

University Centre of the Westfjords

2005 - 2025





Christoph Pfülb, second year master's student in the Coastal Communities and Regional Development program *Photo: Haukur Sigurðsson*





Address from the Chair of the Board



In a small town on the northern edge of the world lies a remarkable academic institution that has grown and thrived for 20 years. At the heart of its operations are two master's programs—Coastal and Marine Management, and Coastal Communities and Regional Development—attracting students from across the globe. These are individuals seeking a high-quality education in a close-knit learning environment, set in a unique landscape where communities must learn to live in harmony with a harsh yet bountiful nature. The academic standards are high, with many instructors among the leading experts in their fields internationally.

The students leave a strong mark on society in the Westfjords, and Ísafjörður has become a true university town—energized by young, dynamic people shaping the local community. Students take part in a range of extracurricular activities, engage in collaborative projects with local businesses and institutions, and many choose to stay in the region after graduation, joining the workforce and contributing to its development.

The University Centre of the Westfjords (UW) was founded in 2005, though its direction was not entirely clear at the outset. From the beginning, it has supported distance learners in the Westfjords and established strong, productive partnerships with local institutions and companies. As early as 2006, the master's program in Coastal and Marine Management was developed in collaboration with regional stakeholders.

As is often the case with vibrant institutions, success has attracted new opportunities. International universities have partnered with UW to offer field courses, bringing student groups to the region. But the area that has grown most rapidly in recent years is research —particularly in the fields of coastal and marine management and the study of coastal communities.

You could say the first academic seeds were sown in fertile soil in 2005—or perhaps more fittingly, it was a mix of seeds, scattered over time. UW has been fortunate to have a strong, visionary director and a dedicated team, working with a clear strategy but always ready to seize new opportunities. Over time, this has blossomed into a diverse and thriving ecosystem, where some initiatives grow slowly and steadily, while others spring up quickly—each one supporting and sheltering the others.

UW is a non-profit organization, supported by all of Iceland's universities along with local municipalities, companies, and institutions in the Westfjords. Many stakeholders have played a role in its development, and the community's ongoing support and goodwill have been vital to its success. Many helped lay the foundation two decades ago, and many more have contributed in countless ways ever since. Let us hope the next 20 years will be just as eventful and full of possibility.

Harpa Grímsdóttir

Chair of the Board, University Centre of the Westfjords





Thank You for Twenty Good Years



The first head of the board of directors at UW, Halldór Halldórsson, then mayor of Ísafjörður, said twenty years ago on the occasion of the opening of UW "Now is a time for celebration—in a few years we shall look back and say; this was a stroke of luck". And indeed it was. It is a blessing that we did not stop at what we knew, but thought outside the box, which was actually necessary. UW is different in so many ways from what is known among universities in Iceland. This is not due to eccentricity, but rather to its location and the demographic realities of the remote, sparsely populated Westfjords region. This calls for tailor-made solutions.

UW was founded in March 2005 by people from here, and it could thus perhaps be called a grassroots institution. And that is precisely why UW has always been a very Westfjords institution. UW has a long and strong tradition of summer courses and field schools, as the demand for face-to-face teaching at the university level was clear and unambiguous from the beginning. The summer courses were the very first steps towards face-to-face teaching at a university level, as early as 2006. UW has been involved in numerous teaching activities during the summer ever since, and the summer is a busy time, while many universities in the country are closed.

The master's program as the first face-to-face program ever taught in the Westfjords, was launched in 2008. UW exclusively offers master's-level programs, as the programs offered in the Westfjords always have to attract students from outside the region, which is easier at the master's level than at the bachelor's level. It's not an eccentricity, but a necessity. Contrary to most universities in the country, UW does not provide distance learning, as the goal is to bring students—and instructors—to this region to strengthen the Westfjords and the Westfjords community. The result is a learning environment, where learning together, from each other and in close contact with instructors, takes on more importance than normally is possible with distance learning. That is probably why students come hither. Emphasis is placed on connecting learning with the local environment and training skills and competences.

And so we stick to the alleged eccentricity: Located in a sparsely populated region, UW teaches everything in two- or three-week compact modules so that the students can receive excellent instruction from on-site experts in their fields. UW is the only institution in Iceland operating at the university level that offers programs taught exclusively by invited part-time teachers. In such a system, the work of the two program directors is indispensable and is not comparable to universities with permanent teaching staff. UW teaches on a trimester system to enable students to complete all coursework in one year and focus on their final master's project in the second year. The classes are not finished until the end of June, which is unique in Iceland. The goal is for students to work anywhere in the world during the second year of their master's programs, which is important as most students will be from outside the Westfjords.

