and in preparing grant applications. The plan to hire a new Research Director to provide centralised assistance in applications is hence strongly endorsed by the Team. Furthermore, coordination and cooperation across faculties can provide

ways to expand the opportunities and strengthen future research, through interdisciplinary research efforts to align with funding opportunities.

Understandably, the University has focused on setting up the doctoral training programme, and, as indicated by the doctoral supervisors, gradually there is a need to establish operations for a post-doctoral system, also requiring success in external competitive funding.

The RA document indicates that research strategies have not been formulated by all faculties. The Team encourages all faculties to address their research goals and build their research strategies that link with the University's strategy.

5.10. Summary on the management of research

The research strategy includes goals that have been reached, notably securing accreditation for doctoral training, and establishing a Centre for Doctoral Studies and Research Management. The University has also made changes to reduce overtime teaching to provide opportunities for an increase in the proportion of staff time allocation to research. Continued development and expansion of the strategy aligned with the strategic goals of the University and expansion of the doctoral programmes will be vital in the future.

As measured by the Evaluation System for Public Universities in Iceland, the University's research activities have increased by more than the 7% increase in research points per year anticipated for the current strategy period. Also, there is an overall increasing trend in research funding since 2017.

Continuing the development of external funding opportunities, including those available for research and those available for funding doctoral students, is encouraged. Doctoral programme

development and possible expansion need to be explored and planned. A clear future vision for doctoral programming and goals for achievement over time need to be developed and managed.

The University has regional strengths, including links with industries, sharing of laboratories and hosting corporations on campus. These links provide opportunities for teaching and supervision of research projects by industry and local stakeholders, which is a strength of the University's research-oriented programmes at the post-graduate level.

6. Managing Enhancement

6.1. General enhancement context

The Team visited the University at a point where it had just completed an assessment and adapting of the current strategy (2018-2023), based on the pandemic and the environment in higher education, and was beginning the process for development of a foundation for the new strategy and strategic planning process.

The University has a distinctive identity and niche-compact size, located outside of the capital and serving students from across Iceland and internationally with its Flexible Learning model. Flexible Learning is a key characteristic defining the University's distinctive niche and context and widens the University's reach and impact. It enables access for students across locations, including remote areas in the North and West of Iceland. It enables access for students in different life situations in terms of age, family commitments, and work commitments, all of which are significant dimensions of Icelandic student demographics. Flexible learning is valued by

stakeholders, particularly students and the local community. Flexible learning is a key strategic focus for the University.

In the context of time, the timescale of QEF2 has been, and continues to be, significant for the University. The University Strategy was revised to cover the period 2018-2023. The Team found evidence that the Mid-Term Progress Review 2019 was significant for the University, including enhancing its approach to using SLRs. The appointment of a Director of Quality and Human Resources and the development of the Team on Quality and Human Resources have been of importance. The Team found a quality culture evidenced by staff, both academic and support, and students, albeit it relatively informal. Finally, the University has coped well with the challenges of COVID-19.

6.2. Strategic planning and action planning

The RA highlighted the strategic planning process for 2018-2023, noting that the plan was approved by the University Council in spring 2018. This plan emphasised research and doctoral studies as a foundation for the enhancement of research activities, with the goal to strengthen the University's educational offerings, highlighting personal learning community through Flexible Learning.

There are four main categories of the 2018-2023 plan: research and innovation; learning; social responsibility; and internal functioning and human resources. This plan has identified action points at the institutional level, as well as identified action points at the level of school, faculty and department. The University developed three main action points through their strategy work. The establishment and growth of doctoral programmes and enrolments was a key action point

in the 2018 strategic plan. The University noted modifications in the goals of growth related to the pandemic, as well as challenges related to unclear funding sources. It has taken a managed approach to doctoral expansion in both launching programmes and developing infrastructure, including the Centre for Doctoral Studies and Research Management, led by a Director of Doctoral Studies. Another key action point of the 2018 plan was defining and implementing Flexible Learning platforms, while supporting faculties with establishing their own learning strategies in programmes. Flexible Learning, including platform development and staff support, has proven to be a challenge, specifically with regards to reaching a consensus on methods and framework for Flexible Learning across schools, faculties, and programmes. The University has successfully implemented a new LMS platform. At the time of the visit students and staff were utilizing this new platform and the CTL was supporting implementation and development.

