

Accreditation Report

Social Science

University of Bifröst

Expert Committee Report

January 2008

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 The Expert Committee

- Dr. Christian Thune, Past Executive Director of the Danish Evaluation Institute, Denmark (chair).
- Prof. Dr. Jürgen Kohler, Universität Greifswald, Germany.
- Dr. Frank Quinault, Director of Learning and Teaching Quality, University of St. Andrews, Scotland.
  
- M.A. Magnús Lyngdal Magnússon, Advisor, Division of Research and Innovation, The Icelandic Centre for Research – RANNIS, Reykjavik, Iceland (Liaison Officer).

### 1.2 Terms of Reference

The Accreditation Committee was appointed to carry out a review of social science at five different universities in Iceland: Iceland University of Education, University of Akureyri, University of Bifröst, University of Iceland and Reykjavik University respectively. The review was carried out according to Article 3 of Higher Education Institution Act (HEI), no. 63/2006. Rules no. 1067/2006 give the following instructions to the committee:

“The committee of experts shall provide the Minister of Education, Science and Culture with a report that outlines the results of the evaluation of items a to i,<sup>1</sup> paragraph 3, article 2 of the Rules, based on the application and information provide by Higher Education Institutions in Iceland (HEIs) in accordance with article 2, in addition to evaluation of the following factors:

1. Academic knowledge and competence of HEI within the relevant field of study and subdivisions thereof, pertaining to the quality of teaching and research, academic facilities, dissemination of knowledge and connection to community.
2. The support structure of the HEI for; the academic community, teachers and experts in the relevant field of study and the education and training of students.
3. Special attention shall be paid to the strengths of the fields of study and the subdivisions thereof, with reference to course plans, particularly in relevance to links to undergraduate and graduate studies and towards other appropriate fields of study.

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<sup>1</sup> Items a to i referred to above are: *a. Objectives and Roles; b. Administration and Organisation; c. Organisation of teaching and research; d. Personnel qualifications requirements; e. Admission requirements and student rights and obligations; f. Teacher and student facilities and services; g. Internal quality system; h. Description of study according to learning outcomes; i. Finances.*

4. Academic standard of the field of study and subdivision thereof, in national and international context. Regard shall be taken of i.e. national and international cooperation between HEI and other institutions.

Should the conclusions of the committee be not to recommend accreditation then it shall provide a detailed report of any failure on the part of the HEI to fulfil the regulations according to article 2 or any recommendations for reparations that the HEIs must undertake before accreditation for that particular field of study can be awarded. In receipt of such report, the Minister of Education, Science and Culture will afford the HEI a specific extension to make any amendments needed. The amendments will be evaluated by the expert committee in question, who will provide the Minister of Education, Science and Culture with a report detailing the aptness of the amendments. Final decision regarding accreditation will be announced to the HEI.”

### ***1.3 Working Method and the process***

An English translation of the accreditation application was made available to the Accreditation Committee (hereafter “the panel”) at The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture’s extranet (<http://ytri.stjr.is>) on 10 September 2007. The application had a number of appendices, all in English (see Appendix 2).

The first panel meeting was held on Thursday 27 September. The panel visited Bifröst University on 3 October 2007 (see Appendix 1). Each member had already been supplied with over 200 pages (excluding staff CVs) of documentary material, besides the actual application for accreditation (hereafter “the application”) itself. The documents had been written in good, clear English and were generally helpful to the panel in understanding the University and its operations. The Rector told the panel [Final meeting] that the preparation of the application had been a valuable exercise.

At Bifröst the panel met the Rector, Deans, representatives from supporting services, a number of teachers and students as well as those mostly responsible for the application (Appendix 1). The final meeting in Iceland was held on Saturday morning 6 October, followed by a meeting with Ministry representatives where they were informed of the panel’s initial reactions to the application and the visits.

After circulating drafts by email the panel agreed on a final draft in December 2007. Chapters 2 to 10 were sent to the University of Bifröst for corrections of factual mistakes and misinterpretations on Wednesday 12 December 2007. The university replied on 20 December making some specific comments which have been taken into account and corrections have been made accordingly.

#### ***1.4 Short evaluation of the work process***

The expert committee found the work process very rewarding in terms of experiencing Icelandic university culture and working with the concept and goals of the present quality assurance system for higher education launched by the Ministry. The committee wishes to state its sincere appreciation of its working relationship with the University of Bifröst and the four other universities involved. All demonstrated the basic academic qualities of openness and frankness, enabling discussions during the site visits to focus not only on the strengths but also in some cases on the weaker points of their social science programmes. The universities have, in most respects, made a sincere and credible effort to produce the documentation needed to show that their programmes comply with the quality criteria defined by legislation. However, it would have been easier for the committee to review the five universities in a consistent and comparable manner had they been given more detailed guidance as to the form and content of the requisite documentation.

The expert committee has, during the whole working process, been given excellent help by Rannis staff members Eiríkur Smári Sigurðarson and Magnús Lyngdal Magnússon. These two have been instrumental not only in making practical arrangements smooth and comfortable for committee members, but also as effective interpreters of Icelandic traditions and the culture of higher education learning. During the recent demanding period of finalising and editing the reports the three committee members have further learned to value Eiríkur's and Magnús's constructive and patient professional attitude.

## **2. Objectives and roles**

Bifröst University (hereafter BU) is a private, non-profit institution. Its most obvious characteristics are its small size, with a headcount not much in excess of 1,000 students, its rather remote setting and the high proportion of its members who live on campus.

