INSTITUTION-WIDE REVIEW

Hólar University

March 2020

Quality Board
for Icelandic Higher Education

Preface

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

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

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

- Quality Board-led Institution-Wide Reviews (IWRs);

- University-led Subject-Level Reviews (SLRs);

- University-led Year-on and Mid-Term Progress reports;

- Annual meetings between universities and Quality Board members to discuss institutional developments, including in quality assurance;

- Quality Council-led enhancement workshops and conferences;

- Quality Board-led special reviews.

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

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Chair   Manager

Glossary and List of Abbreviations

DAFB. Department of Aquaculture and Fish Biology.

DES. Department of Equine Science.

DRT. Department of Rural Tourism.

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

QEF. Quality Enhancement Framework for Icelandic Higher Education.

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

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

MESC. Ministry of Education, Science and Culture in Iceland.

Network of Public Universities in Iceland. Venue for collaboration and resource sharing for the four public universities in Iceland.

QEF. Quality Enhancement Framework.

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

University Board. The governing body of the university according to the law public universities, chaired by the Rector. One member appointed by MESC, two members appointed by university's University Forum, one student member appointed by the students of the University, and two external members nominated by members of the Board themselves.

University Forum. A common meeting of all staff, as well as 10 student representatives, according to regulations set by the University Board. According to Icelandic law on public universities, the University Forum is to be held annually.

Review Team

The following experts comprised the Review Team:

Crichton Walker Lang, Chair. Vice-Chancellor, University of the Highlands and Islands.

Ågot Aakra. Dean, Faculty of Chemistry, Biotechnology and Food Sciences, Norwegian University of Life Sciences.

Teitur Erlingsson, student representative. Former Vice-Chairperson, National Association of Icelandic Students.

Susan Hunter, President Emerita, University of Maine.

Kerstin Norén. Professor Emerita, University of Gothenburg, Sweden, and former Rector at University College West and former Rector at Karlstadt University.

1. Introduction: the review in context

1.1. Overview of review process

In the second cycle of the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF2), Hólar University's Institution-Wide Review (IWR) visit took place in November 2019, with the report published on March 16, 2020. Hólar University (the University) submitted its Reflective Analysis (RA) for purposes of this review on September 10, 2019 and gave the Review Team (the Team) access to supporting documentation via an online file storage system. The University plans to implement a cycle of Subject-Level Reviews (SLRs) in QEF2s starting in Fall 2020. In the previous QEF cycle (QEF1), the University participated in IWR in 2013, and implemented SLRs during the period 2014-2015.

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

1.2. About the institution

The mission of Hólar University is to enhance knowledge and professionalism in its three fields of study (aquaculture, fish biology and aquatic ecology; equine science; tourism studies, events and hospitality management). This emphasis is reflected in the University's three Departments: Department of Aquaculture and Fish Biology (DAFB); Department of Equine Science (DES); and Department of Rural Tourism (DRT). The University aims to continuously further strengthen and develop teaching and research in its programmes; contribute high quality students and research findings to society and specialised industries; maintain and develop further the facilities and work

environment of the University; and foster and develop national and international teaching and research collaboration.

In terms of number of students at university level, Hólar University is the second smallest of Iceland's seven universities and is based in Hólar í Hjaltadal in the North-West of Iceland in the municipality of Skagafjörður. The total resident population of Hólar í Hjaltadal is approximately 150. Hólar has been a seat of learning since 1106, when a cathedral school was founded in the bishopry of Hólar. The University of Hólar was accredited as a University in 2007, which was an upgrade from its then-status as an agricultural college. The University's buildings are primarily at Hólar í Hjaltadal and most of the on-campus teaching happens in one main building that also houses administrative offices and a cafeteria. Riding halls, outdoor riding tracks, student residences and aquaculture facilities are also to be found at Hólar í Hjaltadal. One of Iceland's largest fisheries companies, (FISK Seafood Company) located in nearby Sauðárkrókur, also donates the use of substantial laboratory and office space in its headquarters to DAFB.

The University is currently operating under its *Strategic Policy* for years 2016-2020, which defines the main pillars of the University as: purpose; learning and teaching; and research. A number of broad actions are listed under each pillar, for example:

- Working with other public universities in Iceland, through the Network of Public Universities in Iceland (purpose);
- Strengthening Master's study programmes (learning and teaching);
- Creating conditions for joint research activities of its Departments (research).

Subsumed under the University's *Strategic Policy* are specific aims for each of its three Departments. The aims of the Departments reflect different emphases on research, sustainability, and stakeholder and industry relations, to name some examples. However, all Departments state a strong commitment to the educational mission of the University. The University recently approved a set of

core values to guide all its work: professionalism, respect, and creativity, which will feed into the development of its next policy, set to take effect in 2021.

1.3. Funding/resourcing

Hólar University is a public university and is financed to a large extent by direct funding from the government through the same funding model as the other public universities in Iceland. As reported in the RA, external revenues, primarily in the form of service fees, various grants for research and development and sales of products, have represented a considerable proportion of the University's financing. The total independent income has increased by 97% from 2014 to 2018. Although similar in ISK for the last five years, the proportion of external revenues has decreased from 45% to 30% of the total income. In the past five years, the total operating costs have increased by 33%, which can mostly be explained by an increased salary cost of over 40%. As noted above in 1.2, and explained in more detail in Sections 5.4 and 6.5 below, the University also receives considerable support in the form of access to research infrastructure from a local fisheries company.

1.4. Staff

The University reported in its RA that it employed 48 academic and other staff at the time of submission, with the majority of those holding full-time positions. Of those, 20% are international. The gender balance of staff at the University is approximately even, both for academic and other staff. The University actively participates every year in 'Equality Days', a series of events hosted by the public universities. Finally, the University is in the early stages of a strategic plan to achieve equal pay certification, which is a legal requirement for public institutions in Iceland. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture Key Statistics for calendar year 2017 show 31 staff classified as 'academic staff' with full-time appointments and 19 as sessional (part-time) staff. Forty-five percent of academic staff were female, according to the Key Statistics. Of academic staff, 5 were Professors, 2 docents, and 11 lectors. The remaining academic staff were classified as 'other.' The university-

wide staff-student ratio was at 1:5.3, based on annual full-time equivalencies for both staff and students.

1.5. Students

The University reported in its RA that 179 students were registered at the University at the time of submission, and that this number has been fairly stable since 2015. A significant majority of students are female (82%), and approximately 20% of students are international. The largest Department is DRT, with slightly over 100 students in its blended studies programmes. DES has close to 60 students in their on-campus programmes, whereas DAFB has 21 students with a mixture of on-campus and blended learning students. An additional 20 international students registered at other universities undertake their doctoral studies or internships at DAFB, although they are not formally registered with the University. The average age of all students is approximately 30. The youngest student population is in DES, with an average age of 23 years. The average age of DRT and DAFB students is around 33 and 35 years, respectively.

According to the Key Statistics for calendar year 2017, student headcount was 187, with approximately 143 annual full-time equivalent students. Of those 187 students, 75% were female. Student numbers by degree cycle are also provided in Key Statistics for 2017. Fifty-three students were at the Diploma level, 116 students were at the baccalaureate level, and 18 at the Masters level.

1.6. Key committee and managerial structures

Hólar University is governed by a University Board, chaired by the Rector. There is one member appointed by MESC, two members appointed by Hólar's University Forum, one student member appointed by the students of HU, and two external members nominated by members of the Board themselves. These arrangements are in accordance with Law 85/2008 on public universities in Iceland.

The University Forum is a common meeting of all staff, as well as 10 student representatives, according to regulations set by the University Board. According to the law on Public Universities, the University Forum is to be held annually to discuss the general policy formation for the University in the areas of instruction and research, plans of operations and various other relevant affairs.

The University's Management Team consists of the Rector, the heads of the three academic Departments and the Director of Finance (who leads the Division of Operations and Services). The Management Team is collectively in charge of daily operations and coordinates the work of divisions and Departments. The Rector is the head of the university's administration and works under the authority of the University Board, which is ultimately responsible for the operations of the university.

The Division of Academic Affairs (DAA) is primarily responsible for admissions, student affairs, monitoring the quality of education and study programmes, and the procedure of graduation. The Division of Graduate Studies (DGS) is responsible for the same activities at the graduate level. These two divisions (DAA/DGS) are managed by the same person, in consultation with the Academic Affairs Committee and Graduate Studies Committee, respectively. The Division of Research is responsible for supporting research activities in the University, offering support to researchers, managing the University's research fund and for monitoring the quality of research. The division's activities are mainly carried out by the Research Committee.

1.7. The Reflective Analysis

The RA submitted by the University was considered by the Review Team (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 were impressed with the open and reflective nature of the document and with the number of appropriate and helpful annexes appended to it. Where significant actions were recent or ongoing this was largely clear from the text of the RA. Linking of the present IWR to the processes of the wider QEF, including SLR, the previous IWR in

2013 and the additional IWR follow-up report in 2016, was evident and constructive, as was a level of forward action planning embedded within the RA and in context with the reflective process being undertaken by the University. Only a few additional information requests were made by Team members ahead of the main review visit (and these were only around specific points of detail). However, individual Team members did all note that formal use of data, including the use of key performance indicators and other quantitative benchmarks including student feedback, to the extent they would have anticipated, was not readily apparent from the RA or the annexes provided.

1.8. Summary evaluation

The Team formed an initial view from the RA that Hólar University was a highly distinctive University in relation to history, location, size and the specialist and applied nature of the academic portfolio. They also gained a sense of the very distinct features of each of the Departments and the respective stages of their strategic planning and current activities.

The Team approached the visit with a commitment to work with this initial view, to engage with the distinctive nature of the University, and to implement the QEF2 methodology in ways that would be helpful to the University. The Team quickly gained a sense of a developing quality culture that was being embedded throughout the structure at all levels. This was evidenced in discussions with both students and staff.

There was, however, also a sense of an institution that for its size has quite complex operational structures and a high level of devolution of responsibilities for shaping operation and strategy to Departmental level. Although this leads to a highly inclusive operation, going into the main visit the Team were a little unclear as to the precise operational relationship between the Management Team and the Departmental structures, and of the levels of formality around monitoring and performance management, including data use, that existed.

In summary, the Team formed a view of a University that is taking proactive measures to develop across the full breadth of activities, and to engage effectively with a wide range of stakeholders

relevant to its highly applied and industry-linked nature. The Team had a clear sense that the University has used previous experiences of IWR and SLR positively to shape strategies for change and improvement, and that it is progressing these effectively within the limitations of its resources. Indeed, it was clear just how far the University has developed since the 2013 IWR.

2. Learning from prior reviews

2.1. Learning from previous IWR

In the 2013 IWR during QEF1, Hólar University received a judgement of confidence in the current and future standards of awards, but a judgement of limited confidence in their arrangements to secure the quality of the student learning experience.

Following the 2013 IWR, the University put in place an action plan to improve the academic environment for both students and staff. In 2016, following the submission of a follow-up report and a meeting between representatives of the 2013 IWR Team and senior staff from the University, the judgement in this area was upgraded to one of confidence.

The 2016 report supporting this judgement focuses on the following areas of development:

1. Creating a coherent, reflective and analytical institutional culture, with effective strategic planning;

2. Strengthening quality assurance infrastructure;

3. Strengthening the student voice and all aspects of student support;

4. Strengthening staff support, including a system of staff development;

5. The need for an explicit and realistic research policy;

6. Creating transparent and consistent processes for the assessment of student work;

7. The need for a comprehensive review of distance learning provision, in terms of contact, support, equipment and programme content.

