



# Institutional Review Year-on Report for Reykjavík University

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## Introduction

This report is written to inform the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education about developments at Reykjavik University since the completion of the second phase Institution-Wide Review. In particular, this report describes the progress that has been made regarding the specific areas for improvement identified by the review committee in its report. In addition, the report will briefly inform about progress being made on the key strategic targets identified by the university in its reflective analysis and on the execution of the structural changes that were made around the same time as the review was conducted.

It is with gratitude that we express the university's satisfaction with the work being done by the Quality Board through the Quality Enhancement Framework. Reykjavik University strongly supported the foundation of the Quality Board as an independent board of international experts for quality assurance in the Icelandic higher education system. We believed that doing so would provide much-needed separation from the close connections that characterize Icelandic society and bring in new insights that would strengthen Icelandic universities. That has indeed been the case, as the resulting framework and processes have not only made significant impact on the quality of Icelandic universities but has also garnered strong support from all universities and many other stakeholders in Iceland.

On behalf of Reykjavik University, we would also like to thank the Review Board for the Institution-Wide Review and the Quality Board for its cooperation in ensuring it would be as impactful as possible. It took some collaborative effort to get the plan and process for the review set up, but once that was done, the entire review process went well and had a clear positive impact on the university. The reflective analysis was as informative as it was in the first round and the review team visit was filled with good interactions and instructive content, thanks to the efforts of people on the review team and at the university. The resulting report provided useful information for the never-ending effort at the university to continue to improve.

This year-on report is structured in two parts. We first give a brief overview of developments at the university since the completion of the review in early 2020. We then address each of the issues identified in the IWR report as areas of potential improvement.

## Recent Developments

### Impact of COVID on university operations

The COVID pandemic has been ongoing for much of the time that has passed since the IWR review was completed in late 2019. It posed a considerable challenge regarding the student learning experience and core operations and had an impact on strategic prioritization. This is described in more detail below.

### Significant restrictions on universities

Iceland has until now been relatively successful in meeting the challenges associated with COVID and the government, the medical community, the public safety entities and many others deserve thanks for that. Therefore, Reykjavik University has always taken the point of view that it fully abides by whatever regulations are put in place to tackle COVID and focused on adapting to any rule changes in such a way as to minimize negative impact on students while trying to manage the unavoidable increased load on employees.

This has taken some doing, as restrictions have changed often throughout the period from March 2020 until today. The most notable list of restrictions and rule changes affecting universities are as follows:

- 16.3 2020: Gathering limited to 100 and universities closed
- 23.3 2020: Limit tightened to 20 people
- 4.5 2020: Limit relaxed to 50 people – limited opening of universities
- 13.5 2020: New summer courses and summer jobs for students
- 25.5 2020: Limit relaxed to 200 people
- 15.6 2020: 500 person limit – optional 2 meters
- 30.7 2020: 100 person limit and 2 meter rule
- 13.8 2020: 1 meter rule for schools
- 15.8 2020: Stricter rules on separated areas
- 31.8 2020: RU allowed to use hallways
- 20.9 2020: Masks mandated in universities
- 4.10 2020: Limit down to 30 persons
- 6.10 2020: 2 meter rule for capital area
- 3.11 2020: Limit down to 10 persons
- 13.11 2020: Rules relaxed to allow 30 in "important exams"
- 1.1. 2021: Limit relaxed to 50 but no mixing between groups

Each rule change had impact on teaching and other work at the university. In many cases, new procedures had to be developed and implemented, whether it had to do with online teaching, waivers for exams, physical separation of areas with the university, handling of practical projects, or any of the many other issues impacted.

### Reykjavik University was in many ways in a good position

When the pandemic hit, the university had completed two critical changes within its operations: adopting the Canvas learning system and restructuring its academic and support units.

It was crucial for the university response to the COVID pandemic that the Canvas learning system had already been implemented and was in full use. The system, along with add-ons already in place, was perfectly capable of handling a transition to fully digital teaching, virtually overnight. In addition, add-ons for online examinations and other functionality turned out to be crucial as well.

As noted during the IWR review, the university had restructured its academic units in such a way that the chairs were closer to their departments and two new deans served to provide coordination and support for their departments, as well as serve roles across the entire university. Early in 2020, the university had also revised the

structure for support units, placing key quality and collaboration under the Office of the President and all other units under one Senior Executive. These changes turned out to support very well the rapid decision-making needed during the pandemic.

The university could not have responded as well as it did without Canvas and without the new structure.