The four features that BU itself presents as defining characteristics in its application are that:

- it is the only campus university in Iceland;
- practical exercises are the norm for students to a greater extent than elsewhere;
- a large proportion of its students spend a semester at a foreign partner university;
- it has one of the strongest distance learning programmes in Iceland.

BU has its origins in the Icelandic Co-operative movement, which founded a college in Reykjavik in 1918. This moved to its present location in 1955, acquired degree awarding powers in 1990, as a university college for Business Administration, and changed its name to Bifröst University in 2006. The change followed the creation of a Faculty of Law in 2000 and of Social Sciences five years later. There is thus a sense in which BU is a very new university.

Nevertheless, its historical roots are still reflected in its mission, one version of which [that given in the document EF30, “Strategy of the University of Bifröst”] begins: “To support and strengthen the Icelandic industries and community by providing students with an outstanding education, knowledge and training”. During the visit itself the panel was told that leadership training has been a continuous part of the institution’s mission throughout its 90 years’ existence.

Another version of BU’s mission statement [from its University Regulation] begins with a different priority: “The mission of Bifröst University is the creation of knowledge through research”. According to the application, BU’s research is focussed on:

- practical tasks, domestic and international, which serve to improve knowledge of the economy and the business sector;
- strong ties with business enterprises and organisations through students’ assignments and research and the consultancy work of teachers;
- co-operation with foreign and domestic partners on primary research into economic affairs, the industries and the community.

The Charter of the University of Bifröst is similarly pragmatic: “In providing training and education the University will focus on practical assignments ...”. This does not mean, however, that BU sets its sights low. On the contrary, it aims to provide [University Regulation] “an education which is on a par with the best education offered by academic institutions in the Western world”.

Although it bears the title ‘University’, BU consists of just three Faculties. Each is very small and two of them are still very new. When the Bifröst Business College became Bifröst University, in 2006, the School of Social Sciences was only just completing its first year of operation and the Faculty of Law was not much older. There are other countries in which the change of name would not have been permitted under those circumstances. However, it was, and the agreement between Bifröst and the Ministry of Education whereby it undertakes to educate students at the university level and to conduct research remains in force.

It is obvious that some features that are typical of university education (and which some might argue are essential for it), such as the opportunity for students to interact with others pursuing a wide variety of disciplines, cannot be reproduced at Bifröst. BU must therefore be judged in terms of the complementary strengths it sees itself as possessing. These find expression in the Strategy document, which states that the University “seeks to achieve a competitive edge through its small size, flexibility, innovation and quality” and that:

“An independent university with a limited number of students can possess the flexibility to respond to changes in the international community and can provide each and every student with more personalised services and better facilities for studies and development than other universities”.

*Conclusion:*

Article 2 of the HEI Act charges universities with the responsibility to create and disseminate knowledge, with the aim of strengthening the infrastructure of Icelandic society and its position in an international context. The panel is satisfied that BU embraces this responsibility: it is able to support some research, disseminates

knowledge to students (not only at Bifröst itself but also through distance learning and newly opened branches in the East and West Fjords), maintains international awareness through staff and student exchanges and has always had the needs of Icelandic society at the heart of its mission.

*Recommendation:*

What BU must be especially wary of is claiming more for itself than its circumstances could ever allow it to achieve. The panel met committed, articulate students and dedicated teachers during its visit who would be a credit to any university, but comparing itself with the best academic institutions in the Western world or claiming better facilities than other universities (both sup. cit) is not necessarily helpful to its cause.

### **3. Administration and organisation**

The supreme authority for the internal affairs of the university is vested in the University Council. It is broadly representative of both staff and students, meets every 3 weeks and decides policy on teaching and research as well as dealing with matters that affect the academic community as a whole or which have not been resolved at faculty level. One of its duties is to ensure, in accordance with the Universities Act, that the University Meeting takes place annually, as a general forum for discussion, and is properly representative of all constituencies.

External governance, and ultimate responsibility for the university's assets and finances, is provided by the five persons Board of Governors, appointed by the University Council, the Friends of the University, the Confederation of Icelandic Employers (2) and the Ministry of Education. Each serves for a period of two years.

The Board of Governors appoints the Rector, who remains answerable to it for his or her management of the university and its finances, including the submission of an annual budget. The Rector is designated as the principal authority in quality matters. The Rector's term of office is for three years but renewable.

The three Faculties, of Business, Law and Social Sciences, constitute the main components of the university. Their Deans are appointed by the Rector. Students are represented at Faculty meetings.

Support for students and staff is delivered through the Teaching, Finance and Housing Divisions, the first of which is responsible for BU's Preparatory Department. This offers a chance to students who have not met BU's normal entrance requirement by graduating from high school or who wish to strengthen their application. Studies in the Preparatory Department comprise 37 credits at the secondary level (over two semesters), include teaching in mathematics, IT, and practical English and Danish, and qualify for student loans.

This section of the application also provided statistical data about student admission and progress and information about BU's research centres (both to be discussed later).

*Conclusion:*

The structural organisation of BU, as just described, is comparable with that of other Icelandic universities. It must be borne in mind, however, that besides the university as a whole being very small, some of its components are exceedingly so. For example, it appears [Annual Report] that the Faculty of Law only had three full-time, permanently contracted members of academic staff in 2006, which would equate to a small department – never mind 'Faculty' – in most universities.

Nevertheless, the panel is satisfied that it had been provided with all the information that is required for this section of the accreditation application, and that the manner in which BU is managed conforms to Articles 15 and 16 of the HEI Act.