The 2016 report states:

As is evident from the quantity of documentation submitted, in the two and more

years since the (2013) IWR Report ... there is a clear feeling of ownership of what is being

put in place. Not all of the documentation is fully developed: strategic planning has been

cultivated 'from the bottom up', with teaching staff and student involvement, with the

result that Departmental Action Plans are both more visionary and more practical than

some of the Institutional Policy documents. The Institutional Action Plan, submitted in

October 2015, is more encouraging for future planning. It delineates three areas of

strategy - culture and outreach; teaching and learning; and research – with objectives,

dates, responsibilities, deliverables, etc. Though its approach is fairly broad-brush and

financial implications are not analysed, it looks workable.

Other policy papers – on research, for example – appear somewhat less impressive

than the activities they relate to. But both programme documentation and pedagogical

guidance are increasingly well thought-out. There is also a definite feeling now of an

effective institutional Team: The Rector and senior staff are more confident in their

executive management; the re-constituted University Board is fully engaged and has

regular reporting mechanisms…. Many institutional processes are still in the course of

being formalised – programme validation, monitoring and review, aspects of assessment

and feedback, policies for equal opportunity and disability issues, for example; but there is

now expectation that development in these areas will continue

The present RA set out summaries of key areas of activity and revised processes relating to the 2016

action plan, with comprehensive supporting annexes. Some of these areas were discussed more fully

in the main sections of the RA. Where the Team felt that it was necessary, these topics were

explored further in dialogue with staff and students during the main visit.

The Team undertaking the present IWR would affirm that the direction of travel established in 2016

has been maintained, and in the majority of the areas listed above there has been substantial

further progress. In particular we would note, positively, the obvious coherence of the University Board and of the Management Team, the strength of the Research Policy and Strategy, the emerging Quality Policy and associated policy documents, initiatives to support staff development, the growing levels of student engagement, and the work undertaken so far to embed Learning Outcomes within academic planning and delivery.

Some areas have not developed as significantly since 2016, but overall and within the constraints of size and budget, the University is continuing to make progress or plan activities on all fronts. There are of course further enhancements that can be made, enhancement is a continual process, and the comments of the present review Team in this report are therefore intended to be supportive rather than critical in that respect. However, the balance between 'formal' and 'informal' approaches and the use of analytical/data driven tools to support operation and monitoring remain, as in the 2013/2016 reports, key areas for further reflection identified by the Team.

To again cite from the 2016 report 'Hólar has begun, to quote one of its senior faculty, to "make the system work for it" and is reaping some of the benefits.' This view, of the benefits of the learning from the 2013 IWR, 2015 Action Plan, and changes and actions which it triggered in the University's approaches to its operation is still evident, and the Team was greatly reassured by the positive views expressed about the IWR and SLR processes that had been undertaken to date, and the benefit of what it learns from open engagement with those processes. This was expressed at both institutional level and (in context of the SLRs) in meetings with both management and departmental staff.

2.2. Learning from SLRs

All three departments undertook SLR in QEF1 between 2014 and 2015. As this followed the 2013 IWR, this allowed the SLR approach to build on the reflection and action planning from the 2013 IWR. This awareness of the connected nature of the different elements of the QEF was clearly visible to the Team in dialogue with management, including the departmental heads.

The team for each of the departmental SLRs included a member from another department (to support cross-departmental perspectives and learning) and a student member. Each SLR resulted in a number of actions relevant to departmental strategies and enhancement needs. Summaries were included in the RA and the SLR reports were appended as annexes. Departmental staff were positive about the benefits of the SLR process and understood the links to institutional strategy and the whole QEF, although noting that at the time it had seemed to involve a lot of effort and that the benefit had maybe only been apparent afterwards. This is obviously a learning process and the University should be able to further reinforce positive engagement with SLRs in the next round now that staff have experienced the whole QEF cycle.

The RA notes that developments or initiatives linked to SLR in one department are visible to, and shared with, other departments. This was confirmed in meetings with staff. This 'transparency' helps to strengthen the benefit of each SLR to the University as a whole.

The RA also states that there was some coherence across the SLRs, in terms of being able to extract common issues that then informed institutional actions and priorities: areas of staff support around working environment are mentioned specifically. However, it was not clear to the Team where, at management or committee level, this analysis was happening in a formal way. Similarly, we were informed that not all actions had been progressed as initially intended and again, for the Team, this raises questions about the balance between formality and informality in agreeing and then monitoring progress against actions, especially where responsibility for progressing these sits at departmental level.

However, and importantly, the Team were impressed by the positive and inclusive manner with which HU has engaged with the SLR processes, its connection of these to other elements of the QEF including IWR, and how it constructively links SLRs conceptually and operationally to its institutional mission and objectives.

3. Managing standards

3.1. Institutional approach to the management of standards

Hólar University has recently (May 2019) developed a Quality Policy (in effect encompassing quality strategy, enhancement and management) which aligns with the University Strategy. This document has four main quality 'pillars': human resources; quality of teaching and education; research; and infrastructure. The policy sets out the various committees involved in managing quality matters: The Academic Board, the Rector and the Management Team all have key roles. There is a significant devolution of responsibilities to the individual departments (all Heads of department sit on the Management Team) albeit supported in various respects by the DAA/DGS and their shared Head, as well as the Division of Operations and Services, led by the Head of Finance. There is, in addition, a Division of Research and associated Research Committee, which focus on research quality matters. The Team were reassured through their meetings that these various groups were contributing effectively to the overall management of quality agendas.

The Team felt, however, that there was a level of informality around these arrangements, which might be problematic in a larger organisation. The University would, even given its size, benefit from a greater formalisation of processes and a strengthening of the role of the senior committees in monitoring quality and standards. In meetings with both Management and departmental lead staff there was an awareness of the need for more systematic or formal approaches to be developed in support of the full implementation of the Quality Policy, in line with ESG 1.1., as a key strategic and operational tool for the whole institution.

It seemed particularly anomalous to the Team, especially in light of the above comments, that the Head of the DAA/DGS was not formally part of the Management Team given the centrality of this role in the management and oversight of undergraduate and postgraduate academic quality processes.

This post was frequently referred to by both staff and students, as a key point of contact offering both guidance and support.

Staff and students were familiar with the Quality Policy. Staff reported that there was nothing 'new' in the policy, rather that it drew together processes already in place to define the overall quality landscape that was operating. In this sense, and also considering the nature of the close and responsive relationship that all departments maintain with their students, with industry partners and with other collaborators (in both research and teaching), there is clear evidence of an embedded quality culture.

The term 'policy' was often felt by the Team to be synonymous with 'strategy' in some discussions, but the term 'regulation' was very rarely used in discussion with the various groups. This may again point to the informality of operation and the contextualisation of process at a departmental level, but it was clear that defined processes for all quality areas such as curriculum approval and review (ESG 1.2 and 1.9), admissions (ESG 1.4), mapping of learning outcomes to assessment (ESG 1.3) etc. are in place. Much of this seems to fall under the responsibilities of the DAA/DGS but without the level of formalisation or data-based management that might be expected. The University Board themselves articulated the potential benefit of some form of data-based dashboard approach to support ongoing monitoring of quality assurance and enhancement, and such an approach would be very much in line with ESG 1.7.

The Team notes the intention to review the Quality Policy in line with future review of the strategic plan. This will perhaps give the University the opportunity to further refine and formalise the ways in which quality is managed. However, the Team does also note that the University environment represents a close academic community of both staff and students and less formal approaches can therefore lend themselves to short communication lines and rapid decision making, which can be viewed as a strength. There is therefore a balance to be struck when developing greater formalisation for quality assurance purposes.

3.2. Admissions criteria

The University has defined pre-requisites for entrance to study programmes and, at Diploma- and Degree-levels, students are required to pass a matriculation examination. A skills entrance exam is also required for entry to BSc courses in Riding and Riding Instruction in DES. The University operates a flexible approach to admissions for entrants, for example from work-experienced backgrounds, who they evaluate as eligible through a process that includes assessment examinations. This represents a small number of entrants in specific areas (notably the Diploma in Aquaculture), but there is clear evidence that the performance and achievement of these 'non-standard' entrants is monitored. The Director of Academic Affairs is involved in evaluating applications from individuals with overseas qualifications, with support from the Icelandic ENIC/NARIC office.

For students applying for study at Masters level an additional process is followed to ensure that a suitable supervisor can be allocated and that they are in agreement with the suitability of the student's background for the area of research involved before the remaining admissions processes are followed. Students undertaking doctoral studies are subject to the policies and regulations of the primary University with which they are registered. Admission processes overall are in line with ESG 1.4, with criteria that are pre-defined, published and consistently implemented in a transparent manner, and using the national ENIC/NARIC framework.

3.3. External reference points and benchmarks

The commitment of all departments to connect with industry and academic partners was clear throughout all of the Team's meetings with staff and stakeholders. The University's programmes and the quality of its graduates were held in high regard by the stakeholders and alumni that the Team met. Through these relationships and collaborations with other universities the use of external reference points and benchmarks are, overall, robust through a range of processes including:

- Involvement of industry representatives in the development and review of programmes, and also appropriate levels of input to the teaching of students;

- A proactive approach of the departments to working with their regional and industry stakeholders to identify the changing nature of industry needs and regional opportunity;

- Close dialogue with other universities (notably the University of Guelph) to support the review and the development of new Masters programmes;

- Significant collaborative partnerships with other universities in Iceland and other Nordic countries in the joint development and delivery of curriculum and research (notably the Icelandic Tourism Research Centre with UI and UNAK, and recent developments of collaborative Nordic Masters programmes);

- Cross-institutional teaching by faculty on courses at other universities (through arrangements with the Network of Public Universities).

The University submits data required to MESC annually, as other Icelandic universities. It would be helpful to the University if, to further accord with ESG 1.7, comparative data regarding its performance compared to other universities were readily available through that process. As noted earlier it would also be helpful to develop internal dashboards to aid monitoring of year-on-year or cross-departmental trends in key areas of performance. The RA highlights a particular relationship with the University of Guelph in relation to the development of Masters programmes that has helped the University to benchmark its programmes. The University has a number of other positive relationships with other institutions in relation to collaborative curriculum development (especially in Iceland, Scandinavia and North America) and it may be that further dialogue with these institutions could be helpful in further developing internal benchmarking processes in relation to curriculum.

However, the Team does note that the University is aware of the value of such data. For example, in in the area of research, the Team were provided by the University with comparative data on regional research funding as a measure of the considerable amount of research funding that the university brings into the region of North-West Iceland. The Director of Research and others are fully aware of,

and engaged with, the work of the Research Evaluation Advisory Committee (an advisory sub-committee to the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education) and ongoing plans for an Icelandic Current Research Information System, as well as Icelandic developments in relation to research impact.

In relation to curriculum, it is also notable that each of the three departments has, in different ways, evaluated the long-term career destinations and satisfaction of their alumni as a means to further evaluate the relevance and value of their programmes, which accords well with ESG 1.9 in terms of continuously evaluating the relevance of degrees awarded.

3.4. Resources for safeguarding standards

The overall management of quality at the University operates through a combination of institutional and departmental functions. This is set out, diagrammatically, in the Quality Policy and in a simpler structural form in the RA. At an institutional level the Quality Policy is overseen by the University Board, the Rector (supported by the Management Team comprised of Heads of department and of Operations and Services), by the head of DAA/DGS, and by relevant committees, including the Academic Affairs Committee and Research Committee. The Quality Policy is supported by an appropriate range of sub-policies and processes, to a large extent then delivered through departmental policy and process. For a relatively small institution this is a complex structure, and one which the Team feels may represent a degree of inefficiency. As noted before, the Team was surprised that the Director of Academic Affairs, whilst frequently cited as having a key role in in supporting and monitoring quality assurance processes (including interaction with both staff and students), sits neither on the Management Team, nor formally on departmental committees. The RA specifically states that 'the division of academic affairs is primarily responsible for admissions, student affairs, monitoring the quality of education and study programmes and finally the procedure of graduation.' The DGS is primarily responsible for the same in respect to graduate studies. There was for the Team,

however, a lack of clarity as to whether the Head of the DAA/DGS was ultimately facilitating, monitoring or managing core quality assurance activities.