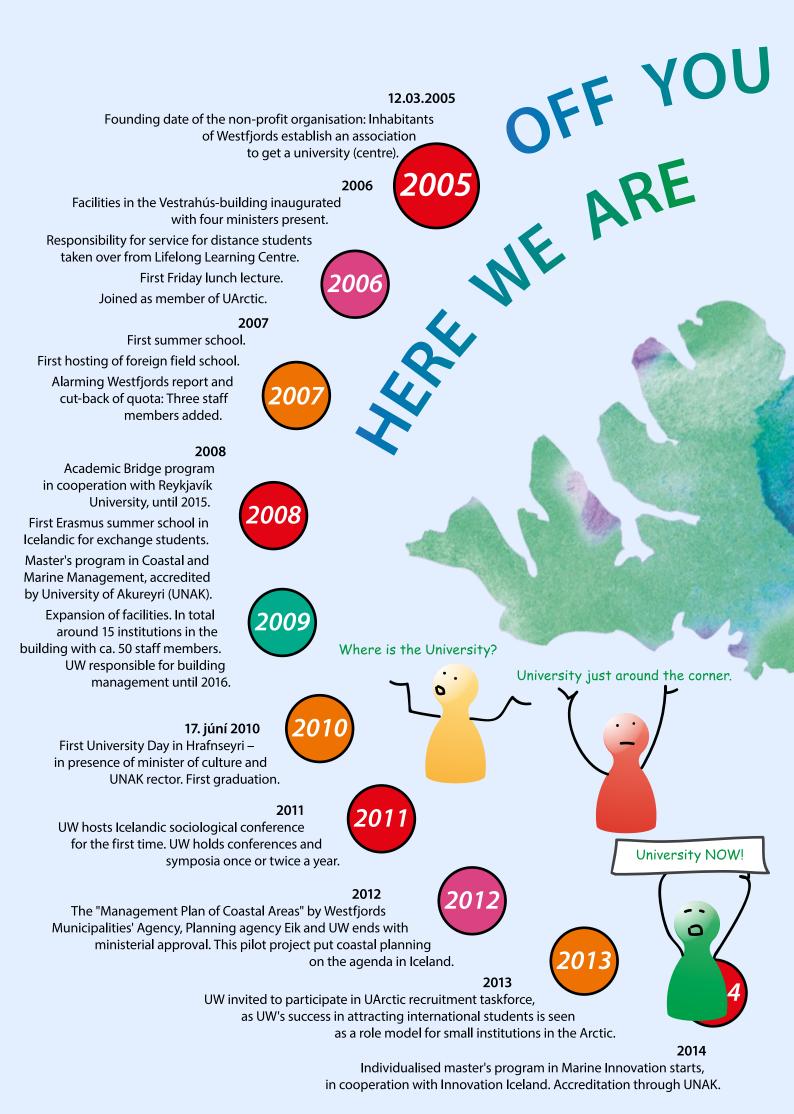
The University Centre of the Westfjords is not a university, as its name suggests, but operates in all respects as if it were a university. Even that has no analogue in the university system. UW ensures international recognition of studies through an accreditation agreement with the state-run University of Akureyri. UW is not funded like the universities and is a measure of regional development in itself. This certainly permeates all its activities. And perhaps most important of all: The institution is different and thinks differently because it is far from the population centres in Iceland. It must, and always was intended to, attract people to the Westfjords.

It is essential that this institution be different from other higher education institutions in Iceland. It cannot be put into neat little boxes, just because someone in the capital or abroad has decided that this or that is now fashionable. UW is such a contradiction in itself that such an institution has to shape its own framework, even if it is in defiance of current trends. It can be innovative or old-fashioned, depending on what suits itself. It has to take into account its geographical location and the demographic background of the region, and few institutions are in the same position in this regard.

A recipe does not exist, it has to be made up on the spot, over and over again. It has been a privilege to be allowed to work on this recipe and develop it further in constant revision for twenty years.

Peter Weiss

Director of the University Centre of the Westfjords



2025 UW is an institution operating at university level, offering academic programs and pursuing research. At any given time, some 70 UW students live in Ísafjörður. UW works closely with UNAK on accreditation of master programs with about 80 students registered in these programs. UW works closely with a large network within Iceland and abroad with the goal to promote the Westfjords and be an active part of the Icelandic academic system. 2024 Extensive work on strategic planning and vision, as UW has reached and exceeded set goals. Applications for research funds reach an unprecedented volume and form the basis for creation of future research positions. 2023 Academic Directors and Research Manager participate in a record number of conferences and publish more articles. Participation in research projects becomes a notable part of UW, even though it is not formally a research centre. 2022 Student dormitory association founded. First students to move into the new housing in September 2023, only 13 months later. 2021 Staff grows. Introduction of quality handbook, archiving software, student information system (Ugla) and course management software (Canvas) in cooperation with University of Akureyri. 2020 Summer term taught remotely because of Covid, in-class teaching returns autumn 2020. UW is known for onsite programs and its goal to attract people to the Westfjords. 2019 Master's program Coastal Communities and Regional Development starts. Research projects, grant applications, and grants to staff and Just start! students increase significantly. Research will turn out to be the fastest growing part of UW operations during the next years. SIT master's program í Climate Change and Global Sustainability starts. Autumn term taught at UW. 2016 SIT in Vermont starts semester program at UW. Students stay for one term (autumn, spring) in Iceland, mainly in the Westfjords. 2015

First intern from SeaTech Toulon at UW for 4 months. Number of interns has grown ever since.

UW Board Members 2005-2025

Nominated by the municipality of Ísafjörður

Halldór Halldórsson 2005-2015 (chair 2005-2015)

Alternate board member: Lárus Valdimarsson 2005-2009 and Rannveig B Þorvaldsdóttir 2009-2015

Harpa Grímsdóttir 2015- (chair 2016-2021 and 2023-)

Alternate board member: Halldór Halldórsson

Nominated by research institutions

Jóhann Sigurjónsson 2005-2013

Alternate board member: Magnús Jónsson 2005-2009 and Árni Snorrason 2009-2013

Árni Snorrason 2013-2021

Alternate board member: Jóhann Sigurjónsson 2013-2017, María Ásdís

Stefánsdóttir 2017-2019, and Hjalti Karlsson 2019-2021

Þorsteinn Sigurðsson 2021-

Alternate board member: Oddur M Gunnarsson

Elected at the annual meeting

Soffía Vagnsdóttir 2005-2009

Alternate board member: Guðrún Stella Gissurardóttir

Jóna Finnsdóttir 2009-2015

Alternate board member: Guðrún Stella Gissurardóttir

Elísabet Gunnarsdóttir 2015-

Alternate board member: Kristinn Hermannsson

Nominated by labour market representatives

Kristján G Jóakimsson 2005-2019

Alternate board member: Laufey Jónsdóttir 2005-2007, Helgi Ólafsson 2007-2015, and Ólafur Baldursson 2015-2019