*Recommendation:*

What the documentation shown to the panel did not include was any detailed strategic plan, for the university as a whole or for its subdivisions. The "Strategy of the University of Bifröst" is essentially an extended mission statement and nothing at all was produced for any of the three Faculties, although one assumes that, for example,

the creation of Social Sciences, just two years ago, must have been guided by a strategic plan that the Faculty is now trying to fulfil. It would have been beneficial for the panel to see such things, even if this entailed extra work translating documents into English.

#### **4. Organisation of teaching and research**

The programmes for which BU is seeking accreditation are:

Diploma in Business Administration (90 ECTS)

BSc in Business Administration (180 ECTS)

MSc in International Banking and Finance (90 ECTS)

MSc in International Business (90 ECTS)

BSc in Business Law (180 ECTS)

ML in Law (120 ECTS)

MA in Tax Law (90 ECTS)

BA in Politics, Philosophy and Economics (180 ECTS)

MA in Cultural Administration (90 ECTS)

MA in European Studies (90 ECTS)

In the first section of its application BU highlights seven facets of its teaching, which may be summarised as:

- a distinctive pedagogical approach, featuring dynamic group work
- training students to present, and critically evaluate, their work
- links with the business sector, for practical assignments
- links to the international business environment, through exchanges and through teaching in English
- use of IT
- distance learning
- first-class facilities.

In the section of the application that deals specifically with teaching, the university's pedagogical approach is encapsulated as follows: "Practical and applied assignments, considerable individualisation and contact with teachers, as well as an international outlook and instruction and training in scholarly habits".

Permanent members of the teaching staff normally devote 24% of their time to research, a figure that may rise to 40% or more in the case of full professors. BU is seeking to increase research activity by providing assistance to staff who wishes to undertake doctoral studies, for instance by allowing some relief from other duties.

The university's Research Institute, staffed by a Director and three other full-time employees, provides help with grant applications and collaborative projects, and its publications include a new Journal of Social Science.

Half the Director's salary is paid for by BU but the Institute is otherwise self-financing.

BU also supports four research centres:

The Centre for European Studies has a particular focus on employment issues and underpins the MA programme in European Studies.

The Centre for Retail Studies is supported by a trade organisation, several individual companies and the Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

The Centre for Law and Labour Equality aims to strengthen policy-making in this area, through teaching, research and consultancy.

The Centre for Cultural Affairs Research, founded in 2007, will be conducting research into Iceland's creative industries.

The panel met the Directors of these Centres and of the Research Institute. The Director of the Centre for Retail Studies agreed that its rural location at Bifröst might seem strange. However, it was established in response to an initiative by the retail

trades, with a current contract to 2010, and is supported by an office in Reykjavik. Its research informs teaching, and some of the students at BU are themselves working in retail businesses. European Studies was an area of interest that BU wished to develop and the creation of the Centre had helped to keep this focus. The embryonic Centre for Cultural Affairs is the brainchild of the Rector who had identified a need that was not being met elsewhere in Iceland. Asked about the balance between applied and more academic research, the interviewees said they would like to increase the latter, because of its importance for Master's students and for attracting research funding.

The last part of this section of BU's application draws attention to its international links, chiefly by listing recent visiting teachers and more than thirty institutions, mainly in Europe but some also in North America and the Far East, with which it has agreements of some kind.

*Conclusion:*

The HEI Act requires universities to organise teaching by means of courses that are evaluated through ECTS, on graduation from which students should receive a Diploma Supplement. As shown above, all the programmes for which BU is seeking accreditation are aligned with ECTS, and although the panel was not shown any Diploma Supplements there does not appear to be any obstacle to their production. Just how BU may benchmark itself against other universities internationally was not disclosed either, but it sees that as being one of the justifications for the many international agreements listed in the application. The panel is therefore satisfied that BU has a protocol in accordance with Paragraph 3 of Article 2 of the HEI Act.

*Recommendations:*

When the panel asked the Rector about his own objectives for BU, he said that consolidation of the undergraduate programmes was now a priority. The university had expanded rapidly in recent years and the emphasis should now be on quality. The panel is glad to endorse that aim, for a number of reasons:

- BU must be particularly careful to guard against product proliferation. Its small size may make it easier to act quickly upon some market opportunities but it can also threaten viability.
- The number of programmes being delivered by the university is already significant in relation to its size, with at least one more (a Master's Degree in health service management) under consideration.
- That is especially true at the Master's Level, where, indeed, BU is already in the process of withdrawing several programmes. The fact that two of these (MAs in Educational & Cultural Administration and in Applied Economics) are in a Faculty that only came into existence two years ago may, perhaps, indicate a deficit in strategic thinking.
- There may be a parallel case for consolidation of the existing research centres, of which only that for Retail Studies is more than two years old.

At the same time, BU may also be well-advised to look closely at the four features that it proffered, at the start of the application, as self-defining. To return to these, but in a slightly different order:

- BU doubtless was one of the pioneers of practical assignments for undergraduate students, and it may still be the case that its students experience them more often than their peers elsewhere, but other universities have been catching up in this regard.
- Some of its students do indeed spend a semester at a foreign university, but that too is now commonplace.
- The panel accepts that BU has been quick to embrace distance learning. However, there is a potential tension between further developments in that direction and BU's customary emphasis on close, face-to-face contact between its students and staff.
- Moreover, the opportunity for really close contact between students and staff is an aspect of the feature which was actually cited first: that BU "is the only campus university in Iceland", creating a special academic environment because most students and staff reside there.