There is no suggestion that there is an under-resourcing of the management of standards, rather that there may be too much sharing of responsibilities, putting an unnecessary load on departments which could otherwise be channelled to centrally-located academic management activity. This may also permit unintentional 'drift' in departmental approaches. The RA itself notes for example that, in relation to the revision of programmes (including the mapping to learning outcomes) that 'the revision of programmes has been influenced by different traditions in the three departments. The exact role and responsibility of the DAA/DGS in this process has not been clear enough.' The RA then goes on to set out some suggested codes of conduct that could address this concern. The Team welcomes this self-reflection.

The Team suggests that the University reflects on how the DAA/DGS might best fulfil their role within the formal committee structure. The Team would also suggest that, in any future review of operational arrangements, the University strongly consider the merits of enhancing central institutional infrastructure to relieve the heavy administrative and student-support load on departments and individual staff. This will also bring the quality assurance activities of the University closer to guidelines offered in ESG 1.1 in terms of supporting both departments and central units in managing their responsibilities in quality assurance.

3.5. Design, approval, monitoring and review of programmes

Hólar University has a clear and appropriate policy relating to the design and introduction of new programmes of study that is very much in line with ESG 1.2. This includes the requirement for all new programmes to be reviewed four years after their initial introduction. The work underpinning the scoping and development of new programmes is the responsibility of the departments under the direction of the relevant Head of department, but the approval of the University Board is required for the instigation of any new programme. Clear timelines exist within the annual academic cycle for the

introduction of new programmes for the following academic year. The University has strengthened these processes in line with ESG 1.2 following the 2013 Institution-Wide Review, and they were extended in 2018 to accommodate new proposals at Masters level. Individual courses are reviewed as part of scheduled programme review that clearly takes ESG 1.9 into account. Additionally, individual teachers with support from the DAA and from the department can review teaching material annually as long as students can still attain the prescribed Learning Outcomes. The teachers' handbook provides some support in this respect.

All study programmes across the three departments have been reviewed since the 2013 IWR, and in many cases this review has been linked to the outcomes of Subject-Level Review. This connection between formal programme review and the outputs from elements of the QEF represents good practice and is indicative of the positive way in which the University is utilising the QEF. Programme review incorporates consideration of how Learning Outcomes are being defined and delivered. As noted in the previous section, during the preparation of the RA, the University has identified ways in which this process could be further enhanced, particularly in relation to Learning Outcomes and the role of the DAA.

Although separate from formal review processes, the Team notes that courses are also monitored every semester through a standard student questionnaire in the last week of teaching as part of the Network of Public Universities in Iceland. For smaller classes (less than 7 students) this questionnaire is not administered and student feedback on the course is gathered by other mechanisms, such as direct dialogue with the class. This arrangement is a requirement for all courses offered at public universities in Iceland.

The results of student questionnaires are made available, after the grades are published, to the teacher, the DAA and the Head of department. The use of the student data generated by these annual course surveys, and indeed the self-evaluation of teaching that staff in some areas are now encouraged to undertake, are examples of data that could be used more formally by the University in

relation to curriculum monitoring and enhancement. It was unclear to the Team whether or not such data was being used in a consistent manner, and again there was a lack of clarity as to whether the role of the DAA represented facilitation or monitoring. This again could link to the benefit of developing data dashboards that could be used at different levels of academic management and quality assurance process and bring these activities closer to ESG 1.7.

3.6. Assessment policies and regulations

HU has clear and appropriate policies in place relating to assessment, grading, and appeals in their published undergraduate study regulations. A separate handbook covers Masters level provision, including arrangements for defence, open presentation and oral examinations at that level. Assessment of student work was an element of the actions agreed following the 2013 IWR. The present RA states that 'the assessment of student work is constantly being reviewed, discussed and improved.' Following the previous IWR, departmental meetings and focussed staff training days took place that engaged staff from all departments. Linking assessment to learning outcomes was stated as a key focus of these events.

The 2016 formal review of the Action Plan submitted by the University in relation to the findings of the 2013 IWR Report notes that 'it is encouraging that assessment, transparency and consistency are clearly live discussion topics and staff development priorities within [the University]. Both the Academic Affairs Committee and key staff are aware of the need to refine these processes. The institution has set targets of compliance and accountability, and staff support will be directed towards these ends.'

In the present review visit, the Team met with students from each of the departments separately. Students were asked about assessment, and students across all departments reported that they were aware of Learning Outcomes and of how individual assessments related to these. In this respect, the University's work accords well with ESG 1.3. On the whole, students reported that this alignment was clear, although all cohorts noted that in some instances it could be better (with specific lecturers or

for specific assignments). Uneven workload within years and across years was also noted, as well as learner stress associated with periods when there were particularly heavy workloads. Students generally reported that study and assessment were quite intensive in their courses, although this was not reported as a criticism beyond issues with very high workload at particular times.

The present review would simply note the significant progress that has been made in terms of mapping assessment against Learning Outcomes, and the institution's own reflection that some further work in this area linked to course evaluations within programme review would be beneficial.

3.7. Consistency in grading and assigning ECTS

The RA and supporting annexes set out clear frameworks for the use of ECTS credits and the grading systems used within the University. The student groups that the Team met indicated that they were clear about all elements of their programme structure and assessment (including, for distance students, clarity about when they were expected to attend on-campus sessions). The grading system is also fully described in relevant study regulations and in line with ESG 1.3. No students reported any lack of clarity or inconsistencies between these regulations and their study experience.

3.8 .Collaborative provision

Hólar University does not currently undertake formal quality assurance responsibilities (such as through accreditation, awarding or franchising arrangements) for any other body as part of its collaborative activities.

3.9. Staff induction, appraisal and development

The 2013 IWR report and the 2016 follow-up report included a particular focus on staff development. In 2015, the University appointed an external specialist to assess staff needs and produce an appropriate staff development plan, which was implemented immediately with budgetary support. The 2016 report also noted that the Human Resources function rested with the Finance Director, but that financial constraints meant it was unlikely that a dedicated HR

appointment would be possible. This remains the arrangement but, nonetheless, a programme of ongoing staff development was evident to the Team in the present review.

The University Quality Policy sets out clear rules for faculty hiring and academic progression. All permanent appointments are filled by open recruitment and subject to the decision of a three-person selection committee (appointed by the Rector). Temporary and sessional staff are appointed at departmental level with the Rector's approval. The RA states that staff induction is the responsibility of the immediate line-manager. The RA also acknowledges that this could be made 'clearer and more formal' and notes this as one of its areas for improvement. Staff whom the Team met did not report any issues with induction, perhaps because the University is operating as such a close academic community in any case, but this is an area that the University should seek to improve upon, especially in relation to sessional staff and staff teaching at a distance.

The University has recently upgraded its guidelines for staff appraisal/job interviews with SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound) goals for the following year. Line managers are responsible for carrying out the appraisal and advising staff as to how they can achieve the development goals agreed (including advice about institutional supports available). Procedures for travelling funds to support international engagements, sabbaticals and rules relating to reduced teaching load have been established (primarily to benefit research engagement). All of these activities accord well with ESG 1.5. Staff whom the Team met were aware of these changes but not all had yet had the opportunity to benefit. Staff were aware that funding for such activity remained limited, but saw the changes as a positive effort to improve staff support linked to strategic priorities.

In addition to specific supports for staff arising from annual appraisal, the University runs a staff development day at least once annually. Topics have included such themes as pedagogy, well-being, time-management and equality. The University has a separate policy and action plan on equality. The Team explored this area with a number of staff and student groups, and would commend the University for the comprehensive nature of the equality policy and evidence of equality being

embedded in its operations. There is also evidence of reflection from SLR linking to staff development. DAFB piloted a process for self-evaluation of teaching, DRT developed procedures to support staff organising courses and teaching through blended learning, and DES held courses to enhance pedagogical support for new and existing staff.

Overall, the Team could see a clear effort to invest in staff development aligned to institutional and departmental strategies in keeping with the expectations of ESG 1.5. Increasing support for research is important, but the University may wish to reflect on the balance of investment between research and teaching activities. In particular, consideration should be given to further enhancing staff expertise in blended/distance delivery and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) enhanced teaching, as well as specific development opportunities for support staff.

3.10. Using SLRs to safeguard standards

The Team commends the University on its active and constructive engagement with all elements of the QEF as intended. The RA sets out a summary of improvements made following SLR in each of the departments. There is clear evidence in each of these of steps being taken following SLR both to strengthen quality assurance processes and to enhance learner experience and outcomes. However, as discussed in Sections 6.1 and 6.3, the Team had questions about how progress on the agreed steps was being formally monitored by the University.

3.11. Summary evaluation of security and standards

Hólar University is supported by a significant history, academic community, the commitment of its faculty and students, as well as deep associations with the region within which it is located. It also maintains a close relationship with the three key national industry sectors it supports. Its strategies are clearly aligned to the needs of those industry sectors, and the academic portfolio is significantly enhanced not just by a maintained alignment to them, but also by active collaboration at multiple levels with industry partners, including in the design, accreditation and delivery of curriculum and in collaborative research activities.

The University maintains an applied focus to its curriculum and research, and sound research- teaching linkages are clearly evident, if at different stages of maturation and expression across the different areas. Academic standards are secured by activity at both institutional and departmental levels. These are underpinned by a comprehensive range of policies, regulations and procedures, brought together in the recent development of a single Quality Policy. These involve sound approaches to benchmarking and engagement with other academic and professional bodies.

The Team recognises the very significant advances that the University has made since the 2013 IWR with respect to most areas of operation, both in assurance of standards and in enhancement. This is evident both in specific initiatives and strategies, and in the committee and lead officer roles that have been established or reinforced. The work underpinning the management of standards is coordinated and led by the University's Management Team with the support of the Director of DAA/DGS. The Quality Policy links to departmental policies and processes contextualised to the departments and their specific portfolios. The Team notes that the three departments are quite distinctive in terms of the nature of their curricula and research. This is not by any means an issue, but the University does then need to take active steps to ensure that contextualisation of process in relation to the management of standards does not lead to variation in equivalence or unintentional drift from institutionally-agreed policies. The role of the Research Committee and the Academic Affairs Committee would seem to be important in this respect, and the role of the DAA/DGS in relation to those committees and to the role of the Management Team is an aspect that the Review Team would encourage the University to reflect on with subsequent plans for improvement.

The Team would also suggest that the University reflects on the potential tensions between academic endeavour and specialist support staff activity in central units, for example in administration of quality processes, educational innovation and pedagogical development, ICT-enhanced delivery and the student support that all departments need to maintain. A rebalancing of central (shared, and currently limited) resource versus departmental input in some of these areas would be beneficial to the collective aspirations of the departments and the University as a whole.

The current lack of a fully functioning Academic Management Information system and processes, perhaps linked to dashboards and other mechanisms for formal performance monitoring, is unhelpful in the efficient management of standards and of enhancement. We would suggest that the University reflects on, even within current resources, how this can be rectified, and instigate actions for follow-up.

The Team welcomes the various initiatives that the University has put in place, including the work so far in relation to Learning Outcomes, the Quality Policy and all that it encompasses, industry engagement and national and international collaborations. All of these have significance in terms of standards. It also commends the University for its positive engagement with all of the elements of the QEF, and it recognises the aspiration and positive outlook of the Academic Board and Management Team. We urge you to continue on this path.