### **Quality- and student-oriented culture shone through**

Throughout responding to frequent changes in limitations due to COVID, the primary objective was always to do as much as was possible for the students, both in terms of providing as much access, support and service as was permitted at any time and in terms of ensuring the quality of their education to the greatest extent possible.

This was of course not possible without greatly increasing the workload on teachers, managers, support services, facilities, and so on. Nonetheless, the response was always in terms of finding solutions to problems and making things work. The entire group of employees, as well as the students, deserve great credit for what was done during this time.

Throughout the entire period, the university has regularly done extra surveys among students and employees to gauge their state of well-being, their ability to continue working and learning, and so forth. The results of these surveys have shown that this effort has largely been successful and more so than we often dared hope, although the negative impacts in terms of mental well-being and workload could not be avoided, as noted below.

Due to the restrictions and the subsequent focus on online teaching and interactions, it was impossible to use the traditional methods for tracking student engagement and participation. To replace that, the university developed ways to track overall how students were doing in terms of completing and turning assignments; everything from small weekly practice problems to large-scale group projects. The analysis of this tracking showed that in the fall of 2020, students kept up with assignments better, overall, than the previous year. Furthermore, students were able to complete the spring term in 2020 to a much greater extent than initially expected, in part due to various different types of leeway provided to the students in the face of the various impacts of the pandemic, such as having to take care of children that were not in school or having to handle other family or personal issues.

### **COVID's negative consequences**

Despite all the efforts outlined above, it was impossible to maintain the personal on-site student experience that characterizes Reykjavik University. For older students, this was of course a major change, but for newer students, especially those that started in the fall of 2020, this has so far created an experience that differs from their expectations and from the experience that the university strives to provide.

The surveys among students showed that the pandemic had notable impact on their mental well-being and happiness, as one would expect. Employee surveys showed greatly increased workload and some impact on well-being. Given how great the workload was before COVID, there is a limit on how long this can be maintained, even with the additional resources that the university has made available.

Finally, COVID has had less negative impact than we expected on the efforts to implement strategic objectives and make planned improvements. In some cases, the new situation actually created additional drive for moving faster. That said, it was unavoidable that certain less critical elements ended up lower on the priority list and thus have not progressed as far as intended.

### Continued implementation of 2020+ Strategy

As noted in the reflective analysis for Reykjavik University, the university is working towards the future, based on its 2020+ strategy. Underlying that strategy are the five pillars that define Reykjavik University:

- Quality education and teaching
- Impactful research and innovation
- Collaboration with industry and society
- Good workplace for employees
- Fiscal responsibility

The 2020+ strategy has objectives related to education and knowledge, with the key elements being:

- Education
  - Teaching methodology
  - Open and flexible study programs
  - Education creating opportunities
- Knowledge
  - Knowledge center
  - Leading in research
  - Innovation university

### The five core pillars

The core objectives of Reykjavik University continue to hold strong. As noted above, the student-focused quality-oriented culture has had a key role in handling the changes that came with COVID and it shows no signs of weakening. However, the restrictions have temporarily taken away some of the key elements of the Reykjavik University student experience, such as on-site, personal and close-knit learning environment. Once the pandemic is over, we will have to work to ensure that all of that comes back.

In terms of research and innovation, the university continued to perform very well, as indicated by its position on the Times-Higher Education list and in particular with respect to its standing in terms of citations. The university is also continuing to push forward with increased support for innovation among students, faculty and the society as a whole.

Although COVID has had negative impact on the day-to-day interactions between the university and industry, there has been no indication of that having any long-term impact. On the contrary, the university has actually signed new agreements for collaboration during the last year, thus continuing to strengthen its collaboration with industry and society.

There is always great focus on making sure talented employees want to work at Reykjavik University. This continues to be successful, as evidenced in the most recent surveys that show loyalty and commitment far beyond what is the norm in society. This is critical, as the university is defined by the talent and dedication of its employees.

Finally, the university continues to have good control over its operations and finances, with the primary goal of ensuring that the university can take on future hard times without having to resort to steps that would have negative impact on employees or services for students.

### **2020+: Teaching methodology**

The main objectives are to utilize digital technology to enhance student learning, to use projects to an even greater extent as drivers for learning and to increase further international collaboration and opportunities for students.

Over the last year, progress in this area has overall been better than planned. The changes associated with COVID have pushed the adoption of digital methods faster than anticipated. Teachers and students are now comfortable with a range of digital techniques for learning and teaching, while infrastructure and support have been significantly upgraded.

Furthermore, although there has been a pause in international in-person efforts to join forces between universities, the COVID period has both served as a time to reflect and has reinvigorated the interest among students for international experiences.

