

**Review of the Action Plan Submitted
by Bifröst University in relation to the
findings of the Institution-Wide
Review Report of Bifröst University
published in September 2015**

February 2016



Preface

This report is based on a meeting between representatives of Bifröst University and representatives of Bifröst University Review Team appointed by the Icelandic Quality Board for Higher Education held at the offices of Rannís in Reykjavík on February 1, 2016. The purpose of the meeting was to review the University's progress in addressing concerns raised in the 2015 Institutional Review Report that resulted in the following judgment:

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

In preparation for this visit, the University addressed five areas of concern from the 2015 review, submitting a report with supplements in November 2015, together with an update of further progress in January 2016. The final conclusions followed consideration of the Team's draft report by the Icelandic Quality Board for Higher Education.

The following people attended the meeting:

- From Bifröst University: Vilhjálmur Egilsson, Rector, Ólafur Ísleifsson, Director of Quality, Sigurður Ragnarsson, Head of the Department of Business, Sigrún Jónsdóttir Director of Academic Services, Þorbjörg Gunnlaugsdóttir, Head of the Department of Law, and Helga Kristín Auðunsdóttir, Assistant Professor, and Sigrún Lilja Einarsdóttir, Head of the Department of Social Sciences.
- From the Institutional Review Team: Barbara Brittingham, Crichton Lang. Secretariat: Þorsteinn Gunnarsson.

The representatives of the Institutional Review Team found the material submitted by Bifröst University to be pertinent and comprehensive and the discussions with the University Team to be positive, forthcoming and productive.

Below are the five areas addressed and the Team's findings in each area, as well as the conclusions of the Team's report.

Professor Norman Sharp OBE

Chair of the Icelandic Quality Board for Higher Education

Barbara Brittingham

Chair of the Bifröst University Review Team

Sigurður Óli Sigurðsson

Manager of the Icelandic Quality Board for Higher Education

1. Data to support securing the academic standards of the University's awards.

Within its update report (November 2015) the University has set out a wide range of key data that it will collect. These data relate to a number of areas:

- Key data for public institutions
- Data on Research and Collaboration
- Student Data (demography, applications, attainment etc)
- Study-break analysis and re-enrolment data
- Departmental transfer data (BU continuing education/Gateway/undergraduate/ postgraduate)
- Data on Teaching (student engagement)
- Data on Academic and other staff (including student feedback and course evaluation)

Within each group there are a range of specific indicators, and the planned timing for the collection and analysis of the data is set out against a Gantt chart for the 2015/16 Academic Year. This chart also clearly articulates responsibility for data collection, whether the data is collected once or multiple times during the year, and the destination of the data (either externally, or with the internal structures and officers of the University). The University was able to talk around the data collected during December 2015 and January 2016 which had previously been presented as a Data Working Group update to the Team. The Data Working Group (one of several put in place in Autumn 2015) is led by the Rector, the Director of Academic Services, the LMS Manager, and the Departmental Head, Social Sciences.

The University recognises that this is an extensive process that needs to be completed but that this will be done in a phased manner as set out in the planned Gantt Chart. The University also recognises that while the data currently identified for collection is extensive, it is not necessarily definitive. However, it will be through analysis of the initial data that the University will be able to determine the refinements to data sets or collection processes that it will wish to put in place.

Perhaps more importantly, the initial data gathering exercise will allow the University to select a set of critical or lead performance indicators against which

to measure institutional progress and to benchmark against other institutions. These performance indicators will in due course form the basis of a publicly visible dashboard, with lower level performance indicators perhaps forming the basis of non-public, operational dashboards for example at the level of Departments or specific services within the University. Key elements of this initial analysis are already presented on the University's website.

The Team discussed several areas of early analysis with the University, including study-break analysis, ECTS credit loads, and the attendance rates on study weekends and the Team is reassured that the University will make appropriate use of the enhanced data in reviewing its strategies for curriculum and learner support. In relation to its agenda for growth in student numbers, it is clear that the data on student satisfaction, conversion of applications to enrollments, and on student attrition is seen by the University as beneficial to its enhancement activities and interventions.