Elías Jónatansson 2019- (chair 2021-2023)

Alternate board member: Bergvin Eyþórsson

Nominated by the Icelandic Rectors' Conference

Hjálmar H Ragnarsson 2005-2007

Alternate board member: Þorsteinn Gunnarsson

Þorsteinn Gunnarsson 2007-2009

Alternate board member: Hjálmar H Ragnarsson

Skúli Skúlason 2009-2013

Alternate board member: Hjálmar H Ragnarsson **Stefán B Sigurðsson 2013-2023 (chair 2015-2016)** Alternate board member: Erla B Örnólfsdóttir

Martha Lilja M Olsen 2023-2025

Alternate board member: Hólmfríður Sveinsdóttir

on 2007-2015, and Ólafur Baldursson 2015-2019

UW's Founding Institutions Today

University of Iceland · Reykjavík University · University of Akureyri · Bifröst University · Agricultural University of Iceland · Hólar University · Iceland University of the Arts · Marine and Freshwater Research Institute · Matís · Icelandic Meteorological Office · Westfjords Nature Research Centre · Municipality of Ísafjörður · Municipality of Bolungarvík · Municipality of Vesturbyggð · Westfjords Municipal Association · District Commissioner of the Westfjords · Westfjords Healthcare Institution · Westfjords Development Office · Centre for Lifelong Learning in the Westfjords · Ísafjörður Music School · Hrafnseyri Committee · Hraðfrystihúsið Gunnvör Ltd. · Þóroddur ehf./Oddi Ltd. · Arctic Fish · Arnarlax · Kerecis · Þörungaverksmiðjan · Snerpa Ltd. · Fjarðanet Ltd. · Vestri Ltd · Vífilfell Ltd. · Skógur Ltd. · Ísfang Ltd. · Land og Skógur · Skurðlæknirinn Ltd. · Agar Ltd. · Atkonur · Kol og Salt · Steig Ltd. on behalf of Bæjarins Besta · Ministry of Welfare on behalf of the Multicultural Centre

Staff 2005-2025

Peter Weiss	100%	Director	01.08.05-30.09.25
Haraldur Kristinsson	100%	Web / Technical Manager	01.10.05-30.09.07
Martha Lilja Marthensdóttir Olsen	100%	Administrative Director	01.01.06-31.08.11
Sigríður Ólöf Kristjánsdóttir	100%	Project Manager	01.12.06-31.12.07
Sigurður Arnfjörð Helgason	100%	Project Manager	01.09.07-30.11.09
Ingi Björn Guðnason	100%	Marketing and Web Manager	01.10.07-31.08.22
Sigríður G Ólafsdóttir	100%	Academic Director	01.01.08-31.12.09
Pernilla Rein	40-100%	Project Manager	01.05.08-31.10.21
Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir	50%	Receptionist	01.01.08-31.08.09
Guðrún Sigríður Matthíasdóttir	100%	Service Manager	01.11.08-
Margrét J Birkisdóttir	45%	Accounting (later through Westfjords Agency)	01.11.08-31.12.13
Urszula Barela	100%	Cleaning Staff	01.07.09-31.12.13
Árný Rós Gísladóttir	50%	Receptionist	24.09.09-31.08.10
Heiðrún Tryggvadóttir	50%	Project Manager	01.01.10-31.10.11
Albertína Friðbjörg Elíasdóttir	100%	Project Manager (previously: 01.04.08–31.05.08)	01.01.10-30.06.14
Dagný Arnarsdóttir	100%	Academic Director	01.01.10-31.08.16
Lína Beck Þorvaldsdóttir	50%	Receptionist	01.09.10-15.12.11
Þórdís Lilja Jensdóttir	50%	Receptionist	01.01.12-31.12.22
Kristín Ósk Jónasdóttir	100%	Administrative Director	20.09.11-31.12.18
Birna Lárusdóttir	25%	Project Manager	01.11.14-31.12.17
Catherine Chambers	100%	Academic Director (later Research Manager)	01.09.16-31.07.20
Astrid Fehling	25%-75%	Project Manager (later Administrative Director)	01.01.18-31.07.20
Sigurður Halldór Árnason	50%	Project Manager	01.10.18-07.10.19
Margrét Björk Arnardóttir	100%	Administrative Director	01.01.18-31.07.20
Matthías Kokorsch	100%	Academic Director	15.08.19-
Catherine Chambers	20%	Research Manager	01.06.20-
Astrid Fehling	100%	Administrative Director	01.08.20-
Veronica Méndez Aragón	100%	Academic Director	01.10.20-31.08.22
Sigþrúður Margrét Gunnsteinsdóttir	50%	Project Manager	01.01.22-31.08.23
Ólafur Guðsteinn Kristjánsson	20%	Summer Course	01.01.22-31.12.24
Hanna Lára Jóhannsdóttir	50-100%	Marketing and Web Manager	15.08.22-
Ingibjörg Rósa Björnsdóttir	50%	Marketing and Web Manager	15.08.22-31.08.23
Brack Hale	100%	Academic Director	01.01.23-
Bjarney Ingibjörg Gunnlaugsdóttir	50%	Project Manager	01.09.23-31.07.24
Ester Sturludóttir	50%-75%	Receptionist (later Project Manager)	01.01.23-31.08.24
Ester Sturludóttir	75%	Project Manager	01.09.24-
	/5/0	Projectivianager	01.09.24



The UW Staff



Dr. Brack Hale joined UW in 2022 and is the Academic Director for the Coastal and Marine

Management program. As Academic Director, his main tasks are to oversee the master's program, provide advice to students, and coordinate work with teachers. Brack holds a PhD in Land Resources from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and also did a post-doc at the Nicholas School of the Environment at Duke University. He worked at Franklin University in Switzerland from 2006–2022, where, at the time of his departure, he was a professor of environmental science and acting dean.