### **2020+: Open and flexible study programs**

The primary objectives here are to create more flexibility for students in their studies, such as through more interdisciplinary studies, more choice and increased offerings of open and shorter programs.

This has progressed largely as planned. There is a steady move towards creating more flexibility and choice for students at RU and two new short programs were started in the fall of 2020. Development of additional short programs and more flexible programs are in the pipeline.

### **2020+: Education creating opportunities**

The goal here is to expand the education that RU offers, both to offer opportunities to a broader group and to extend education to the entire career path, thus increasing students' competitiveness in a rapidly changing world. This will build on the increased study opportunities that come with digital, project-oriented, international and flexible study programs.

Furthermore, this objective is premised on increased awareness in our society concerning how technology and other developments will impact the job market and other opportunities. The university is also contributing to that effort, in collaboration with government, companies and others.

### 2020+: Knowledge center

The main goals here are to ensure that RU has strong expertise and capabilities in its fields of studies and research, and then uses that capacity to disseminate the knowledge that society needs, both from within RU and from experts abroad.

Much is going well here, including improved infrastructure and capacity for sharing knowledge with society in different ways. Another key component is the continued strong collaboration with MIT on bringing knowledge to Iceland through Reykjavik University and its partners.

The main bottleneck is the limited capacity for expanding the core academic talent pool, but with recent affirmation of increasing university funding in Iceland to Nordic levels, there is real hope for being able to grow faster in the future.

### 2020+: Leading in research

The objectives here are as clear and traditional as they get, excellent researchers, strong collaborations and quality research output.

Overall, the university stands very well, especially on the metrics of scientific publications, as seen e.g., in the international ranking by Times Higher Education, where the university is among the 350 best universities in the world and ranks in first place in terms of impact through citations.

Nonetheless, continued excellence in this area depends on the ability to expand the core faculty group, which depends on funding. The need to proactively protect the core faculty group from overwork has become clearer, in part as a result of COVID.

### 2020+: Innovation university

The university sees itself as having a critical driving role when it comes to innovation, through education, through environment and through support for startups.

Good progress is being made in this area. A small student innovation hub is up and running while plans are being made for building an innovation core connected to the university. The university already has partners working with it on that objective and plans to take the next steps in the coming months. Further education opportunities and additional support for startups from within the university are in the pipeline.

## Specific issues from report

### Design and plans for implementing QA system

**From report:** " Involve the Deans and Department Chairs in reviewing the design and plans for implementation of the University's Quality Assurance system - this should build on the existing quality cultures and commitment to strategy-driven enhancement; and should recognize opportunities provided by the new organizational structure"

**Status:**

Good progress is being made in the implementation of the university's quality assurance system and the new organizational structure is proving to work well in facilitating that work.

As noted above, the structure of support units has been streamlined and key units relating to quality assurance have been moved under the President's Office and thus now report to the president and the two deans. These include Teaching Affairs and Registry and Research Services. The increased capacity for academic leadership enabled this change, but there were also specific calls from faculty and department chairs for this step to be taken. Realizing the full benefit of this change has been delayed due to the impact of COVID pandemic on the university, but it is underway.

Development of teaching methodology and quality assurance, based on the 2020+ strategy, is also moving forward in departments and schools. The new structure has facilitated these efforts by enabling departments to focus on the advancement of their programs, while the coordination is managed at the school and university levels. This can for example be seen in the objectives and budget for 2021, where the overall goals are provided university wide, while individual units can identify how they best achieve them.

Finally, as further outlined below, the deans, the president and the department chairs have worked together on revision of evaluations and promotion processes for academic faculty and teaching staff, which are also an integral part of the quality assurance system.

### Informing future Subject-Level Reviews

**From report:** " Consider how the revised Quality Assurance system (referred to above) can be used to inform efficient implementation of future Subject-Level Reviews"

#### **Status:**

The revised quality assurance system, combined with the organizational changes made, has already had notable positive impact on the implementation of Subject-Level Reviews. In particular, there are three key elements worth noting; the management of reviews based on schools, improved guidance to departments and new central oversight and support.

The new organization of schools and departments has enabled us to better manage the efforts within each cycle of SLRs. Thus, the timeline for the SLR work divides the academic departments into two phases, ensuring proper support is available to each department and increases the oversight of the SLR work.

- The four departments within the School of Social Science; Business, Law, Psychology, and Sport Science, will carry out SLR work and submit a final report during the Spring 2021 semester.
- The three departments within the School of Technology; Applied Engineering, Computer Science, and Engineering, to carry out SLR work and submit a final report in the Fall 2021 semester.