Whilst so close a community is not to everyone's taste, it undoubtedly has been a draw for many at BU, especially those with children, who welcome the facilities it offers for families. So too for those wishing to take advantage of BU's Preparatory Department in order to equip themselves for regular university studies. The panel met many students who had benefited from these assets, of which BU can be justifiably proud.

When seeking how best to go on delivering good value to its students, the panel suggests that BU should be careful not to introduce too many new programmes, but nor should it overestimate the novelty or special character of its existing ones. With the right stewardship and development the advantages BU derives from its campus situation are likely to be enduring ones.

## **5. Personnel qualification requirements**

The application includes a list of all Professors, Associate Professors, Assistant Professors and Instructors working at BU, as well as summary information about numbers of employees, by headcount and by FTE. Lists of part-time and visiting staff were also supplied. Curricula vitae were attached for all permanent staff and made available in many other cases also.

Appointments to professorships, at any level, must be approved by a three person Evaluation Committee. The Evaluation Committees, one for each Faculty, convene annually, their members having been nominated by the Board of Governors, the Ministry of Education and the Faculty itself. At least two of them must be from outside BU. The application provides no detail about how these committees evaluate the applications laid before them, beyond saying that the means used are comparable to those in other universities.

When the panel asked teaching staff during the visit how the quality might be enhanced at BU they pointed to a change that is already in progress. Previously, it was said, little had been done to reward staff for success, or indeed to penalise them for failure. The culture was now different. Research activity was seen as a key driver for

improving quality and a new points-based evaluation system was being introduced, which might also give rise to new rewards.

Workshops are held twice a year to induct new teaching staff. Mentoring for part-time staff is the responsibility of the Teaching Adviser.

Staff meet their Dean annually for a one-to-one progress review known as an “Employee conference”. The panel was supplied with the guidelines for these meetings and a copy of the form used by the reviewee to supply information in advance of the meeting and subsequently agreed by both parties.

*Conclusion:*

The panel is satisfied that the criteria and procedures used by RU in the appointment and promotion of academic staff satisfy Articles 17 and 18 of the HEI Act.

*Recommendations:*

As noted earlier, the application supplied no detail regarding the criteria used by BU’s Evaluation Committees. Whilst the panel has no reason to doubt that they have operated “in a way comparable to that in other universities”, more specific information should be provided in future. For one thing, practice in other universities has been changing, as indeed already seems to be the case at BU itself. One of the drivers for change is the widespread wish by universities to increase research productivity. BU shares this aspiration and therefore needs a robust, transparent means of assessing the output of current and prospective staff. Phrases like “Applicants for the position of professor need to be considerably active in research” – found in the application – will not suffice.

## **6. Admission requirements and student rights and obligations**

The normal condition for entry to undergraduate study at BU is matriculation from secondary school. Applications are reviewed by the appropriate Dean, who has the authority to waive that condition if the candidate possesses suitable alternative

experience and knowledge, and to recognise up to 90 credits from another university. The condition for admission to a Master's Programme is a Bachelor's Degree or equivalent, and the Dean may recognise up to 30 credits.

BU's special feature is its Preparatory Department, whose own conditions for entry are summarised in the application. Other things being equal, preference is given to applicants who are more than 25 years old. Students who complete the preparatory programme with a grade of 7.25 or more are given priority (up to a maximum of 30) for admission to university studies the following year.

The application includes statistics showing, for each Faculty at the Bachelor's level, the ratio of entrants to applicants, the average age and the gender balance. Just over half the applicants to Business were accepted in 2006, rising to about two-thirds in each of the other Faculties. Males were in the majority in Business whereas females predominated in Law and Social Science, but in no case was the imbalance especially marked. What was striking was the average age of new recruits, which was in the high twenties for the on-site programmes (and reached 33 in the case of distance learning Business students). The numbers of students who enrolled in Master's Programmes were also shown, again by Faculty, but not as a proportion of applications received.

BU is understandably proud of its drop-out rates, which, according to figures compiled by the National Audit Office, are significantly lower in Business and in Law (none were given to the panel for the Faculty of Social Sciences as it was not founded until 2005) than those for the same subjects at other Icelandic universities. BU attributes this success to high selectivity backed up by close support.

BU has a Code of Ethics, pertaining to the community as a whole, which includes a short section specifically devoted to the responsibilities of students and also sets out what students can expect of their teachers. A commitment to equality is embodied in the University Regulation. Alleged breaches of the code are investigated by an independent Ethics Committee, comprising one representative each of staff and students and a member of the Faculty of Law appointed by the Rector.

Mention is made in the application of “the appeals committee for university student complaints”. The panel was subsequently informed that this was a reference to the national appeals committee, which operates in accordance with the 1999 Icelandic Law, number 73.

The panel asked the group of students it met during its visit what factors they believed influenced students to choose BU and what caused some students to drop out. The perceived attractions included: the campus situation, which insulated them from certain distractions; training for leadership; practical exercises and realistic projects; the small size of the university, which saved one from getting lost, and of the teaching groups; and opportunities for close relationships with staff and peer learning among students. Other influences were: prior experience of the Preparatory Department or from a summer programme; and reputation and personal recommendations. The students thought that drop-out was either a function of poor grades, remarking that the pace of assignments meant that one soon discovered whether one was up to it, or the result of finding BU too small. They thought that younger students were more vulnerable to that. Older students were seen as being more dedicated, and many of them had children. There were some economic advantages to studying at BU, and one could always “escape to Reykjavik” from time to time. The interviewees were keen to point out, however, that drop-out rates are low and that BU also has many successful younger students.

*Conclusion:*

The panel is satisfied that BU’s entrance requirements for students fulfil Article 19 of the HEI Act and that the application provided most of the requisite information concerning the rights and obligations of students.