Brack enjoys skiing, hiking, and looking at plants the most. If you are in the University Center and need to find Brack, he is the one who is always smiling.



The elite team, as we like to call them, is equivalent to approximately 4–5 full-time positions

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at any given time. They conduct research, teach, and work for institutions such as the Vilhjálmur Stefánsson Institute, HA, University in Vermont, and LBHÍ, or are, for example, Fulbright grantees. They have one thing in common: they could be anywhere in the world, but they choose the Westfjords. If it weren't for UW, they simply wouldn't be here. They have very diverse educational backgrounds and many previous jobs, but most of them work on ocean or environmental issues. Arctic research, regional studies, and climate change education are key focus areas for this dynamic group.

It is remarkable that they can meet so many colleagues here who share their interests — even their employers have to admit that this is a suitable location for them.



Dr. Peter Weiss is UW's director and has been since its founding. His main tasks are, according

to him, everything and nothing. He monitors all matters of UW, and is a liaison with the board, founders and ministries. He is in charge of summer courses and field schools, and is on the master's study committee. Peter has a master's degree and a doctorate in linguistics. He worked as a teacher of Nordic studies at the University of Greifswald/Vorpommen until 1997 and as a visiting teacher of German at the University of Iceland from 1997-2002, and a part-time teacher there until 2005. He was the director of the language studies department at the University of Iceland from 2002-2003 and the director of the Goethe Zentrum Reykjavík Cultural Center from 2003-2005.

Although Peter seems to prefer offroad driving in slippery winter days, he always eagerly awaits spring. After all, he is a true sun addict, the biggest lemon farmer in the Westfjords and never wants to close the blinds.



Hanna Lára Jóhannsdóttir first joined UW in 2022 in a 50% position as marketing and

web manager. A year later, she moved into a full-time role. She handles everything related to advertising, design, social media, and the website. Her role is diverse, covering everything from coordinating with study abroad offices to posting on TikTok. Hanna Lára holds a BSc in Psychology and an MSc in Marketing from UI.

In the summer, she cruises around on a retro racer; in the winter, she glides through powder on a snowboard. In between, you'll find her kayaking, making ceramics, or sketching. She has around 100 plants and a real talent for losing her keys—though apparently, the two aren't connected



Astrid Fehling first came to UW in 2010 as an exchange student. She wrote her final thesis in

the Westfjords and completed an M.Sc. degree in environmental management at the Christian-Albrecht's-University in Germany. Astrid accepted the position of Administrative Director in August 2020. She manages all student accounting from application to graduation and is in regular collaboration with the University of Akureyri. She also oversees services for teachers, instructors and examiners, and has worked on many projects in the Westfjords. Her CV also includes working as a German teacher, translator, museum curator and sheep midwife.

Astrid enjoys long walks with her dog, loves books and good food and can completely lose track of time when working on her knitting projects.



Guðrún Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, better known by the name Gunna Sigga or even the

"mom" of students. Gunna Sigga has worked for UW since its founding. Gunna Sigga served as a receptionist at UW and other institutions in Vestrahús for many years, but has now taken on the position of Service Manager. Gunna Sigga handles a wide range of specialized tasks, such as travel bookings, student housing issues, carbon accounting, and is UW's contact person for host families of SIT students. She is the first person to be contacted when technology is not working properly and is the contact person for outsourced technical support.

Gunna Sigga's main interests are natural hot springs, cooking, and traveling. She is the only employee at UW who has a license to drive trucks and buses and holds a license as a tour guide for the Westfjords and Dalir region.



Instructors
Roughly 50 parttime instructors
share the equivalent of 3.5 full-

time positions each year. They cover an incredible range of subjects from natural hazards and climate change to data analysis and tourism. Vacation rights? Not for them. But tourism? Absolutely. Nothing is offlimits — if it can be taught, they teach it. They know all about GIS, and if you don't, you can always join a short course on it. Their education and experience are as varied as their numbers — around 150 have taught since the master's programs began. They're never all on site at once — UW simply can't handle that much brainpower. Most hold PhDs and work at universities. The 25 longestserving teachers have delivered

They're full of fun facts — but as respected university instructors, they'll keep those to themselves.

around 65% of all instruction. They

return year after year, like Santa



Claus.

Ester Sturludóttir took on a 50% position as Project Manager in 2024, having previously

worked as a receptionist at UW. She oversees the Friday lunch lectures, field trips, conferences, the Development Fund for immigration-related issues, and various other tasks — as is customary for a project manager. She also holds a 25% position at UW's Student Housing. Ester has studied business administration and previously worked in the banking sector for many years. She is also a certified personal trainer.

Ester's greatest passions are her family, dog, and friends. She is enthusiastic about fitness and lifts heavier weights than any of her colleagues. She loves racing up a mountain on a snowmobile when the sun comes out.



Hjördís Þráins- dóttir is the newest employee at UW and took on the 50% position of

project manager in 2024. Previously, Hjördís worked as the archives manager for the municipality of Ísafjörður. At UW, Hjördís supervises the distance learning, the library, the GDPR, and manages documents. It can be said that Hjördís enjoys working on what everyone else finds boring. In addition, she is involved in proofreading published material, and organizing field trips, conferences, and Icelandic courses. Hjördís has a bachelors degree in psychology from the University of Akureyri and is currently working on an M.Ed. degree in education.

Hjördís also has degree in being loud (a postgraduate degree in solo singing from the Ísafjörður Music School) and does not use it sparingly. Hjördís is an awful pianist.