Overall, the Team judgement is of confidence in the standards of degrees and awards.

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 generally aligned to the ESG.

- HU's quality management is characterised by short communication lines and rapid decision making. All departments maintain close and responsive relationship with their students, with industry partners and with other collaborators, showing clear evidence of an embedded quality culture. HU would, even given its size, benefit from a greater formalisation of procedures, and a strengthening of central institutional infrastructure to monitor quality and standards, in line with ESG 1.1: *Policy for Quality Assurance*.
- Quality processes are well in resonance with ESG 1.2: *Design and Approval of Programmes*. External stakeholders are involved in the design of new programmes, and the approval of the University Board is required for the instigation of any new programme. Clear timelines exist within the annual academic cycle for the introduction of new programmes for the following academic year.
- HU has adopted a Learning Outcomes approach and there is an emphasis on matching teaching methods and assessment with Learning Outcomes. Courses are monitored annually through a standard student questionnaire, and the grading system is fully described in relevant study regulations. The University has a comprehensive policy and action plan on equality and there is evidence of equality being embedded in the operations of the University, indicating good alignment with ESG 1.3: *Student-Centred Learning, Teaching and Assessment*.
- There are clear processes for admission that are pre-defined, published and consistently implemented in a transparent manner, and using the national ENIC/NARIC framework. This accords well with ESG 1.4: *Student Admission, Progression, Recognition and Certification*.
- HU has in place clear rules for hiring and academic progression of faculty, as well as staff development, in accordance with ESG 1.5: *Teaching Staff*. Considerable emphasis was put on staff development following the 2013 review of HU. All staff have annual performance reviews with their line managers, with goals set for the coming year. The University also hosts an annual staff development day.
- ESG 1.6: *Learning Resources and Student Support* centres on provision of adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support. The visit showed a multitude of examples of students finding these easily available, and special praise was offered for support staff in these functions.
- Data is not used systematically in the day-to-day running of the university, although there were some instances of good use of data. The University Board themselves articulated the potential benefit of some form of data-based dashboard approach to support ongoing monitoring of quality assurance and enhancement. Making better use of data in line with ESG 1.7: *Information Management* would also support the implementation of the HU Quality Policy.
- HU is closely aligned to the business and industry needs, and collaborations exist at both local and national level. This resonates well with ESG 1.8: *Public Information* that requires dissemination and cooperation.
- Defined processes exist for regular curriculum review, as outlined in ESG 1.9: *On-going Monitoring and Periodic Review of Programmes*. External views are included as a matter of course, as well as data on employment of graduates. HU has also engaged with the process of Subject-Level Review in QEF as part of this work.

4. Student Learning Experience

4.1. Overview: Institution's management of standards of student learning experience

A full set of policies and regulations, among them strategic policy 2016-2020, Quality Policy and procedural regulations, were created after the IWR in 2013. These documents will be revised, starting in 2020. In the RA, the University refers to the former IWR of 2013 and the three institution-led SLRs in 2014-16 as 'highly useful' in influencing changes to policy and daily operation.

As stated in Section 3 of this report, the Quality Policy sets out the various committees involved in managing quality matters: The University Board, the Rector and the Management Team all have key roles, but there is a significant devolution of responsibilities to the individual departments. Particularly with respect to student experience (and academic policy and practice), there is significant support from the DAA/DGS and, with respect to certain support areas such as library and ICT support and staff development, from the Division of Operations and Services.

Staff and students also cited the DAA/DGS as a key point of contact for individual students seeking advice or guidance (with significant interface with the student counsellor and service desk staff). Students indicated that these points of contact were understood and accessible. The overall impression when visiting the University is the great interest that staff take in the students, especially, but not exclusively, those students who live on campus.

The University notes in the RA a more embedded quality culture within the University than in the past. A much higher degree of knowledge of, and compliance with, European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) than that reportedly evidenced in the previous Institution-Wide Review was presented in all Team meetings with teachers and students. This advancement is ongoing and there are still some reflections of 'blind spots' where teachers feel a bit lost in the new system. However, the management seems to be aware of these issues. For example, under the headline 'Items for improvement' in the RA, two bullet points addressing this issue are mentioned: 'development of codes of conduct for

induction of new staff members' and 'creation of codes of conduct for revision of programmes'. The Team fully support these priorities.

4.2. Resources for enhancing student learning experience

In the RA the University describes itself as having 'good relations with local industries and professional associations, as well as well as national and international collaboration.' This was confirmed in the majority of Team meetings. The strong local public and industrial stakeholder engagement in Hólar University is used in curricular development and helps the students to enter the job market. This result is achieved, for example, by relevant work placements and projects with clear industry relevance. In some courses, cooperation with industry gives the students opportunity to use brand-new equipment, which the University does not have the resources to procure. The stakeholders also take part as, for example, external examiners, as assessors in performance evaluations (for example in DES), and as Expert Team members. There are also examples of stakeholder involvement in curricular quality development. These are examples of good practice in line with ESG 1.6 and ESG 1.9.

The common view among stakeholders, and also among alumni, is that students are well-prepared for employment, often via work-based placements and contextualised projects during their studies. A general wish from stakeholders for more postgraduate programmes was also heard. This was reflected in dialogue with departments and was in some areas, DRT in particular, clearly linked to departmental thoughts about future developments.

The University employs one person to help students with ICT-matters. As the Team were told, this solution worked very well on campus, but some students in blended studies did not feel as fully supported. Strengthening the capacity for blended learning development and ICT would benefit the student experience, as well as meeting the intentions of ESG 1.3.

Parts of the institutional infrastructure services (Support Services) to students are shared with other Icelandic universities, including a librarian, who also works at the University of Akureyri, and a student counsellor who is well known, accessible and appreciated among students. Although present on site

at times, the counsellor is primarily based at the University of Iceland. The arrangement, however, does seem to be working effectively. The Director of Academic Affairs and the service desk staff are also highly valued by the students as points of advice and support. However, there seem to be few operational contact points between Support Services and the Student Association (e.g. joint initiatives), with the exception of joint social events.

In the Team's view, there would be benefit in strengthening the 'central' institutional student-support infrastructure to relieve the administrative load on departments and individual (teaching) staff. More follow ups, and in some cases the creation of new formal processes for various issues (including staff induction and training), seem needed to avoid instances, albeit few, of negative student experiences that the Team encountered. For example, students referenced some instances of sessional staff not being fully acquainted with administrative routines, or using outdated or irrelevant material or data, as a basis for their teaching. Similarly, instances of a lack of knowledge of, or action in accordance with, internal University procedures for managing individual student personal issues were referenced by students on a few occasions. From the RA, it is clear that the University management is aware, in many cases, of such inconsistency and of the need to address this.

4.3. Student recruitment and induction

Student recruitment appears to take place in different ways in different departments and at different degree cycles: through word of mouth, through agreements with other universities both nationally and internationally (primarily doctoral students), and through awareness of the University's programmes both locally and in the Icelandic society in the relevant industry sectors. There is also a Hólar University website with information for prospective students. Applications for Masters studies are in most instances handled with specific reference to the research opportunities available, as well as the match to applicant background and skills. The majority of students fulfil the matriculation exam requirements for admission. Evaluation of prior learning is sometimes used for admission if the formal

requirements are not met, especially in Diploma courses. The Team's observation is that the system seems to work well, and is in line with ESG 1.4.

All undergraduates are expected to attend an orientation week for incoming students. This event includes, among other things, input from the student counsellor, the librarian and other information services, as well as from teachers of all first-year/fundamental courses. The students that the Team met thought that the information about their studies on the homepage was adequate. There was, however, no evidence that the University collects data about student views on their experiences of the recruitment process and of induction.

4.5. The student voice and engagement of students

The student body at the University is somewhat fragmented. The three departments are rather different in many respects (balance of degree cycles, age demographic, balance of blended and on-site study). In addition, DAFB students are based (for their on-site studies) at a site some 35 km away from the main campus. There was a clear indication from students that the student bodies of the three departments rarely engaged with each other. The University and the student association should take steps to improve opportunities for both staff and student communities to come together. Some help is already provided, e.g. through the University Forum, which is held annually to discuss the general policy formation for the University in areas of instruction and research, plans of operations, and various other relevant affairs. The Hólar student association is responsible for developing the social calendar for students at Hólar. In addition, the student association represents the interest of the students in all matters in dealings with the University and external bodies. The student association is formally a member of the National Union of Students in Iceland, but striving to take a more active part in it. According to the student representatives we met, students willing to undertake representative roles can be hard to find, especially in departments where distance students make up a big part of the student body. In the RA, the University identifies further development of the student association to

better reach students from all departments and study programmes as an area for improvement, and the Team support this aspiration.

Students are represented at University and departmental levels, and they take part in agreeing decisions aimed at enhancing curriculum, student experience and other quality assurance matters. At departmental level, curricular discussions were reported as occurring frequently. Further, the door to the Rector's office is described by the students as being 'always open.' Students were also clearly involved in the production of the RA.

The University does not provide the student representatives with any formal introduction or training for their roles, but students testified to the generally positive uptake of their suggestions, with mostly reasonable explanations of exceptions where student suggestions were not accommodated. However, the Team also heard some complaints about cases were students felt 'talked down to' when they complained about, for example, stressful study and assessment schedules. In addition, the effectiveness of student engagement does not seem to be monitored in any formal way, and not reviewed periodically. This was not an area that was mentioned in any of the meetings, nor in the items for improvement within the RA under the section 'Student voice and improvement'.

The University uses questionnaires to examine students' experience of a course, which is in line with ESG 1.3. For reasons of directives from the Network of Public Universities in Iceland about safeguarding of anonymity, courses with fewer than seven students are not included in this procedure. A number of courses at Hólar are small, so the course review is often missing from these processes. Instead, evaluations are supposed to take place through direct meetings with staff and students. There is an inherent risk to anonymity here, but the University seems to trust in their values, decided by the University board, which include professionalism and respect. As alumni and students testified, this is mostly the case, but there are exceptions such as that outlined above.

The University also participates in a national survey on student satisfaction of second year undergraduates, Masters students, and graduates two years after graduation. The results of these

surveys show that 60-83% of students are satisfied with their studies. Departments have also developed their own surveys (for example, in relation to graduate destinations and employment), and the University is interested in developing these further.

The Team would recommend that the University take deliberate steps to capture the full student voice across cohorts and departments, as well as finding formal and informal ways to bring the student body more closely together. Overall, there is good compliance with ESG 1.3 in this area. There is also a need to increase the use of strategic data in the day-to-day running of the University, and to inform curriculum changes, for example through regularly updated dashboarding, in line with ESG 1.7.

4.6. Student-centred learning, teaching, and assessment

Hólar University shows an active engagement with the elements of the ESGs, including Student-Centred Learning (ESG 1.3). Learning Outcomes are used across the University, and are very widely recognised by both staff and students. However, some students reported that the Learning Outcomes were not shown to them until after the course started in some cases, although there is a website with that information. According to the RA, the assessment of student work is constantly being reviewed, discussed, and improved. Particular emphasis has been put on making sure all assessment factors reflect Learning Outcomes in every course.

Discussions and proposals for changes in curricula in line with ESG 1.9 take place at the end of each year, and there are also monthly meetings if needed. Staff and students take part, as well as stakeholders when appropriate. One example of a recent change responding to student/alumni needs is a course on business management/accounting in DES, introduced last year.

The institution allows for flexible or individual learning paths as resources or other circumstances permit, in alignment with ESG 1.3. In some areas, students are able to propose placements or project work contextualised to their specific area of interest/employment.

Significant collaborative curricular development is also taking place to provide new study pathways, with a particular focus on Masters level opportunities. This is evidenced in the two joint Nordic Masters degrees in two of the departments, and collaboration in the Tourism Research Centre with two other Icelandic universities.