*Recommendations:*

In the absence of any details, it was not possible to assess the adequacy of BU’s procedures for dealing with student complaints or appeals. More information should have been supplied in that connection.

The panel discussed the implications of the high average age of BU undergraduates with some of the senior staff [Initial meeting]. They confirmed that younger students appeared more likely to drop out but added that no systematic research into drop-out had been undertaken. This would be comparatively easy to do at BU and likely to assist the university in its wish to reduce attrition even further.

## **7. Teacher and student facilities and services**

The most striking feature of BU for any visitor is likely to be the compactness of its campus. A short description of each of BU's five main academic/administrative buildings, and of its residential accommodation, is given in the application.

Approximately 700 people live on campus, including many teachers and other staff. Facilities for those with children include a day-care centre and kindergarten. The nearest elementary school is 17 km away but transport is provided. The nearest access point for many other facilities – such as health services, post office, sports centre – is 31 km away. Some of the residential accommodation that has been used by the university consists of holiday cottages that are not available during the summer.

The entire campus, including student housing, has wireless access and all permanent staff are given a laptop, which is replaced at roughly three year intervals. BU has developed its own course management system, known as *Námsskjár*, which all teachers are expected to use and which was welcomed by students.

The BU Library, which the panel visited, is very small, both in terms of the size of its collection and the number of places available to users. However it is supplemented by access to Iceland's national subscription to digital databases and periodicals and by an inter-library loan service that is free to students.

When students were invited by the panel to suggest possible improvements at BU their answers were predominantly concerned with social rather than academic factors. There were requests for: a nurse and a fire engine on campus; some means of bridging the two hour gap between children leaving school for the day and the end of university classes; more activities for children on campus; lower rents; and more

study space, especially for group projects. The Chairman of the Student Union acknowledged that the university was trying to address some of these issues, and staff later pointed out that the rents paid by students cover several facilities that would be charged separately at other universities.

The panel also met the Directors of the various services provided by BU. Points made in discussion with them included:

- Educational counselling, in such matters as effective time management, psychological counselling and career counselling are all available to BU students. There is a limit of five pre-booked, private sessions per semester. Special help is available for students with dyslexia.
- There were 12 visiting foreign students at BU at the time of the accreditation visit. Most come for one semester and the opportunities for hiking, skiing, etc are part of the attraction for many. BU students are given advice before departing on exchanges. Between 20 and 40, mostly Law and Business students, go to China each year.

The advance documentation given to the panel included the results of a survey of the “psychosocial working environment” at BU, for each of the years 2003, 2005 and 2006, which covered such matters as: reception of new staff; workload; management style; motivation and job attitudes; salary; and health and well-being. The panel wishes to commend the university, not only on its use of this instrument but for its candour in disclosing the outcomes given that, for several of the items, the trend was unfavourable. Staff responded to a question about this by advising the panel that there had been a drop in morale, which had been reversed following the recent change in the Rectorship.

*Conclusion:*

The panel is satisfied that both students and faculty at BU are well served by their support staff and that the facilities available to them are adequate to meet their needs.

*Recommendations:*

As already mentioned in section 2 of this report, BU should be careful not to overstate the quality of what it has to offer. For instance, whereas the application states that BU has “one of the strongest distance learning programmes of all the universities in this country”, the document entitled “About Bifröst” states that it has the strongest programme, which may be too bold a claim and was certainly not evidenced.

## **8. Internal quality system**

The University Regulation identifies the Rector as the principal authority in quality matters but also states that these are decided by the University Council. It elects a Quality Board at the first meeting of each academic year, consisting of one staff and one student member elected from each of the three Faculties, and a chairperson appointed by the Rector. The Board is responsible for drawing up “rules concerning quality standards, quality control and quality reviews”, which it submits to the Rector for approval. It also submits an annual report on its work to the Rector and the University Council.

Both Deans and service division managers report to the Rector and University Council on quality within their spheres of operation, presumably as directed by the Quality Board.

BU adopted the Excellence Model of the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) as the basis for its quality assurance procedures in 2001. The application includes a summary of the inputs to this model, which include course questionnaires completed by students, the annual interview with each staff member, examination results, and surveys of BU graduates.

The Quality Board is responsible for the proper maintenance of BU’s Quality Handbook. This brings together a considerable number of documents that set forth BU policy on such matters as the admission of students, course descriptions and course plans, and the posting of grades, to mention but a few.

BU has also produced a separate handbook, with the self-explanatory title, “The teacher’s job”. This is a concise guide to teaching at the university. It opens by presenting the teaching system at Bifröst as “unique”, because of its emphasis on group work and short assignments that are closely connected to the working world. What may, in fact, be more unusual than that (given the developments in teaching at other universities that have already been noted in this report) is BU’s extensive use of open-book examinations, with internet access also permitted (though not for live communication with other persons).

This section of the application must be regarded as the least satisfactory. BU has clearly addressed the need for quality management and has created some of the resources needed for this. It has its Quality Board, its Quality Handbook and its handbook for teaching staff, and it has chosen the EFQM model as a framework. However, none of these components is entirely adequate as yet.

The panel was concerned that electing the membership of the Quality Board every year might hinder its work through lack of continuity. It was told that there is continuity in practice through re-election, but a planned rotation would seem preferable for so important a function.

The Quality Handbook is an excellent idea, but much of what it contains, though undoubtedly useful to staff, has no direct bearing on quality (e.g. Appointment of the University Board; Purchasing; Organisation of the School Year) and some of the documents that do are rudimentary. It is not yet the “complete framework” for internal quality control that it aspires to be.

