



HÁSKÓLINN Á BIFRÖST
BIFRÖST UNIVERSITY

SUBJECT LEVEL REVIEW

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Executive Summary

Bifröst University has been through considerable changes over the last 10 years, both in terms of its institutional structure and in terms of teaching arrangements. The same is eminently true of The Department of Social Science and Law [hereafter DSSL], which emerged in its current shape out a merger of the respective departments of law and social sciences in 2017. The assurance of the quality of our student's learning experience, awarded degrees, teaching and research remains the university's first priority. The DSSL is firmly committed to maintaining and improving its standards and procedures for quality assurance.

The current report is primarily an inspection of the clockwork of these quality mechanisms themselves, as it were, rather than detailed assessments of specific operations such as individual degree programmes or the like. However, these two aspects cannot be separated entirely or evaluated in isolation from one another. Therefore, our performance in various areas is measured and discussed critically. The focus remains on the ways in which we ensure that we uphold standards and meet targets in these areas.

For this purpose, we rely on qualitative and quantitative data from regular and ad hoc surveys as well as data from the student registry. The relevant background material is provided in appendices.

The introductory chapter provides a brief overview of the review process, including data collection and student's participation, followed by an outline of quality enhancement procedures within the DSSL, and a recapitulation of the experience from QEF1.

Reflecting on this experience reveals a very positive reaction to the challenges of quality assurance and points to certain key improvements in practices. The adoption of a new data collection plan, for example, has provided a firmer ground for monitoring performance indicators. A clearer and more purposeful distribution of tasks and administrative responsibilities between academic departments and academic services has rendered the DSSL better able to focus on its vision and strategic planning. Overall the DSSL's commitment to quality enhancement is honoured with increased determination and sense of purpose.

Chapter two consists in a brief overview of Bifrost University's institutional structure, explains the combination and function of boards and describes the responsibilities of offices.

Chapter three outlines the composition of the DSSL, the teaching and research base, its academic vision and primary activities. Developments following QEF1 have rendered the university's academic departments more autonomous, both in terms of specifically academic activity and financial responsibility.

In August 2017 the Departments of Social Sciences and the Department of Law merged into the Department of Social Science and Law. The intended synergetic effects are already manifest as the first tangible product of the interdisciplinary dynamic, the Diploma Programme in Public Administration, was successfully launched in August 2018. A full review of the merger is scheduled in the coming academic year, but the evidence so far suggests that in the long run it will strengthen both academic components.

The DSSL has set targets for reinforcing its team of permanent faculty member, with a view to bolstering research activities and broadening the available teaching expertise to support new developments in course offerings. Such advances will be facilitated by a healthy financial situation, which reflects an increase in government funding as well as prudent management.

Research activities are discussed in **chapter four**. Building up stronger framework around research is identified an objective of the highest priority. In this area there is room for improvement. The chapter includes a SWOT analysis of the DSSL research activities and a vision of enhanced quality and quantity of research output. It is clear that achieving these objectives requires investment and in this regard government funding is stagnant compared with funding of teaching activities.

In **chapter five** the focus is turned towards students-centred learning. The discussion shows that teaching practices form an area of strength for the DSSL. Following a successful introduction of periodic teaching and the flipped classroom model (in 2014) Bifrost University has emphasised blended mode of learning, based on a combination of a strong online platform with access to on-campus facilities. These unique teaching arrangements are indeed a major factor in student's choice to study at Bifrost University.

On the whole teaching methods, including assessment and examination, are seen to be diverse, innovative and suited to our students' needs and requirements. Moreover, robust standards and follow-up procedures are in place to ensure that teaching practices deliver on the objectives and vision of the DSSL.

Chapters six discusses student statistics, demographic information and various performance indicators. Since QEF1 BU has adopted a new and comprehensive data collection plan, which renders statistical analysis more systematic and efficient. The data presented in this chapter includes basic demographics, information about students' progress and student's satisfaction as well as alumni perspectives on the value of the degrees and skills acquired at the DSSL. As a group, BU students are somewhat different from their peers at other HEIs in certain important respects. For example, the average age of DSSL students (and BU students generally) is considerably higher than the national average. Such facts do complicate comparisons on some indicators. But they also provide valuable information about the specific requirements of our students.

As noted above, reviews of individual degree programmes are not part of this current review. However, procedures for the development and introduction of study programmes and periodic reviews of programmes are described in **chapters seven and eight** respectively. These procedures have been

revised and formalised with a view to ensuring the relevance and quality of new degree programmes as well as maintaining that of those already on offer. Each chapter includes a recent case study as illustrative examples.