Staff are trained in different areas individually or in lectures on different subjects, e.g., harassment. This takes place during annual staff development days. The Team was not aware of formal evaluation of incoming staff in terms of teaching competencies, nor of ongoing training in pedagogy and other teaching-related issues on a regular basis. The RA states that there is a need to further develop the support for individual teachers, especially sessional teachers, by updating the teachers' handbook and by developing best practice for teachers, including distance teaching. The Team agrees with these plans, which also accord well with ESG 1.5. DAFB, after the last SLR, introduced a process of self-evaluation of teaching. Some staff had engaged with this, but it was reported as non-mandatory.

The University monitors student progression in all three cycles, but on an individual and rather informal basis. Data about these processes (as outlined in ESG 1.4 and 1.7) does not appear to be collated or published. Individual student issues or circumstances impacting progression do seem to be well managed however, albeit on a case-by-case basis with support of the DAA/DGS.

The Team was told that through their development of skills, perspectives and direct connections with industry, students are well prepared to secure employment, progress to further studies or create/develop their own businesses, which puts the University in line with ESG 1.6 in this respect. However, the Team found no public employment data for graduates in the public domain. Acknowledging the many positive supports and developments in place across the institution, overall there is a lack of data collection of key performance indicators related to student learning experience at University level (ESG 1.7). The Team were told that the DAA/DGS is working with the departments to manage this, but this does not seem to happen in any systematic way, or to underpin ongoing

monitoring and development. One recurrent issue mentioned by both students and alumni, was the periodically very high workload at some points in certain programmes.

4.7. The language experience

Icelandic is the official language of the University, and it is used to a high degree in administration and in teaching at undergraduate level. However, it is emphasised in the language policy that accommodation of the English language is also required. The international students in DES have usually stayed in Iceland for some time before they start their studies. There is a requirement for them to be competent in Icelandic before undertaking study. The departments with blended study options use English to a larger extent, on an individual student basis.

The doctoral students are all based at the University by agreements with other universities, both abroad and in Iceland. They work on externally financed research projects, and they naturally use English as their working language in this international research environment. The language policy includes more details of when different languages can be used. It was reported that staff try to be flexible about the use of English by the undergraduate students when appropriate. For administrative purposes, Google Translate works well, and the in-course materials are often in English. There is an English website for the University with information on degree offerings with a small number of important informational documents translated into English. The RA also indicates that the University might evaluate the potential benefit of taking steps to support non-Icelandic speakers amongst incoming staff to develop Icelandic language skills.

The Team did not hear any complaints from the international, or Icelandic, students about the University's language policy. However, in considering its options for growth, the University may wish to consider whether or not further review of its language policy might be beneficial in some curricular areas including blended learning programmes and courses targeting further international recruitment.

4.8. Internationalisation

The RA shows a very high level of knowledge of international and European standards in both education and research. The proportion of students from other countries varies between departments, and is approximately 20%, which is the same percentage as for staff. Most of the international students come from Northern Europe and North America, and they seem to fit well into the University environment, especially if they live on campus. For its size, the University has a significant amount of collaboration with other universities, both in teaching and research. Collaboration includes practice abroad, for example with partners in Finland. The University also takes part in Erasmus+ exchanges. Increasing the amount of international exchange does not seem to be a defined goal but this may change as the University now employs an international relations officer on a part-time basis.

4.9. Links between research and teaching

The Team found clear examples of links between research and teaching at the undergraduate level. According to the RA, undergraduate students actively participate in research work through their research projects. Students from at least one department reported that staff incorporate their own research work as part of the teaching on the course. Students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels may also take part in ongoing research projects within the departments. At postgraduate level, there are obviously many more links between teaching and research via ample connections to specific research projects, but the curricular connections are not always clear. However, it should be noted that the graduate degrees at Hólar are primarily research-based. One of the departments (DAFB) also noted that there is a great interest from external partners in engaging students in both research and (advanced) teaching projects. Diploma studies in new areas are especially asked for.

More importantly, the teachers at the undergraduate level seem to a certain extent to teach general research methods, theories, and results in their subject area. The groups working on curricula at

departmental level supervise this. It was not clear whether or not there was any external contribution in this respect, for example from guest lecturers or from visiting research collaborators, but this is an area for the University to consider as its collaborations continue to develop.

4.10. Collaborative programmes

HU engages in collaborative programmes with the Agricultural University of Iceland and the University of Akureyri and provides access to its research environment for a number of doctoral students at the University of Iceland. In addition to universities in Iceland, there is active collaboration spanning both research and teaching with universities across the world, including in Canada, Finland, France, The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, UK and the US. The DAFB has an active relationship with the United Nations University's Fisheries Training Programme. The University also collaborates with 15 European universities for an annual doctoral summer school, the International Research School in Applied Ecology.

In terms of internal collaboration between the departments themselves, the Team felt that there is also room for more interdisciplinary courses. In meetings with departmental staff, there was also a suggestion that doctoral students could help with more internal research-based collaboration.

4.11. Serving needs of different student populations

As described in Section 3.9., there is a comprehensive equality policy at the University, which accords well with ESG 1.3. Although there was no formal strategy visible at the review as to how this policy would be promoted and monitored, there was clear evidence of equality being embedded in the operations of the University in accordance with the law.

The University serves student needs primarily on an individual basis, which is manageable given its size. As noted earlier, all staff articulated a clear commitment to supporting individual students and the Team met students and alumni who had secured changes to their study arrangements to accommodate personal circumstances. The experiences of on-campus and blended learning students

are clearly different but both student groups articulated satisfaction with the access to academic and pastoral support. Poorer quality and currency of some distance-learning materials (not whole courses) was commented on by some students. Given the size of the blended learning group, this is an area for the University to monitor and improve upon as needed, for example in its approaches to benchmarking and monitoring of such materials.

The Team would note, however, some inconsistency across those interviewed on how to refer student issues safely and in a confidential but documented manner, for example in relation to student health or misconduct. Departmental staff reported that there were institutional procedures in place. It appeared to the Review Team that there was some variability in these processes, with informal approaches being taken to student support by departments or individual staff. While the Team recognises the commitment to students that drives this, this is an area for the University to reflect on with some urgency and create plans for clear delineation of departmental and institutional responsibilities, while also taking note of ESG 1.6.

4.12. Management of information

One of the first things you encounter when you enter through the main entrance at the University is a large digital screen. Presentations of University news and other sorts of information are presented in an effective way through this medium. The University also runs a Facebook page, which is described as being 'fairly active' in the RA. The website is on the other hand difficult to navigate from outside the University. For example, it is quite a complicated task to reach the descriptions of Learning Outcomes of programmes. The RA clearly articulates an institutional awareness of the need to improve elements of the web site, and the Team agrees with the identification of that need.

As noted earlier, administration and student-facing services seem to take place at a departmental level to a considerable degree. However, it seems that the institution as a whole could use, share, and publish much more information if it collected important and useful key data in a more formalised way and linked data to different important policies and action plans. It could also be useful for programmes

and courses to use digital services, like chatrooms within distance education applications (instead of, as was reported in some cases, providing staff's private telephone numbers to students). To increase the flow of information across the University, minutes from University meetings are posted in Ugla, the internal web for staff and students. Access to information on Ugla is variable, depending on the personal definition of the user. The University Board were open to ideas for some type of dashboard on the performance of the University that would contain key performance indicators and oversight of departmental activities and priorities, in line with ESG 1.7.

After the 2013 IWR, the University, among other planned actions, stated a desire to strengthen the image of the University at large. One of the actions was to enhance their participation in the Network of Public Universities in Iceland. Other actions have been taken to strengthen public engagement and profile for example through open lectures, and strengthen links with industries that the University serves.

As was pointed out in Section 4.3, there is an opportunity to develop the central administration of the University. This could lead not only to improved access to and use of important information, including academic management information, benchmarking and performance data, but also to better collation and use, as well as managed dissemination of promotional material to prospective students, the public and industry. Annual reports of the University are assembled and published. They are published on the University's web site. Every year, Statistics Iceland calls for a list of enrolled students, their programme of study, number of finished credits, number of current credits, distance/on-campus students and country of matriculation examination. Information about foreign and graduated students is also called for. Obviously, this kind of information can be used as, or inspire, key indicators at the University itself.

4.13. Summary evaluation of the student learning experience

Given Hólar University's very long educational tradition and active interest in its students, the commitment from staff to giving students the best learning experience possible is evident. This is combined with extensive integration of the ESGs into teaching and learning at the University.

The contacts between staff and students are distributed between the institutional and departmental levels, and between academic and administrative staff. Administrative issues reportedly lead to a heavy workload on departments and individual staff, which in turn also can lead to problems with upholding good student contacts across the University. The Team therefore recommends the University enhance the institutional infrastructure to support administrative work, ensure collection of important data, and monitor developments in areas such as student learning and student complaints, to name two examples.

We also recommend that the head of DAA/DGS be included more deliberately in decision-making processes at institutional level. This would have a number of benefits in terms of the overall management of the student experience and could also help to ensure that current and strategically developing research strengths were appropriately considered in the development of graduate curricula.

 The student body is rather fragmented, both across the three departments and across on-campus students and blended-learning students. The Team recommend that further steps be taken by the University to bring them together. The University's policies and action plans encourage Student-Centred Learning that is enriched by interaction with research and industry. The Rector's 'open door' policy and the engagement of the University Board further support this approach.

Overall, the Team judgement is of confidence in Hólar University's standards of Student Learning Experience.

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.

- In terms of ESG 1.1 *Policy for Quality Assurance*, Hólar University has a genuinely student-centred view on student experience in its current policies, and it mentions in its RA several good examples of planned actions to enhance student influence in quality development of teaching and learning in the future. The Team recommends that the University takes further steps to enhance the quality of student influence by giving student representatives formal training in their mission, and help them to bring the student body more closely together.
- The design of learning outcomes explicitly involves students as per ESG 1.2 *Design and Approval of Programmes*, but the support and assessment of students' achievements could be more formalised.
- Innovative methods of teaching and learning as described in ESG 1.3 *Student-Centred Learning, Teaching and Assessment*, are created by, among other things, cooperation with the surrounding society, and with national and international institutions. The methods for measuring the co-creation of learning experience with students seem to be more informal, although information can appear in the obligatory questionnaires or oral evaluations of courses.
- In alignment with ESG 1.4 *Student Admission, Progression, Recognition and Certification,* all students have to take part in an introductory week at the University. In programmes and courses, they are informed about things like the relevant learning outcomes. There are possibilities for supportive and flexible ways of studying for students in special circumstances. However, there seems to be a need of a more systematic monitoring and follow up of this work.
- ESG 1.5: *Teaching Staff* reflects the importance of formal evaluation, on-going training and recognition of excellence. Hólar University has no formal evaluation of staff about teaching competencies, but staff has a follow-up conversation with their heads of department every year, which leads to action plans when needed. Lectures on different teaching-relevant subjects take place every year at institutional level.
- ESG 1.6 *Learning Resources and Student Support* ensures provision of adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support to prepare for entry to both employment and further study. Students are provided with ample opportunities to prepare for further studies, employment, or work in their own businesses. This is rather informally achieved though, depending on current co-operations, research projects, etcetera.
- The key data collection about students' experience, including all kinds of students, takes place at departmental level. Plans in the RA on enhancing the public visibility and knowledge of HU might lift this information to institutional level in accordance with ESG 1.7 *Information Management*, and be even more utilised as a source for institutional development.
- On Hólar University's website there is information about programmes, courses, and different procedures and facts, intended learning outcomes included. However, more information could be available there, especially in the English version, to achieve better alignment with ESG 1.8: *Public Information*.
- Programme reviews always include students and teachers, and sometimes also stakeholders, which aligns with ESG 1.9: *On-going Monitoring and Periodic Review of Programmes*. Students that the Team met were usually very pleased with both their studies, and the evaluations but in a few cases, they mentioned that that the student voice was not strong enough to effect change.