The handbook for teaching staff is another commendable idea, but it provokes certain concerns. Leaving aside the question of the extent to which it is appropriate to use open book examinations (in the absence of any explanation as to how the university guards against plagiarism and although the handbook itself concedes that it may make it difficult to test basic knowledge), neither the teacher’s handbook nor the Quality Handbook provide an adequate account of how new courses are approved at BU before first being delivered to students. This is an essential part of teaching quality assurance. The two handbooks are not even fully consistent, the former advising

teachers that syllabuses should be ready at least a week before teaching begins while the latter requires them to be complete approximately 3 weeks before.

What should be underpinning much of this is the EFQM. However, the application does not show how the general model is being applied to the special circumstances of a small university. The two pages of the application that attempt to do this are quite obscure, and when representatives of the academic staff were asked to explain how EFQM works at BU none was able to do so.

### Conclusion:

In the opinion of the panel, there are significant weaknesses here that must be addressed. However, certain other things need to be said in mitigation. BU was not the only university visited by the panel that failed to provide it with a convincing account of how new programmes and courses are approved, including some measure of external judgement; nor was it the only university that failed to produce examples (perhaps because none was available in English) of internal quality reviews. On the positive side, BU has begun compiling its Quality Handbook. Moreover, the teachers who were interviewed by the panel were all clearly committed to delivering a high quality experience for their students, and the students themselves were full of praise for the education they were receiving.

Consequently, the panel does feel able to say that BU is meeting the requirements of Articles 11 and 12 of the HEI Act, with regard to the quality control of teaching.

Although only passing reference was made to the monitoring of research quality in this section of the application, rather more information had already been given in a previous one.

### Recommendations:

In the opinion of the panel the EFQM model is not particularly well suited to the needs of a university, which would be better advised to align its quality procedures with the European Standards and Guidelines.

The Quality Handbook should include clear information regarding the design, approval, annual monitoring and periodic review of all programmes and courses.

## **9. Description of study according to learning outcomes**

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture has produced a National Qualification Framework for Iceland. This provides an overarching structure for Icelandic degrees, defined by 3 cycles and 5 levels and using ECTS credits, in accordance with the Bologna Process. The Framework also includes Degree Descriptors, which set out the criteria that students must meet for each of the five levels. Besides Knowledge and Understanding gained, four kinds of skill are differentiated: Practical skills; Theoretical skills; Communication skills and information literacy; Learning Skills. The HEI Act requires universities to produce learning outcomes that are compatible with the Framework for all accredited programmes

The document EF150 “Content of the study programmes at Bifröst University, and elaboration of the National Qualification Framework” contains short descriptions of each of the programmes delivered by BU followed by statements of the learning outcomes using the categories specified in the national Framework.

Part of the rationale for learning outcomes is that they be aligned with methods of assessment. The intended learning outcome shows what it is that the student should know or be able to do at the end of the programme while the method of assessment shows how that achievement will be demonstrated. None of BU’s learning outcomes include that explicit link to assessment. Some already have the necessary specificity to make that next step relatively easy, others do not.

The panel was surprised to discover, from reading the course description, that the BA in Politics, Philosophy and Economics may be completed in just two years. It was explained during the visit that the accelerated programme entails additional work over the summer and is only permitted for the most capable students. Nevertheless, it is unusual for undergraduates who have not already been granted credit to complete any

Bachelor's Degree in two years and, simply because of its scope, "PPE" is, or ought to be, one of the most demanding degrees. Nor is it reassuring to read that the programme "provides access to further studies at the master's or *doctoral level*". This is another instance where the university would be well advised to be more restrained in its claims.

The panel is pleased to be able to report that the students it met during its visit to BU spoke highly of the education they were receiving and – by virtue of their ability to discuss it intelligently in remarkably good English – were themselves testimony to its effectiveness.

*Conclusion:*

The panel is satisfied that BU has produced learning outcomes that accord with the National Qualification Framework as required by Article 5 of the HEI Act.

*Recommendations:*

In order to fulfil the rationale for learning outcomes they now need to be aligned, explicitly, with appropriate means of assessment. Some of the learning outcomes seen by the panel will need to be expanded first before that would be possible.

## **10. Finances**

BU's accounts for 2005-06 cover a period of 17 months, following a decision to align the fiscal with the calendar year. Operating revenue during that period was [all figures in million ISK] 782, consisting of 328 from the Icelandic government (an insignificant portion of which was for research support, the rest being for teaching) and 454 in other revenue, mainly from the tuition fees that BU itself levies as a private university. However, it recorded a net operating loss of 195, far worse than the small surplus of 2004-05 or even the deficit of 17 in 2003-04 (both reckoned over 12 months). Over the same three years BU's net worth also declined significantly.

It is clear, however, that arresting this decline and ensuring that proper financial controls are in place has been a priority for the new Rector. One of the steps taken to achieve this was an agreement, signed in August 2007, whereby the university's loans have been refinanced and its real estate sold and leased back (with the option of later repurchase). According to the application it is the first time that an Icelandic university has entered into this latter kind of arrangement.

*Conclusion:*

All that the panel is able to say is that the university, led by its Rector, appears to be taking the necessary measures to achieve financial stability and appears to be fulfilling its obligations according to Chapter VIII of the HEI Act.

## **11. Summary of findings and recommendations**

The panel was also asked to summarise its findings by reaching a judgement in respect of each of four broad areas, as follows below.