Benchmarking and comparisons between HEIs form an important part of quality assurance. However, as **chapter 9** suggests, typical benchmarking methods prove to be problematic for atypical groups. DSSL student demographics show that our students are on average relatively mature, predominantly engaged in on-line (or mixed learning) studies and in many cases likely to be studying part-time. As a result, benchmarking practices have not been purposeful to date. Therefore, the DSSL proposes a thorough revision of our benchmarking strategy, with the aim of defining and adopting practices of comparison (with national and international HEIs) which reflect and are suitable to the university's size, structure and student demographics.

Conclusion

The subject level review confirms that substantial progress has been made since QEF1. The most important issues raised as problematic during the last cycle have been addressed successfully. A firmer foundation for quality assurance has been established, e.g. with a new data collection plan. The demarcation and distribution of tasks and responsibilities between university administration and academic departments has been clarified, rendering the latter better able to focus on their academic vision. Standards and procedures for ensuring the quality of studies have been sharpened and streamlined. These, in turn, create scope for identifying and swiftly responding to any potential shortcomings in our operations and make further improvements.

Most importantly the DSSL has cultivated a keen sense of quality awareness. In order to formalise this attitude, the first item in our enhancement plan is the introduction of a quality calendar, which will distribute the quality assurance routine evenly over the academic year to form a cyclical process. The enhancement plan identifies some specific targets and broader areas on which we want to focus our attention in the coming years. These include methods of external comparison (benchmarking), research output and quality, human resources, gender equality and certain aspects of general student satisfaction.

The Department of Social Science and Law is in its infancy as a separate functional unit, but it is built on firm ground. Furthermore, even after the merger of two departments the DSSL is a relatively small and yet a diverse unit. This entails both challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, because of the small size, we are nimble and adaptable, while diversity promotes interdisciplinary dynamism. On the other hand, limited overheads and infrastructure may tend toward informal procedures and excessive responsibilities on individual shoulders. Being aware of these features, with their enabling and limiting aspects, having a vivid purpose, clear objectives and robust procedure are of the utmost importance. And so is an unwavering commitment to ongoing quality enhancement. This subject level review strongly suggests that the relevant resources and mindset of determination are in place, to learn from past experience, maintain high standards of quality of education and research and to progressively work toward raising the bar. The DSSL looks towards the future with confidence but not complacency.

Enhancement Plan for DSSL 2019-2025

Challenges	Actions	Outcome	Responsibility	Timing / Deadline
Consolidation and systematisation of quality assurance practices	Quality assurance calendar to be designed and implemented.	A circle of fixed annual checks on key points in quality assurance	Dean of Department and Department Board	Procedure operation by academic year 2019-2020
Benchmarking	A) Team of faculty members is to identify suitable benchmarking institutions and methods. B) Staff training visit to Syddansk Universitet (Integral Part of the Institution Wide Review Process)	Established procedures for systematic comparisons suitable to BU size, structure and student demography.	Director of Quality Systems, Deans, Director of Academic Services.	A) Staff training visit: provisionally scheduled in May 2019). B) Benchmarking Procedures Draft: Spring 2020
Enhance research output and quality	A) Implement research strategy action plan (ch. 4). B) Broaden the DSSL research base.	Two new faculty members (researchers) in the next two years.	Dean / Rector	A) By autumn 2019. B) By autumn 2020 respectively
Measures to address students' concern over programme progression – and declining student numbers	Comprehensive review of [PPE] course selection and programme structure.	A proposal for PPE programme updates and/or a decision the future of PPE.	Dean	Proposal approved and enacted by January 2020
	Team of two faculty members. Stakeholder consultation according to set procedures.			
Address negative comparison with BD in students' satisfaction surveys	A team of faculty members is to analyse the data and clarify causes.	Competitiveness plan to be designed and implemented.	Dean and Department Board	Spring 2020
	Focus group interviews etc.			
Address relative negative responses among Law students	A team of faculty members (Law x 2: Soc.Sci. x1) is to analyse the data and clarify causes.	Action plan as appropriate.	Dean and Department Board	Spring 2020
	Focus group interviews etc.			
	Comparison of teaching practices.			
Study programme coordination	Appoint programme co-ordinators for each study programme offered by the department.	A clear and efficient distribution and of responsibility for quality and development of degree programmes.	Dean	By June 2019 effective from academic year 2019-2020
Human Resources	Appoint faculty member: Law	A comprehensive base for teaching and research fitting current programme offerings.	Dean / Rector / Head of Financial Department	By Autumn 2019
	Appoint faculty member: Social Sciences Media/Communications.			By Autumn 2020
	Needs assessment and plan on hiring part-time teaching members of faculty.			
Gender Equality	Draft a plan aiming at reducing gender bias among faculty	An even gender ratio among tenured staff (maximum 60:40)	Dean / Rector	By 2022
Review of the department merger	Review team to be nominated (mixed faculty) with external consultation.	A review report measuring achievement of goals (forms part of IWR)	Dean and Department Board	By December 2019