Management of Research

5.1. Research policy and strategy

Research and innovation have long traditions at Hólar University, and the University states that academic research and the establishment of 'modern' research came to maturity in the 1990s. The University has, since the first IWR in 2013, developed a research policy and research strategy, which they commonly refer to as the 'policy,' and each of the three departments have developed separate research policies based on the University's policy. All of these documents are available in English and some are available on the external website in English. The University's research policy and the departmental research policies have supported significant volume of research activities, including publications, external funding and the general priority of high-quality research, especially in DAFB. Students are well-integrated into research activities, and the University has a clear vision for its role in the community. The University acknowledges the importance of collaboration with stakeholders, including research institutions, industry and the local community, and the RA lists several examples of the impact of the University's research and education not only on the region, but also at national and international levels.

Students and PhD candidates appreciate the priority of research, and the high quality of supervision they receive. The institution is small, and this is in many ways a challenge, but also an advantage, as colleagues are easily accessible for discussions and advice, and decisions can be made quickly. The University monitors the performance of the staff in terms of research metrics, and the research performance is an important part of their annual performance reviews.

If the University continues to follow its research policies and improve in these identified areas, the University should continue to grow in terms of the quality, relevance and impact of its research. Importantly, the University was able to share with the Team mature lines of thought on future research strategy and the monitoring of research outputs (metrics) has increased the staff awareness

of the importance of these issues, including publishing in peer-reviewed journals, presenting research at conferences and scientific networking. It is the view of the Team that these measures may be further developed to focus more on quality and impact.

5.2. Relevance of Case Study to managing research on an institutional level

In the Case Study section of the RA titled 'Research Policies of Hólar University,' the University described the development of its research policy and acknowledged that a research policy is one of the foundations for successfully managing a university. The research policy is, in a sense, synonymous with research strategy. The university has fairly recently defined and operationalised university and departmental research policies , and the departmental policies have been (as stated in the RA) used as examples for development of departmental research policies at other Icelandic universities.

The policy covers the following core values; research support; linkage of research and education; and monitoring, maintenance and development of research quality. The Division of Research was central to the development of the research policy, and the research policy has been used as a driver for enhancement of research activity. Strong collaborations are central to performing and developing research, and tools for developing high quality in research are emphasised. Thus, the policy includes a description of management and support, and various tools for development of both quantity and quality of research.

The departments developed their research policies based on the draft policy developed by the Division of Research. The DAFB, the most research-intensive department, developed its policy first. The other two departments then followed, using the DAFB's research policy as a template. Following the development of departmental research policies, the University developed annexes describing certain central issues related to its research mission, including departmental hiring policies, and guidelines for research data management and management of research materials.

The Case Study describes very well the development of the research policy, and the policy has clearly been an important tool for the University to improve its research activities. Although developed in

advance of the QEF2, the Team's view is that the research policy aligns with the focus areas for the evaluation of management of research in QEF2.

5.3. Monitoring of scientific quality of outputs

The University is clearly eager to strengthen its research and has made several efforts to do so. The research policies do not include specific goals on research quality, and the main focus appears to be on increasing overall research quantity, although there is a clear emphasis on open publication and dissemination. It is also clear that the 'least publishable unit' is not a goal for the University's research activities, i.e., there is not a push to maximise the number of publications from a given research project to increase the raw number of research outputs. The departments do have goals for the volume of publications per staff member, and those form part of annual performance reviews. The overview of research metrics (bibliographic output in terms of number of publications, presentations, posters, reports, books, etc.) is an important part of the monitoring of scientific quality. It is the Team's view that higher output in terms of, for example, number of publications is not equal to higher quality but the monitoring of research metrics is a tool to follow up on research output and relevance. Staff also noted that discussing quality in a critical sense with colleagues in the departments is somewhat challenging due to the very small university community, compounded by even smaller specialist teams in the different departments.

The number of publications in peer-reviewed journals is increasing and there are also indications of an increase in quality, as the University's research is increasingly published in ISI-indexed journals, citations are increasing, and staff are invited more often to speak at international scientific conferences. All of these suggest that its research is highly appreciated by the international scientific community. At the same time, the University does indeed wish for at better system to monitor scientific quality. Citation monitoring is undertaken at the University, but staff appreciate the controversial nature of this being used as a sole indicator of quality. Open access publishing is

monitored and included in the research policy as well, and there is a clear desire to further support open access publishing (although the financial challenges of doing so were noted).

5.4. External support

Increasing external funding is one of the main aims in the University's research policy, and external funding increased across all three departments by 85% between 2014 to 2018. This applies in particular to DAFB, which has recently received a Grant of Excellence from a national funding body (the Icelandic Research Fund). The external research support comes both from governmental and private sources, as well as national and international sources. One important source of funding is the FISK Seafood Company, which has supported the University by donating the use of important research infrastructure in Sauðárkrókur, where the research facilities of the DAFB are located. This support to build up state-of-the art research facilities has been very important for DAFB.

The department heads are ultimately responsible for the research in the departments. This includes facilitation of discussions and collaborations within and between departments, and thus the ability to develop new projects and proposals. In partnership with the Division of Research, the departments have emphasised internal collaboration in applications for funding, and provided peer-learning sessions where staff that have successfully sought funding share their experiences.

5.5. Impact of the unit

Research impact and academic output, and how to define these, is a topic receiving great interest in Iceland at the time of the present IWR. The University stated that it was looking forward to receiving guidelines on how to define and collect information on research impact from the Research Evaluation Advisory Committee. The University currently lacks a formal definition and policy regarding impact but has defined this as an item for improvement. At the same time, the relevance and impact of current research is demonstrated very well through several relevant examples. The examples describe the University's impact and added value to society, through research projects, the contribution to (animal) health (DES and DAFB), industry development (all departments), governmental policy making

(DRT) and to education at elementary and secondary level (DES). The description of these examples shows mature thinking by the University regarding its role as an important provider of applicable knowledge within its fields of research. The discussion on impact included considerations of added value regionally and nationally, as well as international impact. The collaborations with relevant industries and research institutions, coupled with increased success in gaining external support for research, will likely lead to even more future impact.

5.6. Institutional enhancement of research management

The University research policy, as well as the research policies of the departments, show how the ambitions of the University, on an institutional level, give high priority to research management. The research fund to support pilot and Master projects, the priority of building up state-of-the art research facilities, hiring strategies, the Research Day, the opportunities to undertake research sabbaticals, as well as the general encouragement to undertake good research are important indicators of an active approach to the enhancement of research, and the Research Committee, Division of Research and department heads collaborate on positive management of research.

5.7. Benchmarks

Management of research was not included in the first edition of the Quality Enhancement Framework for Icelandic Higher Education. Thus, management of research was not part of the first IWR of Hólar University in 2012-2013.

The research policy of the institution and the departmental policies are approved by the University Board, and show how the University benchmarks its research. The institutional and departmental policies were developed through processes including staff in the departments, the Division of Research, and the University at large. Research support, research quality and the motivation for the policy/policies are described. Codes for Ethical Conduct and Equity (in Icelandic) apply for management and participation in research projects.

The University collaborates with the other Icelandic public universities on performance evaluations for research output, and utilises different merit systems for staff at different levels. In the system for professors, annual extra payments are made based on merit points that are mostly tied to research productivity. The point system affects promotion and salary raises for lectors and docents. At Hólar University, these processes are further detailed in institutional agreements where teaching activity may also influence salary increases.

5.8. Collaboration

The University encourages and emphasises the establishment, development and maintenance of collaborations – internally, nationally and internationally, with private and governmental organisations – and has a long tradition of such collaborations. Opportunities for national funding are limited, which in turn makes international collaborations even more important. The University described the establishment of successful new collaborations, for example with the United Nations University Fisheries Programme, but also described objectively the challenges in gaining funding from the European Union research programmes.

Stakeholder and industry engagement are strong, with good links in the community. The links with collaborators are important for research support, for opportunities for students to engage in research and for development of curricula.

5.9. Teaching-research balance

Students, in particular doctoral students, are active participants in research, which is also stated as an area of emphasis in the research policy. Thesis work is part of the undergraduate and graduate level training in some programmes; thus, research training is deliberately integrated into the education. The University has developed a handbook for Masters students and student projects must match university and departmental policies. Systems for undertaking internships and independent research projects, often connected to externally funded projects, are well established. The University participates in the International Research School in Applied Ecology, where 15 European universities

collaborate on an annual summer school for doctoral students. The students in the research school take specialised courses, and thereby increase their research competency, as well as the size of their scientific network.

Processes for evaluating and verifying the quality of student research depend on the level of studies. At lower levels, supervisors usually evaluate the research work, although DES uses external examiners for certain performance-related assessments. At higher study levels (MSc, MA), external evaluators are also involved, while the evaluation of doctoral-level research work depends on the system used by the University at which the doctoral student is registered. The University was also able to provide examples from DES of how research output from student projects has been applied and even integrated into teaching programmes.

When hiring academic staff, research competency usually weighs more than teaching competency. Having good teachers is very important, and there were examples of hiring processes where teaching capabilities have been weighted more heavily than research. The merit system for staff remuneration (https://www.hi.is/haskolinn/reglur_nr_263_2010) mainly rewards research, both when hiring and for promotion. The merit system does not reward teaching as much as research, which makes it difficult for the staff and the institution to give teaching as high priority as they would prefer. The balance in teaching and research, and the staff's need for competence development (pedagogic, continued education, time management etc.) is, however, discussed in annual performance reviews. As noted earlier, the University does maintain an internal process where teaching activity can also influence salary changes.

5.10. Support for grant-capture activities and grant management

The Division of Research and individual departments support the grant-capture activities and management of grants. In the area of grant management, the Division of Operations and Services is involved as well. Grant applications are usually developed through teamwork, with both internal and external collaborators. Colleagues, internal and external, support each other and comment on drafts,

but there is no formal institutional strategy for this. As most faculty are not native speakers of English, language can be an issue in grant-application writing, as well as in scientific publishing. Colleagues give feedback on each other's' written materials, and language may then be improved. Likewise, external partners provide feedback on scientific writing of staff. The University sometimes used commercial companies to improve English language quality, but the experiences with those are varied. Good time management, and the ability to prioritise enough time for writing high quality grant applications is sometimes problematic. Students, in particular doctoral students, are encouraged to write, both by supervisors and teachers. The Division of Research wishes to improve the support for grant application writing and the University's research day in 2019 was devoted to scientific writing in English, with attendance from doctoral and Masters students. A mandatory Masters-level class includes a grant application proposal assignment.

The University has clear thoughts on grant-capture and grant-management and has established some tools to increase the quality of proposals. It is suggested that the University consider how it can encourage even more systematic support of writing grant proposals.