It is worth noting that the additional support offered by the quality assurance system and increased centralized coordination is enabling more synergy between the SLR work and international accreditation efforts. For example, both the Department of Business and Department of Computer Science are also undertaking external accreditations during 2021.

The second element worth noting relates to improved guidance and coordination, led by Teaching Affairs. In part, this is in the form of SLR templates that outline sections of the report and provide guidance on the content. Thus, each section has a clear breakdown of all information required, for example, a list of prompt questions to be answered within the section. In addition, Teaching Affairs developed SLR Guidelines that provide further details on the process, such as the steps to undertake when selecting and working with an external expert. Each department receives the template and guidelines before work on the SLR begins as well as a kick-off meeting with an SLR project manager provided by the university to the department.

That leads to the third element, which is greatly increased central support and coordination. A key component in that development is the addition of a project manager from the President's Office who has been assigned to oversee the SLR work for all departments. The project manager is responsible for overseeing communication with the SLR committees assigned in each department, management of project timeline, data collection, support in writing the text of the report (editing and structure of the text), organization of visit with the external expert, and all other administrative tasks as needed to ensure that the SLR work runs efficiently. That has also ensured the rapid adoption of best practices between the various departments.

The development of SLR processes, based on the quality assurance system, is of course always work in progress, but indications are that the above-mentioned improvements are already having notable positive impact.

### **Provide more pedagogic and technical support to teaching staff**

**From report:** " Strengthen and widen the range of support for pedagogic and technological competence to include all people with teaching roles, in particular sessional staff and teaching assistants."

#### **Status:**

Good progress has been made in this respect and that has also provided a stronger and better foundation for dealing with the sudden changes to teaching methodology that came with the COVID pandemic. The primary objectives have been to strengthen Teaching Affairs in this aspect and increase focus on such developments across the university.

Teaching Affairs has increased focus and staffing related to pedagogic and technical support for teaching staff. This has been done in part by existing members taking on the combination of pedagogic and technical training, as these two must align well in development and training of teaching staff. In addition, additional hires have been made for experts in digital technology, including media such as videos, online tests,

projects and quizzes, as well as integration of these elements into the digital learning system Canvas. As noted above, Teaching Affairs has also been moved to be directly under the Office of the President.

It is worth mentioning a few examples of expanded efforts by Teaching Affairs to provide pedagogic and technical training for teaching staff:

- New two-part online course for new teachers, introducing online teaching, learning and assessment, along with an introduction to the Canvas learning system.
- Ongoing development of instructional guides for using Canvas. For example, course on using SpeedGrader to provide better in-document feedback to students.
- Research-based project focused on mathematics course, developing a new structure for digital teaching through videos, online quizzes and interactions.
- Multiple internal presentations on using technology to support "flipped learning".
- Workshops and pilot projects on group work evaluation, in support of more project-driven learning.

In addition, Teaching Affairs was able to quickly develop additional training and support for teaching staff when the impact of the COVID pandemic hit university operations in March 2020. Just to name a few examples (most of which are available to teachers any time online):

- Course: Talking about teaching online - pivoting to online teaching and learning
- Material: Guide to teaching technology
- Material: Principles and practice of effective blended online teaching
- Course: Talking about teaching online - pivoting to online assessment
- Material: Canvas quizzes: How you can use them to design assessment for open-book, online context
- Multiple internal presentations
- Multiple department workshops and seminars
- Course level design and implementation solutions

All of this work will continue to be applicable after the COVID pandemic is over and thus is also contributing to the abovementioned expansion of support for teaching staff in the long term. Additionally, Teaching Affairs has provided consultation and assistance to individual teachers throughout the COVID impact period.

Across the university, the focus is also on increased teaching quality, advancing teaching methodology and using technology to support learning. This can be seen within the departments where multiple teachers are developing new approaches and sharing them with their colleagues. Additional funding is also being provided for such developments, both through an already-established Teaching Fund and through allocation of 2021 budget for department-driven projects for improving teaching. Finally, significant investment has been made in better infrastructure and support for technology in teaching, in terms of both hardware and software. One example is

a new studio for creating digital content, available to all teachers, including sessional staff.

### Expediate implementation of Student Information System

**From report:** " Expedite the implementation of a Student Information System."

**Status:**

Progress in this area has been slower than hoped for, but nonetheless, progress is being made along the path that has been outlined for this objective.