In relation to alumni data, the University will begin systematic data collection and analysis on graduates using the Zenter system in 2016, and will repeat this survey every 5 years. This action is one of a group of Enhancement Priorities for calendar year 2016, updates against which were presented to the Team. It is reassuring that the updated Bifröst University Strategic Plan for 2016-2020 already details a number of areas for future growth and improvement e.g. staff qualifications profile, where the planned data sets will very clearly support both monitoring and forward strategy. Other data-related priorities include a general assessment of the modular system and flipped classroom, a systematic data compiling project with regularly updated dashboard, further definition and assignment of responsibilities in the handling, interpretation and application of data, benchmarking and redefinition of key statistics. The Team noted that appropriate lead officers are identified for all Enhancement Priorities.

In parallel with the developments in data collection and use the University is undertaking a Needs Analysis of the LMS and registration system, this itself being one of the enhancement priorities for 2016. The Needs Analysis will include student input. The University has already reflected that a move to a

different platform is likely to be required in the medium-term, but that it can justify investment in development of the current system to secure the additional functionality required at the present time.

Summary: The University has set out comprehensive plans to secure and refine the data that it needs to support the institutional mission and priorities, and has linked these clearly to its strategic planning and to evaluation and further development of its LMS system and data capture and analysis workflows. While this is admittedly a work in progress, the Team concluded that this is well thought out, and has appropriate timelines attached to it. Providing the work is completed as planned it will serve the University well on a number of fronts.

2. Strategic plan that includes how the University will continue to strengthen its practice in securing the academic standards of its awards.

Bifröst University's Strategic Plan 2016-2020 was approved by the University Council on 12 November 2015 and by the University Board on 13 November 2015; the same meeting at which the 2016 budget was approved. The Team finds that the Plan draws significantly and usefully on the foundational material that was available at the time of the March 2015 visit (e.g., the SWOT analysis), further enhanced by the work of departments and units in identifying priorities and coalesced at the University's annual September Strategic Session. The plan includes assigned responsibilities and timeframes and is notably focused on securing the academic standards of the University's awards.

Given the rapid changes at the University and its current budget constraints, Bifröst has declared 2016 to be a "year of stability," and no new programs will be introduced unless they come from outside initiatives (for example, being selected as the home of a new Police Academy to serve all of Iceland). For this year of stability, the University has framed its plan on three themes: "Do better," "Be more efficient," and "Do more," and each major office or unit has listed its priority actions under one of the three themes.

The list of “enhancements” seems to the Team to be realistic, focused, and crucial to securing the academic standards of the University’s awards. Several enhancements relate to compiling and using better data, assessing the modular system, beginning benchmarking activities, and ensuring that the annual teacher coaching program is sufficiently interesting to attract instructors. Similarly, several of the priorities of key staff relate directly to further securing the academic standards of the University’s awards (e.g., helping instructors use the functionality of MySchool to track and support students, regular revision of the study lines)

Goals for 2017-2020 include increasing the proportion of permanent academic staff with Ph.D. degrees to 50% (through hiring and also providing support for continuing faculty to pursue Ph.D. studies), a systematic review of courses with respect to content and delivery, and significant investment in new technology. University support for current faculty to pursue the Ph.D. is seen quite positively by the faculty and is particularly important in the Law Department, where until recently, as a field, there has not been a general expectation that faculty would have doctoral degrees. (The Department of Social Sciences, by way of contrast, reports that by Fall 2016, all continuing faculty will be doctorally qualified.)

The University intends to continue with its strategic plan, updating it each year following the September Strategic Session.

The Team finds that effective progress has been made on strategic planning. Key personnel were involved in establishing priorities, the plan appears reasonable and focused, it was approved through both internal and external governance bodies, and it is clearly related to the institution’s budget.

The Team also notes that the annual process to refresh the plan can helpfully draw upon an assessment of the progress in achieving the prior year’s goals, as well as an analysis of their continuing pertinence. As the institution further develops its capacity to gather, analyze, and use data, and further refines its ability to define key performance indicators and establish external benchmarks, its capacity for effective planning will develop still further.

Summary. Bifröst University developed and approved a strategic plan for 2016-2020. The plan is realistic given the University's recent changes and challenges and has an appropriate focus on ensuring that the University can secure the academic standards of its awards.