Dr. Matthias Kokorsch has been the Academic
Director of the
Coastal Commu-

nities and Regional Development program since 2019. Matthias enjoys getting students involved in exciting research projects. Matthias once wanted to become a teacher and studied pedagogy, geography, and sociology. But since discovering Iceland during his studies, he has had a tough time stopping moving here. He completed his PhD in geography at the University of Iceland, where he studied the social impact of the quota system, and on his third move to Iceland, he ended up with us at UW.

Matthias' goal in life is to see a football match in every European country and every continent. He has already seen matches in 26 countries. Matthias is probably the only instructor who has taught with a black eye, after having the brilliant idea to become a handball goalkeeper again.



Dr. Catherine Chambers joined
UW in 2016, as the
Academic Director
of the Coastal and

Marine Management program. Now she holds a 20% position as Research Director. Although the position is part-time, it reflects the growing importance of research at UW. Catherine manages a number of research projects, supports students in a variety of ways, and strengthens the research community in the Westfjords. Catherine holds a PhD in Fisheries Science from the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, a Master's degree in Zoology from Southern Illinois University and a bachelor's degree in environmental science from Drake University. Catherine is also a department head at the Vilhjálmur Stefánsson Institute.

Catherine's interests, include sea swimming, sauna, Spanish omelettes, and running an everyday museum in her office.



The outsourced team amounts to around 3 full-time positions. They take care of tasks

like cleaning, technical support, audits, exam supervision, and more. Things other UW staff often have no idea how to do. They aren't on the payroll — truly hidden figures — yet everything grinds to a halt if they don't show up! Naturally, their educational backgrounds depending on their area of specialization. They bring valuable skills and experience that are essential to UW's operations. Some of their tasks were previously handled by salaried employees, which makes it hard to calculate their total contribution over the years.

Here at Vestrahús, everything runs smoothly — even without visible management or regular staff meetings — but in truth, it's the outsourced team that keeps the whole place running!

Summer Courses and Field Schools

Today UW's core activities are centred around the two master's programs, but it all began with field school service and summer courses and they are still important, especially during summer time.

Summer Courses in Icelandic

Summer courses have been part of UW's portfolio from the very beginning. When the master's program started in 2008, with its broad variety of short, engaging modules during the spring and summer terms, these took the place of the original summer courses—as they are, in fact, a kind of summer course or field school and are open to participants from outside the regular program.

The summer courses still offered today are Icelandic language courses for international exchange students coming to Iceland. Due to changes in the Erasmus system, participant numbers have dropped from around 150 in 2013 to approximately 60–70 per year, but this number has remained stable since. The courses are also open to other participants and enjoy a strong reputation—not least the B1 and B2 level courses, which are rare in Iceland. UW focuses on participants who are prepared for a fast pace and a steep learning curve.

Field Schools

In 2006, the first summer school was held in Hrafnseyri, and in the same year, contact was established with SIT in Vermont. The first students from SIT came to UW in the summer of 2007, and they have returned annually since then. In 2016, SIT began sending students for their semester program, with students living in Ísafjörður during the autumn and spring. These ties remain strong: the first cohort met for a reunion in Ísafjörður in 2017, and the first Academic Director visited UW again in the summer of 2024. The 2024 reunion with the group took place via email, and it is interesting to read now—nearly twenty years later—what a lasting impact their stay in the Westfjords had.

Participation in a field school often leaves a lasting impression that can shape students' worldviews for years to come. It is estimated that more than one thousand students have visited UW through field schools, and many have become true ambassadors for the Westfjords and Iceland around the world.

In 2025, UW expects a group from a new cooperation partner, FOM Essen, and has even managed to find a highly specialised instructor based in the Westfjords. Field schools require a variety of services and pay for facility rentals, teaching, overnight stays, and the organisation of a range of leisure activities.



Giving Icelandic a Chance

In recent years, one of the teachers, Ólafur Guðsteinn Kristjánsson, has organised the Icelandic summer courses on UW's behalf. He embraced the summer course philosophy of making the town an outdoor classroom. Inhabitants of Ísafjörður had always been encouraged to speak Icelandic with the students, as they were here to learn Icelandic—not English—but Óli went much further. He struck while the iron was hot, and the result was a campaign that eventually took the name Gefum íslensku séns—"Let's give Icelandic a chance." The campaign promotes a shift in mindset among native Icelandic speakers, reminding them to use Icelandic whenever possible. UW's summer course participants have often reported that they found it easier to communicate—even in limited Icelandic—in Ísafjörður than in the crowded

capital area, and that locals were more willing to respond in simplified Icelandic. Although not backed by scientific research, it is a pleasant thought that twenty years of summer course students running around town, trying to speak Icelandic, may have encouraged locals to become almannakennarar—informal instructors. And indeed, that is the campaign's essence: each and every person in town shares responsibility for keeping the language alive. Languages can tolerate mistakes—but they die in silence when they are not spoken. The campaign has received several awards and grants, and most recently a larger grant that called for more formal organisation. The campaign is now hosted as a project within the Lifelong Learning Centre.

Distance Learning & the Lifelong Learning Centre

Lifelong Learning Centre

The Lifelong Learning Centre shares the same building as UW, along with a range of other institutions. There are common coffee areas and frequent contact between the institutions and their staffs. As the Lifelong Learning Centre and the University Centre are the only educational institutions in the building, they naturally consult and cooperate with each other. In times of high demand, having additional classrooms and facilities in the same building is a great advantage. During the COVID-19 pandemic and more recently during renovations, this proved to be especially beneficial. Since UW operates on a trimester system and also offers a variety of summer courses, there is hardly a week in the year without teaching.