### **a. Academic knowledge and competence of the HEI in the relevant field of study and subdivisions thereof, pertaining to the quality of teaching and research, academic facilities, dissemination of knowledge and connection to community.**

Support for the Icelandic community in general, and the business sector in particular, has always been at the heart of this institution's mission. Its staff complement is small, but proportionate to student numbers and clearly committed to delivering teaching of high quality. Applied research is also an established activity. BU is now seeking to diversify its teaching and its research. Both are feasible but the university should take particular care not to over-extend itself.

### **b. The support structure of the HEI for the academic community, teachers and experts in the relevant field of study and the education and training of students.**

BU's intimate, campus setting is one of its defining features. It cannot provide some of the facilities that one would find in a larger university, such as extensive library holdings, but students value the close, personal contact they have with staff and the Preparatory Department offers some a chance to enter higher education that might not otherwise be available to them.

### **c. Special attention shall be paid to the strengths of the fields of study and the subdivisions thereof, with reference to course plans, particularly in connection with links between undergraduate and graduate studies and towards other appropriate fields of study.**

Neither the time available to the panel during its visit nor the documentation available to it in advance was sufficient to judge the strength of each and every programme. No deficiencies were detected, but the panel recommends that BU, because of its small

size, should exercise particular care when considering the introduction of new Master's Programmes.

**d. Academic standard of the field of study and subdivisions thereof, in a national and international context. Notice shall be taken of national and international cooperation between HEI and other institutions.**

The documentation supplied by BU made it clear that the university wishes its teaching and research to be judged by international standards, but it did not provide any detailed account of how it carries out such benchmarking itself. The panel formed the view that there is scope for greater co-operation between universities within Iceland, which might have particular benefits for a small institution like BU.

## **Recommendation**

The committee recommends the accreditation of the field of social science in the University of Bifröst.

**Signatures of the Accreditation Committee for Higher Education  
Institutions in the field of Social Science in Iceland 2007**

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Dr. Christian Thune

*Past Executive Director of the Danish Evaluation Institute, Denmark (chair)*

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Prof. Dr. Jürgen Kohler

*Universität Greifswald, Germany*

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Dr. Frank Quinault

*Director of Learning and Teaching Quality, University of St. Andrews, Scotland*

## Appendix 1: Visit to the University of Bifröst

### Wednesday 3 October (Christian, Jürgen, Frank and Magnús)

10:00 **Meeting with rector and deans and director of teaching division.** The Bifröst University, application, learning criteria and university education.

**Present:** Rector Ágúst Einarsson, Bryndís Hlöðversdóttir, Dean of the Faculty of Law, Jón Ólafsson, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Reynir Kristinsson, Dean of the Faculty of Business, Ingibjörg Guðmundsdóttir, Director of the Teaching Division, María Þorgeirsdóttir, Chairwoman of the Quality Board.

11:30 **Walking around the campus with rector and deans.**

**Present:** Rector Ágúst Einarsson, Bryndís Hlöðversdóttir, Dean of the Faculty of Law, Jón Ólafsson, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Reynir Kristinsson, Dean of the Faculty of Business, Ingibjörg Guðmundsdóttir, Director of the Teaching Division.

12:00 **Lunch**

12:45 **Meeting with directors of research institutes.**

**Present:** Grétar Þ. Eyþórsson, professor, Director of Bifröst University Research Institute and Chief-Editor of the Journal of Social Sciences, Eiríkur Bergmann, associate professor, Director of Centre for European Studies, Elín Blöndal, associate professor, Director of Centre for Labour Law and Equality, Emil B. Karlsson, Director of Centre for Retail Studies, Jón Ólafsson, Dean of the faculty of social sciences.

13:45 **Meeting with students.**

**Present:** Júlíus Arnarson, undergraduate study, philosophy, politics and economics, chairman of the Student Union, Brynjar Þór Þorsteinsson, undergraduate study, business administration, Davor Purušić, undergraduate study, law, María Einarsdóttir, undergraduate study, law, Sara Magnúsdóttir, undergraduate study, philosophy, politics and economics, Stefán Páll Ágústsson, undergraduate study, business administration, Birgir Óli Sigmundsson, master study, business administration, Sonja Ýr Þorbergsdóttir, master study, law.

14:45 **Coffee break**

15:00 **Meeting with representatives of academic staff.**

**Present:** Lilja Mósesdóttir, professor, Faculty of Business, Ástráður Haraldsson, associate professor, Faculty of Law, Ásta Dís Ólafsdóttir, associate professor, Faculty of Business, Ian Watson, assistant professor, Faculty of Social Sciences, Svanborg Sigmarsdóttir, part-time teacher, Faculty of Social Sciences, Bryndís Hlöðversdóttir, Dean of the Faculty of Law.

**15:45 Meeting with directors of library, housing, financing, educational advice, computer services, studying abroad and master programmes.**

**Present:** Andrea Jóhannsdóttir, library, Alda Baldursdóttir, housing, Einar Valdimarsson, financing, Erla Vilhjálmsdóttir, educational advice, Hjalti Benediktsson, computer services, Ingibjörg Guðmundsdóttir, director of teaching division, Kristín Ólafsdóttir, studying abroad, María Þorgeirsdóttir, master programmes, Reynir Kristinsson, Dean of the Faculty of Business.

**16:30 Final meeting with rector and deans.**

**Present:** Rector Ágúst Einarsson, Bryndís Hlöðversdóttir, Dean of the Faculty of Law, Jón Ólafsson, Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Reynir Kristinsson, Dean of the Faculty of Business.