3. Approval and implementation of an appropriate model to hire academic staff and key university officers.

The University has reviewed its processes for the appointment of academic staff against Icelandic legislation and made appropriate changes to these. The Rector is responsible for hiring new staff members on the basis of new positions being advertised in the media with applicants being reviewed by an Evaluation Committee, consisting of both internal and external members, all holding a PhD qualification or equivalent. The Rector is responsible for interviews of selected candidates, with the aid of the Vice-Rector and Departmental Head where appropriate. The Rector makes a decision at the end of this process.

In relation to senior appointments (e.g. Vice-Rector, Departmental Heads), a similar process will prevail with the Evaluation Committee being constituted with special regard to management experience.

A Promotion Committee, following the same model as the Evaluation Committee, considers applications for promotion to Associate Professor and Professor.

Previous University Regulations have been revised to reflect these changes and the rules surrounding remit and operation of the Evaluation Committees are set out in a new University Regulation. These were approved by the University's Academic Council and Board of Governors in November 2015.

The Team received evidence of all of the formal regulatory changes and were able to discuss with the University its early experiences of the new processes.

Summary. The team is pleased to conclude that the University has made appropriate changes to its protocols for academic recruitment and promotion.

4. Governance study to ensure that the academic governance system can efficiently and effectively strengthen the University's ability to secure the academic standards of its awards.

The University has appointed a governance task force with appropriate campus representation and significant externals, including a Professor and former head of a large academic department from the University of Iceland and the founding Rector of Reykjavik University. Five meetings of this task force had been held at the time of the meeting, and five sets of minutes have been submitted to the Team.

From the March 2015 visit, the team's principle concern was that the governance structure, (the many councils and committees) seemed overly complex and perhaps redundant, with several individuals having appointments to multiple groups that considered broadly the same issue, with associated problems of potential inefficiencies and/or undue influence on the same issue. Perhaps not surprisingly, the task force is considering questions of organization (e.g., Should financial services and marketing be merged?) and roles and responsibilities (e.g., the role of the Rector vis a vis the role of the Vice Rector) as well as governance (e.g., Should the Academic Council and the Quality Council be combined?)

At the time of the meeting, the Team noted that no clear outcomes had yet been identified, but some clear principles had been articulated, namely: the resulting governance should be simpler; should be related to the University's strategy; and, the independence of the academic departments should be taken into account. University representatives indicated that a full proposal would be developed by March for consideration by the Rector and the Board prior to its implementation.

The Team also noted that while the governance task force has not yet produced any tentative plans, it has also included an examination of the organization and

roles of key individuals within the organization. Notwithstanding the challenging nature of such a task (at any institution), the task force expressed its determination to produce an actionable proposal within the next two months.

Summary. The Team welcomed the establishment and progress to date of the governance task force with appropriate internal and external representation. It noted that it has already held five meetings, and will make proposals before the end of March 2016. The Team urges the University to complete this review and act upon it as planned.

5. University financial resources

The financial position of Bifröst University continues to be hampered by lack of financial resources. Yet the financial situation has improved over the past year. The University has successfully refinanced its debt, resulting in somewhat more flexibility in the operating budget. In the 2016 state budget, Bifröst also receives an additional one-time contribution to secure its financial health. The University's contract with the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture stipulates that student numbers are one of the bases for proposing governmental contributions to the University, however, in recent years the National Budget Bill has instead chosen to emphasise an increase in funding per student, rather than reward increase in student numbers per se.

Summary. Because Bifröst University has re-financed its debt and received increased support from the government, it is gaining some measure of increased flexibility in its budget.

6. Conclusions

Following the visit of the Team to Bifrost University on 1st February 2016 and consideration of the Team's draft Report, the Quality Board concluded that the 'Confidence judgement' in relation to securing the academic standards of the awards of the University should now be raised to 'Confidence'.

In making this recommendation, the Board has listened carefully to the assurance provided by the University, that it will complete the key actions set out in its November 2015 update-report and discussed with the Team during the meeting on 1st February 2016. We are reassured that, like ourselves, the University sees these as critical to its future success.

Although, inevitably, these actions will evolve with time and in response to changing external challenges and opportunities, the Team has strongly encouraged the University to further develop and implement these areas over the coming years. While reassured that the University is making substantial progress against the areas highlighted for their consideration following the original Institutional review in 2015 these will obviously be points of reference for future annual meetings of the Quality Board and Bifröst University, and the next scheduled Institutional Review of the University.

Finally, in commending the progress made by the University and in concluding the follow-up Review, it is the Board's view that:

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