5.11. General comments on the management of research

Research activities at Hólar University are impressive in relation to the size of the institution. Collaborative networks are relevant and their development should be continued. This is very important to increase the probability of success in future funding applications. Publication strategies are effective and building writing competency is a priority, which is to be complimented. Open science and sharing of data are on the agenda as well. Policies on intellectual property rights and commercialisation of research are less clear and should be further developed. The institution has pointed out certain items for improvement: 1) the need to develop a strategy for regular review of research policies, in alignment with the University's general policy, 2) to identify clear ways to evaluate the impact of research (in light of the work of the Research Evaluation Advisory Committee), 3) to develop support for faculty to enhance their research output and 4) to develop support for faculty to

publish in open access journals. The Team agrees that work on these areas would be an appropriate priority in the near future

Section 6 Managing Enhancement

6.1. General enhancement context

Since its founding in 2007, Hólar University has maintained a consistent focus on enhancement. The University has proceeded through several strategic plans starting in 2006, as well as SLRs and the IWR of 2013 as part of the first cycle of the QEF. The first-cycle IWR resulted in a limited confidence assessment in Hólar University's management of the student learning experience. Since the 2013 review, Hólar University has focused significant attention on improving the academic environment for students and in 2016 earned a 'confidence' rating from the Quality Board following the submission of an Action Plan in 2015 and subsequent follow-up. Although improvements have been marked, the University recognises that opportunities exist for improvement in terms of developing greater uniformity of management and oversight of compliance with regulations, as well as follow-up of action plans. Based on discussions during the visit and reflected in the RA, it is also hoped that, over time, there will be more deliberate steps taken to capture the full student voice across cohorts and departments, as well as finding formal and informal ways to bring the student body more closely together.

It was apparent from discussions with the RA Steering Committee that the RA was developed in a more holistic, collaborative fashion than previously, and also with greater attention to detail and inclusion of a far greater number of annexes related to University management and operations. There was a deliberate engagement of staff and students in the writing of the RA and the external members of the University Board commented on a draft of the RA.

Hólar University's Quality Policy was drafted following the last IWR and is based on various Icelandic policies, laws and regulations; the Icelandic Quality Enhancement Framework – QEF2 developed by the Quality Board; and ESG 2015.

6.2. Strategic planning and action planning

The RA identified specific actions taken to strengthen collaborations, improve educational quality, improve the work environment for staff and students and increase research quality and visibility. The results of the first IWR provided key elements for the University's Strategic Policy 2016-2020. A SWOT analysis and broad-based staff participation were employed to achieve a plan that focuses on the institution broadly, as well as teaching and research in each of its academic units specifically. The 2016-2020 Strategic Policy emphasises the three main pillars of the institution: 1) purpose, 2) learning and teaching, as well as 3) research.

Increased industry collaboration and the creation of advisory boards in each department are positive steps. There has been significant progress since the last IWR around staff development, especially in relation to research and research management. Also, the increased utilisation of travel funds and sabbaticals is a positive enhancement in the research environment. The establishment of a new BA programme and two new collaborative Masters programmes are enhancements to the curriculum that provide additional opportunities for learners. Based on meetings during the visit, it is recommended that courses and state-of-the-art training in pedagogy, both generally and specifically related to blended learning, be pursued along with strengthening ICT to benefit students and staff.

The development of the formal equality policy and rules regarding bullying and sexual harassment were appropriate. However, conversations during the site visit suggested that further work is needed to create a process that is uniformly followed regarding these important student-facing issues so that appropriate documentation and communication will occur in all cases, with appropriate safeguards for confidentiality.

6.3. Committee structure

The University Board is the governing board of the University. The current Board is very new but displayed good group dynamics and a clear commitment to working together for the good of the University. The Board sets policy for teaching, research and the University's organisational structure and approves the budget. The Rector serves as Board chair and is the chief administrator of the University. The Management Team consists of the Rector, Chairs of the three departments and the Finance Director.

The University Board consists of internal (including a student) and external members with two-year terms. The Rector and the internal members select the external members. The internal members have a responsibility to ensure University rules and regulations are followed, while the external members are committed to their role as communicators to outside entities, including stakeholders and relevant ministries.

In addition to the three academic departments, the University has four divisions that work across the academic departments. An organisational chart was provided to the Team as part of the RA. The review Team noted an apparent disconnect of the DAA/DGS from the Management Team, resulting in the absence of these divisions from decision-making processes at the institutional level. The Review Team also envisions possible benefits of including the Head of the DGS on the research committee to ensure that research is appropriately considered in the development and expansion of graduate curricula.

The DAA/DGS are managed by the Department of Academic Affairs in consultation with the Academic Affairs Committee and the Graduate Affairs Committee. Both committees are chaired by the Head of the Division, with other members appointed by the Rector. The authority of the Academic Affairs Committee is not clearly articulated but, as was noted in the 2013 IWR report, this committee could serve as an institution-wide governance (and enhancement) vehicle focused on data-driven management and planning.

Activities of the Division of Research are mainly accomplished by the research committee and the Team noted a mature outlook on research and research management within the Division that is in touch with global issues. The mechanisms of prioritisation are not clear in the descriptions or remits of formal structures. For example, it was not clear to the Team if an institutional mechanism exists to formally endorse or veto action plans arising from SLRs. To allow the Rector to balance the strategy, especially in light of very limited resources, there should be oversight of the departmental activities and priorities, and the University should look to strengthen its capacity in that respect.

6.4. Evidence base

It was apparent to the Review Team that strong stakeholder and industry engagement are very much part of the Hólar ethos, coupled with strong links to the surrounding communities. These elements support the University's research, curricular development and student learning experience. The Team found clear evidence during meetings of response to input in all departments. Students in DES suggested changes in the Genetics and Horse breeding courses, as well as the addition of entrepreneurship and business management courses to the curriculum. In response to student feedback, DRT incorporated more project-based learning and the department has benefited from the input of the many students who were already working in the industry. DAFB responded to industry and student concerns when they decided that students would visit a fish farm with re-circulation equipment in the West of Iceland when it was pointed out that this technology was the way of the future and that the University does not have these facilities.

However, there is a need to increase the use of strategic data in the day-to-day running of the University, for example through regularly updated dashboards. Information that grounds daily operations and strategic decision-making, for example, financials, enrolment data and research funding could be utilised effectively by various committees and departments. The benefit of such tools was also identified by a member of the University Board. Similarly, there is a need for the development

and utilisation of a full range of Key Performance Indicators related to student satisfaction and student learning experience/achievement more broadly.

Hólar University is a supportive community that values personal relationships with students. A by-product of this close-knit environment and resultant informality appears to be a lack of uniformity in the day-to-day running of the University and its departments, as well as in institutional oversight of the evaluation of compliance with regulations and the follow-up of action plans.

6.5. Benchmarks

Hólar University pursues benchmarking through various avenues relating to its academic and research activities. The RA describes using the University of Guelph in Canada as a model when developing the MSc in DAFB and utilising experts from the USA and Europe to review the Masters degrees in DRT.

The institutional and departmental research policies all articulate the goal of producing high-quality research that is recognised by the international research community through publication and participation in international research conferences. DAFB has a mature research organisation and culture. Tangible recognition occurred in 2019 when it was awarded a substantial Grant of Excellence from the Icelandic Research Fund. The department has greatly benefited from the relationship with FISK Seafood, which has provided the research facilities at Verið in Sauðárkrókur free of charge since 2004. Faculty in the department supervise doctoral students at Verið and a number of international students come there annually for research internships. The University is aware of the competitive nature of research grant capture (and indeed performs well in this area), especially in DAFB. The Director of Research and others are fully aware of, and engaged with, the work of the Research Evaluation Advisory Committee and Icelandic developments for a Current Research Information System in relation to capturing research impact. Such frameworks and analyses will be of benefit to the University in assessing the impact of strategies to enhance its research performance.

6.6. Internal sharing of best practice

It is clear from the discussions that occurred during the site visit that staff engage in many informal and wide-ranging conversations in their day-to-day work. The RA includes numerous references to adopting and operating in a best practice manner to improve education, teaching and, student-related issues and research. More formal efforts have been grounded in the development of codes of conduct and best practice within DAA/DGS that apply and are shared across the University. Codes were developed that focused on improving the quality of teaching, described the programme revision process and upgraded the teachers' handbook. Codes have been developed that focused on the quality of teaching and programme revision. It was recognized in the RA that the exact role and responsibilities of the DAA/DGS in programme revision was not made clear enough. The RA also identified the need to update the teachers' handbook and develop best practices which include blended learning.

The research policies are supported and monitored by the Division of Research and the departments. The Division of Research supports and promotes the research policy by organising and hosting annual research days as well as seminars and symposia, where research, research philosophy, research policy and best practices in research are discussed across the University. With research being an important and integrated part of the University, the Division of Research and the departments have emphasized internal collaboration on research applications, as well as guided training on how to apply for funding where experienced faculty have shared their experience. The University-wide Division of Research efforts should be mirrored in similar activities focused on teaching and programme review and modification.

6.7. Drawing on international experience

It was clear from the RA and site visit meetings that the University has a mature outlook on research and research management. Extensive collaborations exist between the University and institutions in Europe, Canada and the USA with projects that involve funding from national and international

research foundations. The University routinely hosts international collaborators, graduate students, as well as internship and exchange students.

International collaboration also occurs within academic programmes. DAFB faculty supervise doctoral students registered at other universities, e.g., the University of Iceland and the University of Guelph. The Nordic Masters Programme in Sustainable Production and Utilisation of Marine Bio Resources (MAR-BIO) is a collaboration with the University of Gothenburg, Nord University in Bodø, and the University of Akureyri. Additionally, a formal collaboration at the Masters level has been established with the University of New England in the US. Starting in 2020, DRT will offer a Nordic Masters Programme in Outdoor Activities in collaboration with the University of South-East Norway, the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences and the Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences. The University clearly recognises the unique strengths of its programmes and has tailored international collaboration to enhance those strengths to great benefit.

6.8. Domestic cooperation

There is extensive collaboration with universities, research institutions and industry partners across Iceland. Examples include the DAFB-based breeding programme for Arctic charr and the collaborative research project between DES and DRT on Landsmót 2016 and 2018 (the National Icelandic Horse Tournament), which took place at Hólar.

As referenced above, the collaborative DAFB Nordic Masters Programme in Sustainable Production and Utilisation of Marine Bio resources (MAR-BIO) also includes cooperation with the University of Akureyri. DRT collaborates with Tourism Studies at the University of Iceland and with the University of Akureyri through their collaborative research venue, The Icelandic Tourism Research Centre. The University's equality committee has close collaboration with equality committees and equality representatives in the other Icelandic universities, through The Consultation Platform of Equality Representatives in Icelandic Universities, which together organised annual 'Equality days' in Icelandic universities.

The University has identified the value and strength in the collaboration among Icelandic universities, especially through the Network of Public Universities in Iceland, the Rectors' Conference and through the work of the QEF's Quality Council and Research Evaluation Advisory Committee. The examples cited above illustrate the breadth of cooperation encompassing academic areas, research and human resources.

6.9. Evaluation

Hólar University operates as a close-knit community in a relatively isolated environment. With such a small population, it is easy to imagine meaningful professional conversations ongoing throughout the day. Hierarchy in terms of official communication and decision-making is not however wholly apparent. Formality in the day-to-day running of the University and its departments, as well as in the formal mechanisms of oversight of compliance with regulations, is largely absent. It was noted during the visit that mechanisms of evidence gathering and documentation as procedures to accompany policies had lagged behind. Policies with embedded, regularly scheduled evaluation procedures would set the stage for periodic 'closing the loop' in making modifications of many kinds.

Although the close, supportive relationship of campus personnel with students is an asset, it should not substitute for a more formal mechanism to monitor progress and track problems. Without a formal documentation process, patterns of behaviour or problems can be overlooked, thereby continuing longer than necessary

Within Hólar University, as in much of the world, evaluation of research is framed around successful grant proposals, publication in leading journals and participation in international conferences. The Division of Research supports and monitors research policies and best practices through various means, including seminars and symposia. The Division of Research's efforts could serve as a model for similar actions focused on teaching and programme review and modification.

An overarching question is how departmental decisions are layered into institutional planning at the Management Team level? The Team noted the apparent dissociation of the DAA/DGS from the

Management Team, resulting in the absence of these divisions from decision-making processes at the institutional level.