**16:32 Close**

## Appendix 2: Documents Received

1. Higher Education Act 63/2006 (draft translation).
2. Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions according to Article 3 of Higher Education Institution Act, No. 63/2006 (draft translation).
3. National Qualification Framework Iceland (draft translation).
4. Checklist on structure and approach on Expert Committee report and recommendations.
  
5. Application for Accreditation of the Social Science at the University of Bifröst.
6. Quality Handbook, incl.:
  - About Bifröst
  - EV01 Quality system
  - EV100 Instructions for teachers
  - EV10 Bifröst University strategic planning
  - EV110 Admission of students
  - EV11 Quality Management
  - EV120 New student's orientation
  - EV130 Teaching evaluations
  - EV140 Student evaluation – Examinations
  - EV150 Student evaluation – BSBA theses
  - EV160 Semesters projects
  - EV170 Student evaluation – Master's Programme
  - EV180 Administration of examinations
  - EV190 Grade posting
  - EV200 Visiting teachers from abroad and teacher exchange
  - EV20 Appointment of the University Board
  - EV210 Student applications for study abroad
  - EV21 Appointment of the University Council
  - EV220 Student applications for study abroad at Shanghai University in China
  
  - EV22 Appointment of the Quality Board
  - EV230 Reception of exchange students
  - EV240 Budget preparation
  - EV250 Purchasing
  - EV260 Property Registration
  - EV30 Meetings and consultations
  - EV40 Appointing the rector
  - EV41 Appointing permanently-contracted faculty
  - EV42 Hiring of part-time instructors
  - EV43 Employee hiring
  - EV50 New employee reception
  - EV60 Creating job descriptions
  - EV70 Employee conferences
  - EV80 Workplace analysis
  - EV90 Organization of the school year, organizations of departments

- EV91 Course descriptions and course plans
- EV92 Promotional work at Bifröst University
- 7. EF10 Bifröst University Regulation
- 8. EF20 Charter of Bifröst University
- 9. EF30 Strategy of Bifröst University
- 10. EF40 Internal Control
- 11. EF50 Employee contract, faculty
- 12. EF60 Employee contract, employees
- 13. EF70 Creating job descriptions
- 14. EF80 New employee checklist
- 15. EF81 Checklist for new part-time instructors
- 16. EF90 Equal Rights Plan of Bifröst University
- 17. EF100 Code of Ethics and Conduct of Bifröst University
- 18. EF110 Survey of the psychosocial working environment at Bifröst University
- 19. EF120 Employee conference – Preparation form
- 20. EF130 Manual for teachers
- 21. EF150 Description of degree programmes
- 22. EF160 Seminar projects, instructions
- 23. EF170 National Qualification Framework for Iceland
- 24. EF200 Bifröst University – Master’s Degree Programme
- 25. EF270 Checklist for the reception of foreign exchange students
- 26. EF290 The Buddy project
- 27. EF320 Library Information
- 28. EF330 EFQM model
- 29. EF340 Yearly Report Bifröst University
- 30. EF350 Solutions for students with disabilities
- 31. EF360 Bifröst University website
- 32. EF370 CV of professors
- 33. EF380 CV of associate professor, assistant professor, instructors
- 34. EF391 CV of part-time instructors
- 35. EF392 CV of visiting professors
- 36. EF500 Agreement with the Ministry of Education on teaching and research
- 37. EF510 Bifröst University databases

In addition the application referred to the following websites and files:

- 38. Friends of Bifröst (only available in Icelandic):  
[http://hollvinir.bifrost.is/Default.asp?Sid\\_Id=29288&tId=99&Tre\\_Rod=&q](http://hollvinir.bifrost.is/Default.asp?Sid_Id=29288&tId=99&Tre_Rod=&q).
- 39. Journal of Social Science (only available in Icelandic):  
[http://www.bifrost.is/default.asp?sid\\_id=29944&tId=1&Tre\\_Rod=004|011|&qsr](http://www.bifrost.is/default.asp?sid_id=29944&tId=1&Tre_Rod=004|011|&qsr).
- 40. The Bifröst University Research Institute (only available in Icelandic):  
[http://rannsoknamidstod.bifrost.is/default.asp?sid\\_id=25703&tre\\_rod=006|&tId=1](http://rannsoknamidstod.bifrost.is/default.asp?sid_id=25703&tre_rod=006|&tId=1).
- 41. Centre for Retail Studies (only available in Icelandic):  
[http://www.rsv.bifrost.is/default.asp?sid\\_id=24317&tre\\_rod=004|&tId=1](http://www.rsv.bifrost.is/default.asp?sid_id=24317&tre_rod=004|&tId=1).
- 42. Centre for Labour Law and Equality (only available in Icelandic):  
[http://rvj.bifrost.is/Default.asp?Sid\\_Id=24469&tId=2&Tre\\_Rod=&qsr](http://rvj.bifrost.is/Default.asp?Sid_Id=24469&tId=2&Tre_Rod=&qsr).
- 43. The website of Varmalandsskóli (only available in Icelandic):  
<http://www.varmland.is>.

44. The duties of the Bifröst University Campus security guard (only available in Icelandic):  
[http://www.bifrost.is/default.asp?sid\\_id=28585&tre\\_rod=002|001|006&tId=1](http://www.bifrost.is/default.asp?sid_id=28585&tre_rod=002|001|006&tId=1).
45. The National Audit Office's report on universities in Iceland (only available in Icelandic):  
[http://www.rikisend.is/files/skyrslur\\_2007/haskolakennsla\\_2007.pdf](http://www.rikisend.is/files/skyrslur_2007/haskolakennsla_2007.pdf).