



HÁSKÓLINN Á BIFRÖST

BIFRÖST UNIVERSITY

Annual Quality Report 2024

January 2025

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1. Introduction

This annual report provides an overview of quality-related activities at Bifröst University over the past year, covering developments since the last institution-wide review. It also highlights the progress made in various areas and offers a brief outline of upcoming internal quality activities.

2. Recent Developments

Bifröst University (BU) experienced significant changes last year when its campus buildings in Norðurárdalur were deemed unusable due to mold infestation. Consequently, the campus was closed and will be put up for sale. BU has since transitioned to a distance-learning institution, operating without a traditional campus, with staff offices located in Reykjavík and Hvanneyri.

In spring 2024, BU reached a new funding agreement with the Ministry of Higher Education, which aligned its financial structure with that of public universities in Iceland. This agreement eliminated tuition fees and adjusted funding in line with the new higher education funding model. Despite this progress, BU remains the lowest-funded university in Iceland and continues to align its operations with the new model.

This shift in funding has led to remarkable growth in student enrollment, increasing from 600 to nearly 1,700 students by summer 2024. To address this rapid growth, BU expanded its academic and support staff. As a distance-learning university, where dropout rates tend to be higher, BU focused on improving student support services, achieving the lowest dropout rates in its history.

In summer 2024, BU, along with nine European universities, secured a 2 billion ISK grant from the EU for the OpenEU project. This initiative aims to develop cross-border education, including distance learning, joint and double degree programs, and a PhD program, potentially culminating in a new distance-learning university. OpenEU enhances BU's curriculum development, international cooperation, and research opportunities, with partner universities serving as benchmarking institutions in the coming years.

BU is also piloting AI systems to monitor teaching and learning quality within its LMS.

Additionally, BU has entered negotiations with the University of Akureyri regarding a potential merger. An agreement, endorsed by both universities and the Ministry of Higher Education, has been reached to establish a new public university with a main campus in Akureyri and offices in Reykjavík and Borgarfjörður.

These developments, along with external factors such as the introduction of QEF3, have prompted BU to update its infrastructure. A new international policy has been published, and a general university policy is expected in spring 2025 as we have already achieved most of our goals in the strategy for 2030. To comply with QEF3, BU has introduced a new research policy and strategy for research administration.

Starting January 2026, new regulations on promotion and qualifications of academic staff will take effect. Meanwhile, rules concerning teaching, student supervision, courses, and programs are under review.

3. Areas of Improvement

In November 2020, Bifröst University (BU) received a **limited confidence** verdict regarding its ability to secure academic standards from an Institutional Review Team (IRT) appointed by the Quality Board. Following a rigorous revision of the institution's infrastructure, policies, and processes, the university was awarded **full confidence** by the Quality Board in December 2022.

While the IWR team and Quality Board did not issue further formal recommendations for quality enhancement, BU acknowledges that quality assurance is an ongoing process. The university has continued to strengthen its internal quality assurance system. This section addresses specific topics highlighted in the IRT's letter from December 2022.

3.1. Clearer Vision and Strategic Implementation

The vision for BU is multi-faceted and complex. As a result, its strategies, priorities, and action plan implementation require clearer delineation.

As noted in the December 2022 letter, BU's response to the IWR2 report was an **impressive strategic transformation**, which included a new strategy with defined goals and sub-goals. Most of these goals have already been achieved. However, given the significant changes the university is undergoing, a new policy is now required and is currently being developed as this report is being prepared.

This renewed vision and strategy have driven an organizational review, with a particular focus on staffing. Efforts have been made to increase the number of permanent academic staff, enhancing the ratio of courses taught by permanent faculty compared to part-time lecturers. Simultaneously, regulations governing the recruitment and career progression of academic staff have been made more rigorous. The new regulations align with those of institutions such as the University of Iceland.

However, the stricter regulations have posed challenges in hiring new academic staff with doctoral degrees. This challenge is particularly significant in Iceland, where only 0.5% of the population holds a doctoral degree.

3.2. Evidence-Based Decision Making

Evidence-based decision-making is not consistently applied across the university. The strategic plan and enhancement plan currently lack defined **targets for KPIs** (Key Performance Indicators) and clear timelines for achieving outcomes.

While BU's current strategy and action plan—as well as the one currently in development—identify goals, sub-goals, actions, responsibilities, timeframes, and indicators aligned with quality assurance and reporting systems, the university does not yet have a **formal approach to benchmarking** and implementing best practices.

Efforts have been made to improve benchmarking practices. Exercises have been conducted with Reykjavik University and the University of Akureyri, while the Department of Business Administration has engaged in similar activities with Copenhagen Business School. BU's participation in the **OpenEU project**, as outlined earlier in this report, provides a unique opportunity to benchmark with nine European distance-learning universities. Additionally, upcoming Subject-Level Reviews (SLRs) scheduled for the next few years will include benchmarking exercises for each department.

3.3. Addressing Student Non-Completion Rates

While BU has achieved successes with students from diverse academic backgrounds, **high non-completion rates** remain a concern, and there has been insufficient analysis of the reasons for this outcome.

BU has taken the issue of student non-completion seriously and has conducted an analysis of its non-completion rates and the underlying causes. Benchmarking with other Icelandic universities has shown that BU's completion rates are comparable when viewed over a longer study period.

The majority of BU students are older, have family responsibilities, and most of them work alongside their studies. To address these challenges, BU has made significant efforts to expand its **student support services** and counseling resources. As a result, recent measures have led to the **lowest dropout rates in BU's history**, despite student enrollment more than doubling over the past year.

4. Internal Quality Reviews

To ensure evidence-based decision-making within BU, data collection follows the Operational Calendar, a collaborative effort between the Directors of Quality Management, Curriculum, and IT Services. This calendar specifies data extraction timelines and responsibilities. Data collection aligns with University Executive Committee meetings, which use these statistics to monitor ongoing quality. Student surveys and interviews complement this data to enhance teaching and learning quality.

Regular program reviews ensure that academic awards meet high standards and drive improvements in teaching, learning, evaluation, and student experience. Reviews assess whether program objectives align with BU's strategy and societal needs.

Over the past two years, all programs in the Department of Law and most programs in the Departments of Social Science and Business have undergone reviews. Current reviews include the MA in Cultural Studies and the BS in Business Administration with a focus on Business Intelligence. This review cycle will conclude in 2025.

The outcomes of these reviews have already been used as a basis for strategic updates within the departments of Law and Business.

Subject-Level Reviews (SLRs) are also conducted periodically to ensure quality in teaching, learning, research, and societal impact, aligning with QEF3 standards. These reviews involve external experts and benchmarking with similar departments at other institutions. BU has scheduled SLRs for all three departments from 2025 to 2027. During this period, the Office of Teaching and Learning will undergo a similar review process.

Bifröst University is currently in the mid-process of aligning its quality processes to align with QEF3, particularly regarding quality assurance of research administration and societal impact. It is important to acknowledge that external factors are making this process more challenging. The fact that QEF3 indicators for societal impact are not the same as the ones of the Ministry of Higher Education does make this effort more complicated as well as the fact that neither the IRIS-system for research output nor the Data warehouse supplied by the University of Iceland for Bifröst data collection is functioning as expected.