Finalization of the 40 action points identified in QEF1 was the last identified action points of the 2018 strategic plan. This has been managed and coordinated by the Director of Quality Management and Human Resources, with operational execution from the Management Board. The University has reported that each of these has been either addressed or incorporated into operations and the Team found numerous examples of this work.

The University noted the continuous review process of the strategy by the Management Board, highlighting that in early 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic, it became apparent that the full set of actions for the 2018-2023 plan would not be achieved. Based on this realization, the Management Board reviewed the plan and operations, resulting in themes which would become the core areas of emphasis for the remainder of the 2018-2023 plan. The core areas of emphasis

included an increase in research outputs as measured with the Evaluation System of the Public Universities; development and implementation of student survey and student evaluation processes to measure student satisfaction; funding from competitive research grants; utilization of the Evaluation System of the Public Universities and the Institution of the Year surveys to evaluate of societal impact; and use of the annual employee survey to assess employee satisfaction.

The Team found that each of the identified themes was understood widely to be a goal or focus area of the 2018-2023 strategic plan. There was, however, a lack of clarity on the link between these goals and the University's strategic vision in the view of the Team.

Strategic planning and development of a strategic vision is a current focus for the Management Board and leadership teams. The University is in the process of developing both a strategic vision and an organizational structure which aligns with the mission and goals, to serve as the foundation for the next strategic planning process to begin in early 2022.

6.3. Committee structure

The University current governance structure is one which complies with current laws and regulations for public universities, with the University Council as its highest authority. The University Council is chaired by the Rector and develops the overall strategy for the University, shapes its structure, and carries out general supervision in compliance with current regulations and laws. University Council, Quality Council and Management Board are key bodies in management of enhancement at the institutional level (see also Section 1.6).

The academic structure at the University includes three Schools, led by Deans, with differing numbers of faculties in each school, ranging from two to four. The current structure incorporates schools and faculties, with some faculties then further divided into departments. This structure has not led to much collaboration across Schools and/or faculties/departments and, at times, has presented challenges to institution-wide communications and initiatives, such as meeting consensus on Flexible Learning models.

The University noted that for the previous two years, the main regulations of the University have been under review, including the role of key administrators, councils and committees. This review process has included representation from major stakeholders and resulted in draft regulations. These drafts underwent an open consultation process across the University, with the outcome being a review committee compiling results for a finalised proposal to be delivered to the University Council. This final proposal is currently being reviewed and revised for approval in spring of 2022, with implementation by Fall 2022. The goal of this proposal is to create, within laws and regulations on public universities, a clearer structure for academic units. This is still in process and continued efforts on creation of a clearer structure for academic units and the University will be beneficial to advance strategic goals, as well as providing clarity for the strategic planning process currently underway.

6.4. Evidence base

A recommendation identified in QEF1 IWR was to improve upon the use of survey and data across the University. The Team noted the wide array of surveys and statistics utilized by the University that are coordinated by the Quality Council. The University shared examples and highlighted that

it is in the process of developing institutional dashboards. This effort is currently underway and dashboards and data sets in support of the SLRs and quality assurance work are initial deliverables. Continued development of these dashboards will be essential to ongoing quality assurance work.

The Team noted that numerous project managers across departments continue to develop and utilise reports, including key statistics in support of operations and strategic initiatives. There is a lack of process and clarity on when and how evidence-based decision making is incorporated into specific projects and initiatives. The University did note specific examples on the incorporation of evidence-based decision making in specific programmes, like doctoral programmes. However, there needs to be a University process by which evidence-based decision making is embedded across operations. An example highlighted by the Team (and discussed in more detail in Section 3.3), is the use of evidence in documenting the rationale for new programmes. The Team recognises the opportunity for the University to incorporate these practices, of evidence-based decision making, throughout activities including changes of policies or processes, closing programmes and setting goals.

A strength that the Team found in both the RA and during the online site visit was the incorporation of the student voice. It was evident that the student voice is heard at the University, through evaluations and through partnership with the Student Union and other student representatives.

6.5. Benchmarks and internal sharing of best practice

The University incorporates benchmarking into numerous activities, such as evaluations, SLRs, research activities and others. The 2018-2023 strategic plan highlighted and incorporated benchmarking throughout action plans. As noted, current benchmarking has only been included internally, across the University or externally with Icelandic institutions of higher education. To date, the University has yet to incorporate benchmarking with Nordic or other international universities.