Service for Distance Learning Students

In strategic planning conducted in autumn 2005, it was stated that the best UW could do for local students was to offer excellent service for those enrolled in distance programsdespite the clearly formulated demand for face-to-face programs. From the beginning, there has been close cooperation with the Lifelong Learning Centre in proctoring exams, as it was the Lifelong Learning Centre that, during the years 1998–2005, was responsible for developing services for the then-new distance learning option. Since the Lifelong Learning Centre also had staff in the southern Westfjords and the Strandir region, cooperation on exam proctoring began early and has in recent years expanded to include Ísafjörður. Approximately 350 exams are proctored annually via UW, most of them for the University of Akureyri. The positive economic development in the southern Westfjords is reflected in the fact that around 30% of these exams are taken in the southern Westfjords and Strandir region-closely aligned with the population share of these regions.



Interns at UW

Since 2015, UW has hosted interns from SeaTech Toulon in France, the marine engineering department of the University of Toulon. From the beginning, Björn Erlingsson—then working in Ísafjörður at the Icelandic Meteorological Office—has supervised them. These students help fill a gap in UW's two master's programs, as marine and coastal engineering, although part of Coastal and Marine Management, is not a major focus in UW's curriculum. The number of interns has increased over the years, reaching a record high of 13 interns in 2024, each staying for four months—equivalent to around 4.5 full-time students. However, when student numbers are reported in statistics, interns, field school participants, and summer course attendees are not included. At UW, these are a significant number of individuals who often fly under the radar.

SIT Master's Program in Climate Change and Global Sustainability

The Vermont-based SIT University has been a partner of UW since 2006. For many years, SIT only offered bachelor's programs focused on sending students abroad, but in 2018 they launched their first master's program in Iceland and selected UW as a partner. This program has clear synergies with UW's existing offerings, as it aligns with many of the topics taught in the cross-disciplinary programs Coastal and Marine Management and Coastal Communities and Regional Development.

The Master's Programs

The master's programs at the University Centre of the Westfjords (UW) have evolved over 20 years, offering students an interdisciplinary approach to coastal studies. We currently offer two different degrees: an MA in Coastal Communities and Regional Development (CRD) and a Master of Resource Management (MRM) in Coastal and Marine Management. Both programs consist of 120 ECTS, divided over two academic years. The first year focuses on coursework, requiring students to complete 75 ECTS through intensive course modules between August and June. The second year is dedicated to the master's thesis, which carries 45 ECTS and represents over one-third of the total program workload. Students work with their chosen supervisors and have the flexibility to conduct their research in the Westfjords, their home countries, or other locations of interest.

We offer around 40 courses per year in the form of two- to three-week modules, taught by national and international experts. The average course size at UW has been around 13.7 students per module or instructor. Each program has nine mandatory courses that make up 35 ECTS, primarily taken in the fall semester. The other 40 ECTS of coursework comes from UW elective courses or from partner universities in Iceland or abroad, for example through Erasmus exchanges. The elective courses allow students to specialize and adapt the program to their own interests. Students may also receive up to six ECTS for relevant internships. In recent years, we have also been collaborating with domestic and international partners to offer field courses; for example, the CRD summer school - a collaboration with several Nordic and Baltic universities on rural development – and a Marine Mammals course in partnership with the University of Iceland.

Instructors

The teaching model at the University Centre of the Westfjords is unique, relying generally on guest instructors. Over the past 20 years, this approach has allowed us to bring in highly specialized faculty while maintaining a flexible and interdisciplinary curriculum. The interdisciplinary and applied nature of the programs necessitates a balance between academic scholars and career professionals. This is also important because some instructors supervise master's theses or serve as external readers. This model provides students with diverse professional perspectives and an expansive global network for thesis research and future professional opportunities.

Between 2008 and 2025, around 150 instructors taught courses in the master's programs. Many instructors have taught regularly over the years, and some have helped develop new courses that reflect current trends in the field. This helps maintain consistency over time in the programs. Our instructors come from a variety of countries, 57% of the teaching volume is taught by instructors based abroad, and 43% by instructors based in the Westfjords and other parts of Iceland. The majority of our international instructors come from Canada, other Nordic countries, the Netherlands, and the US. We are also pleased to include Westfjords residents among our teaching staff; they have made up 18% of our teaching (based on ECTS), and include professionals from local institutions such as EFLA consulting the Marine and Freshwater Research Institute in Ísafjörður, and the University of Iceland's Research Centre in Bolungarvík.

Hiring and Quality Assurance in Teaching

UW strives to be role models for other institutions in our hiring practices by recruiting teaching staff from diverse backgrounds and career stages. First and foremost, we select instructors based on expertise and teaching experience, recruiting from academia, government, non-profits, and industry. In recent years, UW has achieved a balanced gender ratio and increased our hiring of young, dynamic instructors to complement our existing pool of experienced and talented instructors.

In order to ensure uniform and consistent practices in the classroom and assessment, UW has developed policies and guidelines for all instructors. UW carries out student evaluations after every course to inform quality-assurance. The academic directors oversee all instructor recruitment, orientation, and coordination. They also communicate regularly with instructors before, during, and after course execution to maintain and improve quality over the years. UW connects instructors with relevant local contacts and field experiences that complement the course material.



Master's Theses

Our students can choose their own thesis topic related to the programs as well as their advisor. Over the years, we have seen a variety of important and contemporary topics which have made a significant contribution to scientific knowledge about the Westfjords. The Westfjords have been the most common subject for theses (81), ranging from topics looking at aquaculture and fisheries, disaster risk management, tourism, and cetacean ecology and management. A total of 131 theses have examined topics in Iceland (including the Westfjords) and contributed important findings to the national knowledge base. Arctic-related topics have also been popular among students, in part due to our participation in the University of the Arctic network; a total of 204 theses have examined topics in the countries of the Arctic, including Iceland. Other students have chosen to do thesis work elsewhere, including Aotearoa New Zealand, Belize, Chile, Fiji, Indonesia, Mexico, Scandinavia, South Africa, and Thailand. More details are available in the Research section of this report.