It should be noted that implementing a new Student Information System is one component in the transition away from the outdated system MySchool, albeit a very large and important one. The old system bundled together a lot of different functionality, including learning management system, student information system, teaching survey system, group management and grading system, continuous education, and so on. Thus, the strategy has been to replace all this functionality with the best suitable software for each purpose, while using a data warehouse as a safe and trackable system for storing and retrieving student information.

As was noted in the reflective analysis and meetings during the IWR, the replacement of the student information system component was well underway when the software provider backed out, based on not being able to fulfil the multi-language requirements of RU. After finding no better options in the market, the decision was made to split the problem into a curriculum management system and student information system. The immediate next step was to find and implement a curriculum management system. For various reasons, limited progress has been made since the IWR completed and the next milestone - a set of realistic options for curriculum management systems - is scheduled for March this year.

Still, some progress on the overall effort has been made during the last year, as the continuous education and group management and grading components are being replaced. The group management system became operational during the fall of 2020 and the continuous education system should be up and running in April 2021.

A reporting system, Prevero, has been purchased and work is underway to connect that to the data warehouse to provide more user-friendly access to all key data about students. This is being done in close collaboration with those most involved in student information data, including department offices, support for reporting and accreditations, management, etc.

### Support academic staff in managing online student interactions

**From report:** " Support academic staff with techniques and technologies to help them efficiently manage large volumes of student online inquiries and emails."

**Status:**

Prior to the COVID pandemic impact, efforts on providing guidelines and support were underway in those fields where such support was most urgently needed, in particular in the School of Technology.

The sudden shift to fully online teaching and learning in March 2020, when the authorities closed universities for undergraduate and masters-level students, greatly changed the dynamics of online student interactions. As noted above, the various levels of restrictions that have been in place during the primary teaching periods, have forced the university to have most of the larger classes mostly or fully online, while all classes are at least partly online.

It goes without saying that this has significantly added to the workload on teachers; not only due to online interactions with students, but due to additional work needed to provide online content, alternative approaches to projects and evaluations, etc.

The work that was done prior to the COVID pandemic impact seems to have had a positive impact in providing guidelines and support but work on this must be picked up again as the shorter-term intervals of different COVID restrictions give way to a new norm where hybrid on-site and online teaching will become the norm.

### Explore career review and development processes

**From Report:** "Involve senior academic staff to explore the benefits of introducing a career review and development process for a wider and longer-term view than the current annual Faculty Contribution Report through a process to include and acknowledge teaching and service in addition to research."

**Status:**

Good progress has been made in this area. Immediately following the IWR, work was started in reviewing how academic career track could be better managed and supported, for both traditional academic tracks and teaching-focused tracks. The result of this work has three primary components:

- Revised promotion support and management process for the traditional academic titles, putting focus on progress tracking and support within each department, while utilizing the schools for quality control.
- Definition of a new teaching track with similar structure as the traditional academic track, but with different titles, based on what has been done in other universities.
- Plans for expansion of the Faculty Contribution Record to include teaching track evaluation, which will also impact evaluations in the traditional track when it comes to the teaching component of the academic job.

The first two elements were done in close collaboration with department chairs and the faculties of different departments. In addition, working groups with academic participation contributed greatly to the development of the processes. Implementation of the final component has not been kicked off formally yet, but discussions about the teaching track by academic departments and curriculum council have already contributed to that effort.

At this time, the revised promotion process for traditional academic positions has been approved and put into effect. The teaching promotion track is undergoing final revisions before being put up for approval. The revision of the Faculty Contribution Record will follow immediately after that.

### **Increase transparency and formalization when hiring sessional teachers**

**From Report:** "Increase transparency and formalization in the selection and appointment of sessional teachers."

**Status:**

Good progress has been made in terms of oversight and formalization of contracts with sessional teachers. Making and signing contracts with such teaching staff is being centralized and moved online, providing a foundation for better tracking. Furthermore, the rigor of teacher training for that group has been increased and the level of participation has also risen.

Nonetheless, work remains to be done in terms of making the process for the hire of sessional teachers, especially new ones that do not have prior experience with the university more uniform across departments and in line with best practices within the university. This work has gotten delayed by the impact of the COVID pandemic so the timeframe will be later than originally planned.

### **Consider encouraging shared support for international research applications**

**From Report:** "Consider whether the University could encourage the creation of an Icelandic common resource to support applications for international research programmes."

**Status:**

This discussion has not yet been started with other universities or the government. Currently, collaborative efforts for shared support have focused on support for technology transfer and innovation. In addition, Rannís does have a supporting role when it comes to research fund applications, so this also needs to be considered in that context.

Nonetheless, once interactions with partner universities abroad become normal again, we will follow up on this by finding best practices that we can build on.