An opportunity identified by the Team would be the utilization of benchmarks combined with processes of sharing best practices internally as a foundational element in evidence-based decision making and to promote continuous quality improvements (see also Section 3.3).

6.6. Drawing on international experience and domestic cooperation

The RA noted international experiences as a key to the student experience. A majority of students are encouraged to participate in international experiences, with many of the Masters and doctoral programmes including international study requirements. Students shared their experiences in these programmes but many have missed this opportunity due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Domestically, the University is a major contributor to the communities of Northern Iceland. The University's work with local community organizations and numerous programmes and research activities enhances this community (see also Section 5.7). The RA also highlighted the collaboration between the University and local companies in both research and teaching activities, as well as shared laboratory spaces across campus. These collaborative activities

strengthen the University's programmes, provide students with unique learning/research opportunities and highlight a strategic goal to increase domestic experience and cooperation.

6.7. Evaluation

The Team found that approaches to evaluation are generally becoming more systematic. The University's commitment to quality enhancement was noted through the RA and site visit. The Director for Quality and Human Resources has created institution-wide resources and support for SLRs and the University's quality management system. The RA noted that the University has taken a reflective, evaluative approach to engaging with QEF2, including identification of developmental action points, with the Quality Council assisting in the coordination and management of this work. The Team agrees with the assessment. The University has an opportunity to develop key performance indicators, as well as establishing goals for the University related to quality. The development of dashboards and the incorporation of key metrics will assist the University in these efforts.

7. Conclusion

7.1. General summary, including overview of management of research

The Team is grateful to the University of Akureyri including the Rector, Management Board, Quality Council, staff and students for the warm welcome and participation in the virtual site visit. Everyone who met with the Team was very constructive in the way in which they engaged with the Team and was extremely helpful and open in participating in discussions. Meetings with

the University community over the site visit assisted the Team in gaining a wide perspective of the working of the University and understanding its culture.

The RA presented a University that was handling challenges of the current environment within higher education in Iceland well, and an institution poised to address challenges and opportunities in the future. There were several areas of progress noted from both the QEF1 IWR and the mid-term evaluation, as well as subsequent reports and accreditation activities. The Team found sufficient evidence to underpin this report and enable the Team to make the confidence judgements noted in sections 7.4 & 7.5.

The Team found the University to have a sense of self-awareness and self-identity and having identified its niche and distinctive context. This is evident across members of the community who recognise that they are a public university serving students with a Flexible Learning model, permitting students to achieve their goal of a university degree. Through the RA and site visit the Team confirmed that the University has identified its strengths, is aware of opportunities for improvement, and is continuing to fulfil its mission and commitment to students.

Regarding the management of research, the Team wishes to highlight the following conclusions:

- The research strategy includes goals that have been reached, notably securing accreditation for doctoral training and establishing a Centre for Doctoral Studies and Research Management. The University has also made changes to increase the proportion of staff time allocation to research activities to about 40%, facilitated by use of a sabbaticals system and discouraging overtime teaching. Continued development and expansion of the strategy aligned with the strategic goals of the university and expansion of the doctoral programmes will be vital in the future.
- As measured by the national Evaluation System for Public Universities in Iceland, the University's research activities have increased by 20% in 2017-2018 and 17% between 2018-2019, which exceeds the 7% increase in research points per year anticipated for the

current strategy period. External research funding has increased between 2017 and the present, although there was a decrease in 2019-2020.

- Continuing the development of external funding opportunities, including those available for research and those available for funding doctoral students, is encouraged.
- Doctoral programme development and possible expansion need to be explored and planned. A clear vision for doctoral programming and goals for achievement over time need to be developed and managed.
- The University has regional strengths, including links with industries, sharing of laboratories and hosting corporations on campus. These links provide opportunities for teaching and supervision of research projects by industry and local stakeholders, which is a strength of the University's research-oriented programmes at the postgraduate level.