Our advisors come from top universities, research institutions, NGOs, and governmental institutions in Iceland and around the world. Many of the advisors have advised more than one student, which indicates the strong network that UW has developed with experts in coastal studies domestically and internationally. Student theses are sometimes funded through advisors but also through various grants from regional, national and international sources, such as the Sea of Innovation fund from the Westfjords Development Agency, the Master Thesis Fund from the Icelandic Regional Development Agency, as well as Erasmus and Nordplus. All UW master's theses can be found at skemman.is.

Student Demographics

Between 2008 and 2025, 391 students enrolled in the programs: 342 in CMM and 49 in CRD, which only started in 2019. The gender ratio of the student body has been just under 2:1 (women to men); several students have also not identified with traditional gender roles. The majority of our students have come from Europe (49%), and North America (44%) in particular from Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, and the US. However, UW has also attracted students from faraway areas, such as the Bahamas, the British Virgin Islands, India, and Taiwan. Each year, UW also welcomes about 10 guest students, primarily through Erasmus. Although we constantly strive to attract more Icelandic students, they have only made up 2,3% of our student body. Although some of our students come to UW directly from Bachelor programs, others come with a range of professional interesting experiences, contributing to the knowledge exchange in class with practical examples. Occasionally, we have even had students join us from later stages of their career, including students in their 40s, 50s, and 60s.



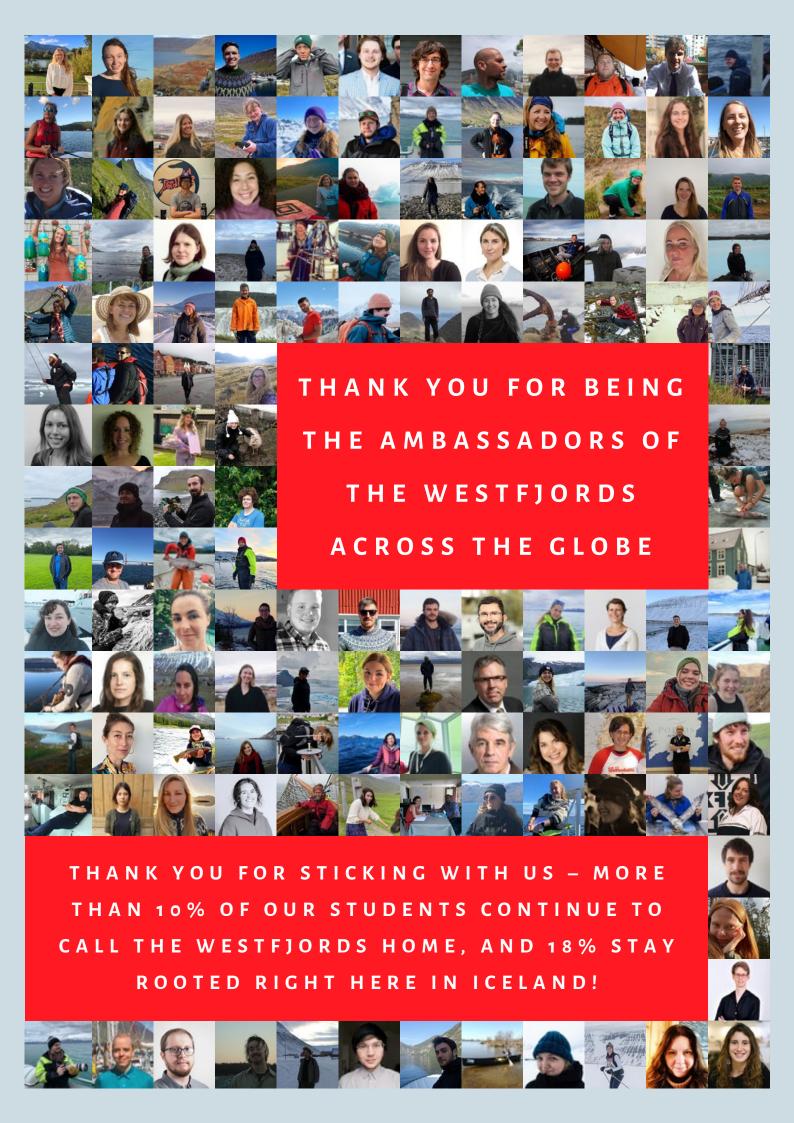
UW master's programs are accredited by the University of Akureyri through a formal contract between UNAK & UW

Graduation and Alumni

From 2008 to 2025, around 73% of students successfully completed their studies: 264 in CMM and 20 in CRD. Many are able to finish within the standard two-year timeframe, while others require additional time due to personal, professional, or research related reasons. The dropout rate is about 13%. The Westfjords and Iceland also are an attractive place for some of our alumni to settle down in. Currently, at least 47 (18%) alumni live and work in Iceland, including 27 (11%) in the Westfjords. Given that only few UW students are Icelandic, the alumni who remain in Iceland provide an important addition to the Icelandic and particularly the Westfjords workforce and taxbase.

UW tries to maintain strong connections with alumni, allowing for tracking of graduate outcomes. Of the alumni that are in touch, over half have gone into careers related to coastal studies in government, non-profits, research, and industry government. Approximately, a fifth have gone on to pursue doctoral studies. A small percentage have also gone into business for themselves. Some of the alumni stories are highlighted in the Alumni section of the report.





What Are Our Alumni Doing Now?



Name: Sara
Program: Coastal and
Marine Management
Graduation year: 2019
Nationality: Spain

I work as a researcher and consultant at Deltares, focusing on coastal ecosystem restoration and climate adaptation. My background in oceanography, marine ecology, and coastal management plays a key role, and many UW courses proved directly relevant — especially those on spatial planning, GIS, and adaptation. The blend of technical training and socio-economic perspective has been especially valuable in my current work.