The strong sense of Hólar University's identity and community spirit was echoed throughout the Team's visit. Staff are committed to the institution, students are largely satisfied with their experience, alumni value their education, and stakeholders champion the University's importance to the region. The University Board is dynamic, provides support to the Rector and is clearly committed to working together for the benefit of Hólar University. The Team recognises that addition of more formality and structure to the University culture will be a noted change, but one that would set the stage for greater efficiency and success long into the future.

7. Conclusion

7.1. General summary, including overview of management of research

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

The RA presented a picture of a very distinctive university, one which has made very significant progress in development since the IWR in QEF1 and subsequent follow-up report. The Team found a wealth of evidence to confirm the RA and to enable the Team to make the confidence judgements noted in 7.4 and 7.5 below. In particular, the Team wishes to note the helpfulness of the institution's showcase at the beginning of the visit, which served to set a context for the work being done at Hólar University, as well as the Hólar ethos.

The Team also found evidence of the effectiveness of the University's management of research. This is confirmed by the growth in research performance during the period since the 2013 IWR. More generally, the Team found a University that has identified it strengths, and is moving to fulfil its mission with engagement of a wide range of stakeholders.

7.2. Summary of strengths

- An active engagement with the elements of the QEF as intended, including the deliberate engagement of staff and students in the writing of the Reflective Analysis.

- The strong sense of Hólar University's identity and community spirit that was echoed throughout the visit, and alumni confirming that the values of the University clearly resonated with their experiences.

- The strong stakeholder and industry engagement, coupled with strong links to the surrounding communities, that support Hólar University's research, curricular development and student learning experience.

- The readiness of graduates to enter the job market, aided by relevant work placements and projects with clear industry relevance.

- Clear evidence of student input leading to curricular changes.

- Short communication lines and rapid decision making.

- A student counsellor that has, in a relatively short time, made herself visible and easily accessible to students through continuous outreach and personal attention, as well as a Director of Academic Affairs and service desk staff that are highly valued points of contact.

- The significant progress made since the last Institution-Wide Review around staff development, especially in relation to research and research management.

- A mature outlook on research and research management in the research committee and research division that is cognisant of global issues.

- A range of research activities that is impressive in light of the size of the University.

- The significant collaborative curricular development that is evidenced by the two joint Nordic Masters degrees in DAFB and DRT, and collaboration in the Tourism Research Centre with two other Icelandic universities.

- A comprehensive equality policy and evidence of equality being embedded in the operations of the University.

- A University board that is dynamic, provides support to the Rector and is clearly committed to working together for the benefit of Hólar University.

7.3. Summary of areas for improvement

- Areas for further development that the University is asked to consider are:

- The level of formality in the day-to-day running of departments and the University, as well as in the institutional oversight of compliance with regulations and follow-up of action plans.

- Improved formal connection and definition of the Department of Academic Affairs and the Department of Graduate Studies within important structures and decision-making processes at the institutional level.

- Enhancing institutional infrastructure to relieve the heavy administrative and student-support load on departments and individual staff.

- The possible benefits of including the Head of the Division of Graduate Studies on the research committee to ensure that research is appropriately considered in the development of graduate curricula.

- The development and utilisation of a full range of key performance indicators related to student satisfaction and student learning experience more broadly.

- Taking deliberate steps to capture the full student voice across cohorts and departments, as well as finding formal and informal ways to bring the student body more closely together.

- The lack of consistent understanding and practice across those interviewed on how to refer students issues safely and in a confidential but documented manner, e.g., student support or misconduct.

- A need to better market the brand of Hólar University and to further raise its profile nationally, with an emphasis on the impact of its current research and teaching.

- The levels of interdisciplinarity in Hólar's research and teaching.

- A need to increase the use of strategic data in the day-to-day running of the University, for example through regularly updated dashboarding.

- Strengthening the current capacity for blended learning development and ICT support to benefit both students and staff, and to facilitate future curriculum development.

- Creating more practical support for research, exemplified by the staff sabbatical process.

7.4. Judgment on managing standards of degrees and awards

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

7.5. Judgment on managing standards of student learning experience

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

Annex 1: Site Visit Schedule

Tuesday November 19

Time	Meeting	Attendees
08:30-9:00	**Briefing with President**	Dr. Erla Björk Örnólfsdóttir, Rector
09:00-12:00	**University Showcase**	Bjarni K. Kristjánsson PhD, Professor and head of DAFB Erla B. Örnólfsdóttir PhD, Rector Guðmundur B. Eyþórsson MSc, Finance Manager and Head of DOS Laufey Haraldsdóttir, MA, Assistant Professor and Head of DRT Sveinn Ragnarsson PhD, Associate Professor and Head of DES Skúli Skúlason PhD, Professor and Head of DOR
12:00-13:00	**Lunch**	
13:00-13:25	**RA Steering Committee**	Annie Ivarsdottir, BSc student in DES (graduated last spring, Iceland/Sweden)* Jóhannes Amplatz, BSc student in DES (graduated last spring, Italy) Ástrós Pálmadóttir, BA student DRT Bergrós Guðbjartsdóttir, BA student DRT Berghildur Fanney Hauksdóttir, MA student DRT Börkur Nóason, diploma student DAFB* Hjördís Gísladóttir MA, Head of DAA and DGS Anna G. Þórhallssdóttir PhD, Professor DRT * Elisabeth Jansen MSc, Assistant Professor DES Ingibjörg Sigurðardóttir MA, Assistant Professor DRT Stefán Ó. Steingrímsson PhD, Professor DAFB Víkingur Gunnarsson MSc, Assistant Professor DES Bjarni K. Kristjánsson PhD, Professor and head of DAFB Erla B. Örnólfsdóttir PhD, Rector Laufey Haraldsdóttir MA, Assistant Professor and Head of DRT Sveinn Ragnarsson PhD, Assistant Professor and Head of DES Skúli Skúlason PhD, Professor and Head of DOR
13:30-14:30	**Senior Management**	Bjarni K. Kristjánsson PhD, Professor and head of DAFB Erla B. Örnólfsdóttir PhD, Rector Guðmundur B. Eyþórsson MSc, Finance Manager and Head of DOS Laufey Haraldsdóttir MA, Assistant Professor and Head of DRT Sveinn Ragnarsson PhD, Associate Professor and Head of DES
14:30-15:00	**Team Debriefing**	
15:00-17:00	**Department Heads & QA Staff**	Bjarni K. Kristjánsson PhD, Professor and head of DAFB Hjördís Gísladóttir MA, Head of DAA and DGS Ingibjörg Sigurðardóttir MA, Assistant Professor DRT Laufey Haraldsdóttir MA, Assistant Professor and Head of DRT Skúli Skúlason PhD, Professor and Head of DOR Sveinn Ragnarsson PhD, Associate Professor and Head of DES Víkingur Gunnarsson MSc, Assistant Professor DES Guðmundur B. Eyþórsson MSc, Finance Manager and Head of DOS

Wednesday November 20

Time	Meeting	Attendees
08:15-09:00	**Support Staff**	Aldís Axelsdóttir, Service/Reception Main Desk Astrid M. Magnúsdóttir, Director, Library and Information Services (collaboration University of Akureyri) Ástríður M. Eymundsdóttir, Career and Guidance Counsellor (collaboration University of Iceland and Agricultural University of Iceland) Broddi R. Hansen BSc, Information Technology Eysteinn Steingrímsson, Manager of Hólar Farm, DES Guðmundur B. Eyþórsson MSc, Finance Manager and Head of DOS Kári H. Árnason, Chief Technician/Research Station Manager, DAFB Rafnkell Jónsson, Hólar Campus Manager (buildings & facilities) Unnur G. Haraldsdóttir BSc, Accountant
09:00-09:10	**Team Debriefing**	
09:10-9:25	**Student Representatives**	Not disclosed. N = 4.
09:30-10:00	**Student Meeting DES**	Not disclosed. N = 6.
10:00-10:30	**Team Debriefing**	
10:30-11:00	**Student Meeting DAFB**	Not disclosed. N = 6.
11:00-11:30	**Student Meeting DRT**	Not disclosed. N = 8.
11:30-12:00	**Team Debriefing**	
12:00-12:40	**Lunch w. Students - catered**	Not disclosed. N = 85 (estimated)
12:40-13:00	**Team Debriefing**	
13:00-14:00	**DAFB Staff**	Camille A. Leblanc PhD, Assistant Professor* David Benhaim PhD, Associate Professor Ólafur Sigurgerisson MSc, Assistant Professor Stefán Ó. Steingrímsson PhD, Professor DAFB Kári H. Árnason Chief Technician/Research Station Manager, DAFB
14:00-14:30	**Team Debriefing**	
14:30-15:30	**DRT Staff**	Ingibjörg Sigurðardóttir MA, Assistant Professor DRT Anna Guðrún Þórhallsdóttir PhD, Professor DRT* Anna Vilborg Einarsdóttir M.A., Assistant Professor Jessica Faustini Aquino PhD, Assistant Professor Kjartan Bollason MA, Assistant Professor* Þórir Erlingsson MA, Lecturer Þuríður Helga Jónasdóttir MA, Sessional Teacher
15:30-16:00	**Team Debriefing**	
16:00-17:00	**DES Staff**	Mette Mannseth Trainer & Riding teacher, Head Riding Teacher Guðrún Stefánsdóttir PhD, Assistant Professor Þorsteinn Björnsson Trainer & Riding teacher, Riding Teacher Víkingur Gunnarsson MSc, Assistant Professor DES Elisabeth Jansen MSc, Assistant Professor DES

Thursday November 21

Time	Meeting	Attendees
08:30-10:00	**Research Management, including Case Study**	Bjarni K. Kristjánsson PhD, Professor and head of DAFB Laufey Haraldsdóttir MA, Assistant Professor and Head of DRT Ólafur Sigurgeirsson MSc, Assistant Professor Skúli Skúlason PhD, Professor and Head of DOR Víkingur Gunnarsson MSc, Assistant Professor DES
10:00-10:30	**Team Debriefing**	
10:30-11:30	**Open Meeting with Staff**	No attendees
11:30-12:00	**Team Debriefing**	
12:00-12:40	**Lunch**	
12:40-13:00	**Team Debriefing**	
13:00-14:00	**University Board**	Erla B. Örnólfsdóttir PhD, Rector and Chair Gunnlaugur Bjarnason, student repr. Ingibjörg Sigurðardóttir MA Assistant Professor, repr. HU Jón E. Friðriksson, former CEO of FISK Seafood, appointed by the board Laufey Skúladóttir, Specialist at the Icelandic Regional Development Institute, appointed by MESC Sjöfn Guðmundsdóttir, Tourism Operator, appointed by the board Stefán Ó. Steingrímsson PhD, Professor, representing Hólar University
14:00-14:30	**Team Debriefing**	
14:30-15:15	**Alumni**	Not disclosed. N = 9.
15:15-15:30	**Team Debriefing**	
15:30-16:15	**External Stakeholders**	Soffía Karen Magnúsdóttir, Project Manager Laxar Fiskeldi (fish farm) Guðrún Þóra Gunnarsdóttir, Dir. of the Icelandic Tourism Research Ctr. Jelena Ohm, Promote Iceland, Project Manager, Trade & Export Sigurður Pétursson, Arctic Fish (fish farm), Business Development Arnar Pálsson, Professor of Bioinformatics University of Iceland Sigurbjörn Bárðarson, Master Trainer, Coach of the National Equitation Team Þorvaldur Kristjánsson, National Consultant for Equine Breeding Lárus Ástmar Hannesson, Head of the Icelandic National Equestrian Association Evelyn Kuhne, Tourism Operator
16:15-16:45	**Team Debriefing**	
16:45-17:15	**Debriefing with Rector**	Dr. Erla B. Örnólfsdóttir, Rector