7.2. Summary of strengths

- The University has a sense of self-awareness and self-identity and has identified its niche and distinctive context. Across the University, it is evident that members of the University community understand who and what they are, and what the University wants to do and be: a public university serving students and community outside of the capital that is at the same time involved in the international higher education community.
- The University has a communicative and collaborative culture that promotes transparency and coordination across all groups.
- The quality culture is evident through commitment and sense of pride in the University, its achievements and its future among students, academic staff and support staff. Institution-level support for strategy-driven quality enhancement is aligned to the strategy of the University.
- Flexible Learning is a strategic focus with commitment to creating opportunities for students to be engaged with their learning. The University has recognised this as a strength in the model and continues to adapt the Flexible Learning model with support for innovation and expansion of technology and capability across programmes.
- The Team found a very effective engagement of the student voice, highlighted with systematic engagement with students, including through the Student Union. The strategic approach adopted by the University's Student Union's highlighted a strength of the student voice and student involvement.
- Students expressed very positive views about the value and standards of their programmes, as well as their learning experience. Involvement of students in quality enhancement work included innovative approaches, such as student-led evaluations and incorporation of their results.

- The University presented a carefully managed start-up of its doctoral programmes, including funding of all students as a requisite for admission.
- The University has a great relationship with a number of external stakeholders for placement of students, research and community impact. External stakeholders have a very positive view of their interactions with the University and its students and recognise the important impact the University has on the community. There was resounding enthusiasm to do more in future among external stakeholders.
- Internationalisation is a key commitment of the University, including the presence of international staff and students across the University and the numerous partnerships and opportunities for participation in activities with international communities and organisations.
- There has been useful investment in support services for students and staff, including hiring more support staff. This has benefitted the Centre for Teaching and Learning and the library and supported quality enhancement across the University. Additional support staff for research-related and grant-getting activities, as well as the planned increase in staff from one to two to support internationalisation, are also to be applauded.

7.3. Summary of areas for improvement

- In developing the next phase strategy, the University should give careful consideration to the alignment between new school structures and institutional strategic vision and goals.
- Refining and providing clarity across the University for the organisation and oversight of programmes within schools will provide transparency to students and staff, as well as permit further collaboration and increased efficiencies.
- Further clarity on and consistency of the Flexible Learning model and its requirements will promote student-centred learning and unify experiences for students and external stakeholders.
- The University is urged to optimise the blend of distance and on-campus activities in its programmes and ensure that expectations for each are communicated to students in a clear and timely fashion.
- Creating an effective on-campus sense of community with appropriate activities, without ignoring or disadvantaging distance-only students, is a matter that requires some urgency.
- The University should continue implementation and further development of systematic, evidence-based approaches to inform quality enhancement, in particular for the use of data dashboards to inform quality assurance processes and enhancement activities.
- Providing additional information, that is clear and consistent, on the “how” of teaching, learning and assessment would benefit both students and staff.

- The University has been well served by its cautious approach to accepting its first doctoral students but is encouraged to expand the doctoral programmes as additional external funding becomes available.
- Training of doctoral supervisors has begun and needs, in the view of the Team, to be rolled out across all programmes. This would also support any planned additional doctoral programmes.
- The University is strongly encouraged to expand internationalisation opportunities for teaching, research and involvement for students, faculty and staff. One example would be to support faculty in building international networks for the purpose of applying for research funding available through international mechanisms.
- The University is urged to create clearer rules for budgeting new programmes and programme changes that acknowledge teaching workload and quality standards. These rules would be clear on the ideal contribution of sessional staff to teaching loads at individual programme level.
- Developing clearer structures and guidelines for Flexible Learning modalities across programmes will provide an opportunity to systematically document staff workload, and in turn ensure appropriate levels of contribution from full-time and sessional staff across the University.

7.4. Judgement on managing standards of degrees awarded.

Overall, the Team concluded that confidence be placed in the soundness of University of Akureyri's present and likely future arrangement to secure the academic standards of its award.

7.5. Judgement on quality of the student learning experience.

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

Annex 1: Visit Schedule

Monday 22 November 2021

Time	Meeting	Attendees
8:30-9:00	Rector	Dr. Eyjólfur Guðmundsson, Rector
9:45-10:45	Management Board	Dr. Eyjólfur Guðmundsson, Rector Hólmar Erlu Svansson, Managing Director Dr. Elín Díanna Gunnarsdóttir, Dean of School of Humanities and Social Sciences Dr. Sigríður Sía Jónsdóttir, Dean of School of Health Sciences Dr. Oddur Þór Vilhelmsson, Dean of School of Business and Science Vaka Óttarsdóttir, Director of Quality and Human Resources Harpa Halldórsdóttir, Director of Finances and Analysis Martha Lilja Olsen, Office Director of the Rector's Office
11:00-13:00	Institutional Showcase	Dr. Eyjólfur Guðmundsson, Rector Hólmar Erlu Svansson, Managing Director Dr. Auðbjörg Björnsdóttir, Director of Centre for Teaching and Learning Vaka Óttarsdóttir Director of Quality and Human Resources
13:30 - 14:15	Faculty/Academic Leadership	Dr. Birgir Guðmundsson, Professor Faculty of Social Sciences Dr. Birna María Svanbjörnsdóttir, Associate Professor, Faculty of Education Dr. Grétar Þór Eyþórsson, Professor, Faculty of Business Sciences Dr. Guðmundur Torfi Heimisson, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Psychology Hrannar Már Hafberg, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Law Hreiðar Þór Valtýsson, Associate Professor, Faculty of Natural Resource Sciences Dr. Margrét Hrönn Svavarsdóttir, Associate Professor, Faculty of Nursing Sonja Stelly Gústafsdóttir, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Occupational Therapy Dr. Þorbjörg Jónsdóttir, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Graduate Studies
14:30 - 15:30	Deans	Dr. Elín Díanna Gunnarsdóttir, Dean of School of Humanities and Social Sciences Dr. Sigríður Sía Jónsdóttir, Dean of School of Health Sciences Dr. Oddur Þór Vilhelmsson, Dean of School of Business and Science

Tuesday 23 November 2021

Time	Meeting	Attendees
9:00 - 10:00	Representatives of RA Editorial Team	Sigrún Magnúsdóttir, Advisor and former Director of Quality at UNAK Daníel Gunnarsson, student representative Steinunn Alda Gunnarsdóttir, student representative Bragi Guðmundsson, Professor, SHSS Dr. Yvonne Höller, Professor (SHSS) Dr. Eva Halapi, Associate Professor from the SHS and Specialist at the University of Akureyri Research Centre Dr. Elísabet Hjörleifsdóttir, Professor Emerita (SHS) Dr. Stefán B. Sigurðsson, Professor Emeritus and former Rector of UNAK Dr. Rannveig Björnsdóttir, Associate Professor (SBS)
10:30 - 11:30	Sessional staff	Sæmundur Elíasson, Faculty of Natural Resource Sciences Guðný Júlíana Jóhannsdóttir, Faculty of Natural Resource Sciences Jóhanna María Oddsdóttir, Faculty of Nursing Kristín Viðarsdóttir, Faculty of Psychology Anna Soffía Víkingsdóttir, Faculty of Social Sciences Stefán Guðnason, Faculty of Business Administration Lísbet Hannesdóttir Faculty of Business Administration
13:00-14:00	QA Team	Vaka Óttarsdóttir, Director of Quality and HRM Lísbet Hannesdóttir, Project Manager of Quality and HR Dr. Gísli Kort Kristófersson, Professor (SHS) Dr. Páll Björnsson, Professor (SHSS) Bergljót Borg, Adjunct (SHS) Dr. Nanna Ýr Arnardóttir, Assistant Professor (SHS) Dagmar Ólína Gunnarsdóttir, students' representative

Wednesday 24 November

Time	Meeting	Attendees
10:30-11:30	Faculty	Dr. Margrét Auður Sigurbjörnsdóttir, Associate Professor, Faculty of Natural Resource Sciences Guðmundur Kristján Óskarsson, Associate Professor, Faculty of Business Administration Dr. Eva Halapi, Associate Professor, Faculty of Nursing Hafðís Skúladóttir, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Nursing Dr. Sigrún Kristín Jónasdóttir, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Occupational Therapy Dr. Finnur Friðriksson, Associate Professor, Faculty of Education Dr. Giorgio Baruchello, Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences Dr. Kristín Margrét Jóhannsdóttir, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education
11:45-12:45	Doctoral Supervisors	Dr. Markus Meckl, Professor (SHSS) Dr. Þóroddur Bjarnason, Professor (SHSS) Dr. Oddur Þór Vilhelmsson, Professor (SBS) Dr. Kristinn Pétur Magnússon, Professor (SBS) Dr. Sigríður Halldórsdóttir, Professor (SHS) Dr. Árún Kristín Sigurðardóttir, Professor (SHS) Dr. Finnbogi Rútur Þormóðsson, Professor emeritus (SHS)
13:00-13:45	Doctoral Students	Not disclosed (N=8)
13:45-14:30	Doctoral Council and Graduate School Director	Hulda Sædís Bryngeirsdóttir, student representative Karen Birna Þorvaldsdóttir, student representative Dr. Sigríður Halldórsdóttir, Professor SHS Dr. Guðmundur Heiðar Frímansson, Professor SHSS Dr. Grétar Þór Eyþórsson, Professor SBS Dr. Guðrún Rósa Þórsteinsdóttir, Director of the Centre for Doctoral Studies Dr. Stefán B. Sigurðsson Professor Emeritus and former Rector of UNAK
14:30-15:15	Open Meeting: Students	Not disclosed
15:15-16:15	Undergraduate students	Not disclosed (N=11)
16:30-17:15	Open Meeting: Faculty	Not disclosed

Thursday 25 November

Time	Meeting	Attendees
8:30-9:15	Masters Students	Not disclosed (N=5)
9:15-9:45	Elected Students Representatives	Nökkvi Alexander Rounak Jónsson Dagmar Ólína Gunnlaugsdóttir Agnes Ögmundsdóttir Særún Anna Brynjarsdóttir
10:00-10:45	External stakeholders (involved in student placements in field experience/practical training)	Jón Kjartan Jónsson, Managing Director, Samherji Fish farming Olga Ýr Björgvinsdóttir, Quality and Compliance Manager, Arctic Therapeutics Kristín Halldórsdóttir, Plant Manager, MS Akureyri Kristín Jóhannesdóttir, Headmaster, Giljaskóli Primary school Páley Borgþórsdóttir, District police commissioner Sólveig Hulda Valgarðsdóttir, clinical teacher at Akureyri Hospital Guðlaug Ásta Gunnarsdóttir, clinical teacher at Akureyri Hospital
11:00-11:45	External stakeholders (from community/local regional stakeholders groups involved in research collaborations).	Hildigunnur Svavarsdóttir, CEO, Akureyri Hospital Dr. Anett Blischke, Senior geoscientist, Iceland GeoSurvey Guðný Vala Þorsteinsdóttir, Biotechnologist, Icelandic Institute of Natural History Sigurður E. Sigurðsson (M.D.) chief medical executive and medical executive of surgical services, Akureyri Hospital Dr. Hilmar Janusson, Director, Genis
12:30-13:15	Equality	Sólveig Elín Þórhallsdóttir, Chair of the Equal Rights Committee Dr. Finnur Friðriksson, Associate Professor Faculty of Education Guðlaug Þóra Stefánsdóttir, Project Manager of HR and Quality

Friday 26 November

Time	Meeting	Attendees
9:00-10:00	Internationalization	Rúnar Gunnarsson, Director of International Office
10:45-11:30	Alumni	Berglind Ósk Guðmundssdóttir, Chair of Alumni Association Einar Brynjólfsson, former Chair of Alumni Association Katrín Árnadóttir, Director of Marketing and Public Relations, University of Akureyri
12:00-13:00	Heads of Support Service Units	Dr. Auðbjörg Björnsdóttir, Director, Centre for Teaching and Learning Astrid Margrét Magnúsdóttir, Director, Library and Information Services Árný Þóra Ármannsdóttir, Director of Student Counselling Bára Sif Sigurjónsdóttir, Director of Student Registration Katrín Árnadóttir, Director of Marketing and Public Relations
13:15-14:15	University Council	Dr. Eyjólfur Guðmundsson, Rector Björn Ingimarsson, Mayor of Múlaþing Karl Frímansson, Head of Division of Education, Leisure activity & Public Health at Akureyri Katrín Björg Ríkarðsdóttir, Director, Directorate of Equality Nökkvi Jónsson, President, student union Dr. Guðmundur Ævar Oddsson, Associate Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences Sigríður Margrét Sigurðardóttir, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education
16:30-17:00	Goodbye to Rector	Dr. Eyjólfur Guðmundsson, Rector