One of my favorite memories is the student life we shared at home—living with six classmates, sharing the house, life, and outdoor adventures. In Ísafjörður I gained a new family and a sense of belonging that made the experience unique, and the friendships I formed are something I still cherish.



Name: Lynnee
Program: Coastal
Communities & Regional Development
Graduation year: 2023
Nationality: USA

I work as Industry Communications Coordinator for the Oregon Coast Tourism Association, focusing on sustainable tourism, stakeholder coordination, and local blue economy projects. The Westfjords and the Oregon Coast share many challenges. My UW studies gave me the skills to work with stakeholders, communicate complex topics clearly, and push for more meaningful travel.

A highlight from my time in Ísafjörður was co-creating the Westfjords Way Challenge — hosting riders from around the world in this amazing region.



Name: Rob
Program: Coastal and
Marine Management
Graduation year: 2014
Nationality: Canada

I am semi-retired but serve as Vice Chair/Adjudicator at the Workplace Safety and Insurance Appeals Tribunal in Ontario, Canada, hearing final appeals on workplace safety and insurance claims. Writing my thesis at UW taught me discipline that greatly helps in writing legal decisions. UW also introduced me to reading academic journals and evidence-based science, kev to understanding detailed medical reports in my work.

My favorite memory is hanging out at the coffee shop in Ísafjörður, having great talks with classmates and locals. Learning to make pönnukökur with Gunna Sigga was a highlight — though mine aren't as good! Once we went on an "expedition" to find wild rhubarb, only to discover later we had robbed Gunna Sigga's family cultivated patch.



Name: Hanna
Program: Coastal and
Marine Management
Graduation year: 2020
Nationality: Canada

I lead a campaign at Oceana to protect endangered North Atlantic right whales in Canada, working with fisheries and the shipping industry to reduce entanglements and vessel strikes. Learning how to work collaboratively with stakeholders and industry partners to best protect ocean resources and wildlife was imperative to the work that I went on to do. Additionally, a hands-on learning approach and collecting data for my thesis helped equip me with the necessary skills to conduct field work.

My favorite memory is arriving in Ísafjörður and seeing the northern lights from my bedroom window during my first week — a magical start to two unforgettable years.



Name: John
Program: Coastal and
Marine Management
Graduation year: 2018
Nationality: USA

I am a Seafood Technical Director at Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute. The multi-disciplinary studies at UW have been invaluable for my work, which covers sustainability, biology, ecology, quality, human nutrition, and more. Being able to navigate varied subjects and adequately consider the many perspectives of various stakeholders was something focused on intensively at UW, and something I'm infinitely grateful for. Integration of the program into a fishing community was incredibly valuable for seeing the subject matter in real time, and the generation of my thesis at UW gave me the foundations for my daily work. I still pull from lessons learned in that process frequently.

My favorite memory would have to be the sense of community in Ísafjörður. Not only did I make lifelong friends from my cohort, but to this day still feel like it is a home away from home. The community is small, friendly, and more than welcoming to the students in town. I made lifelong friends and still feel at home there. The small, welcoming town with stunning scenery deeply connected me to my work at UW.



Name: Solveig
Program: Coastal and
Marine Management
Graduation year: 2023
Nationality: Norway

I am a researcher at Nordland Research Institute in Lofoten, Norway, working on resource and environmental management from a social science perspective.

The interdisciplinary courses and diverse student cohort at UW prepared me best for my work today.

My favorite memory is the community in Ísafjörður and the lifelong friendships I made there.



Name: Alan Program: Coastal and Marine Management Graduation year: 2011 Nationality: UK

I work mainly in Africa as a consultant with various wildlife authorities to manage and develop parks and nature reserves. Although I studied Coastal and Marine Management at UW, I've never worked near the ocean. Much of what I learned about natural processes and conservation principles has been of great value. I've realized that environmental work has nothing to do with playing with animals or enjoying landscapes — it's about dealing with humans, the most unpredictable and baffling species. The somewhat eccentric people of the Westfjords and the colorful characters I met through prepared me challenging situations in Africa.

My favorite memory is from a winter outing with UW students and staff during the first snowstorm. A spontaneous snowball fight erupted, with many snowballs aimed at Peter Weiss. In true Bavarian spirit, he transformed into a snowball-wielding warrior. What followed was a mighty battle of icy projectiles, laughter, and the occasional faceful of snow.



Name: Mathieu
Program: Coastal and
Marine Management
Graduation year: 2023
Nationality: France

I currently work as a Biodiversity & Ocean Coordinator for a multienergies company in Paris, France. Personally, what prepared me best for my current career from my studies at UW was the multidisciplinary nature of the degree, combined with learning alongside students from diverse backgrounds.

My favorite memory from my time at UW is the graduation ceremony in Hrafnseyri.



Name: Charla Program: Coastal and Marine Management Graduation year: 2014 Nationality: Canada

I am a postdoctoral cetacean researcher at the University of Iceland's Húsavík Research Centre. What prepared me best from my studies was the broad range of marine-related courses.

Some of my favourite memories from UW are when my cohort would host or participate in community events at Kaffi Ísól, including "international buffets" and trivia nights, connecting us to the locals.



Name: Sarah Program: Coastal and Marine Management Graduation year: 2014 Nationality: Canada

I am currently an Impact Assessment Practitioner with Parks Canada in Newfoundland, focusing on sustainable development to prevent significant impacts. My master's studies gave me a holistic view of resource management that I still apply today.

I have fond memories of spending time with my classmates and being taken care of by my Icelandic Mama Gunna Sigga!!!



Name: Elsa Program: Coastal and Marine Management Graduation year: 2024 Nationality: USA

I'm currently a PhD student at the University of Copenhagen's Globe Institute. What prepared me best from UW were the practical projects and fieldwork. Developing my own thesis topic made me an independent researcher today.

I met most of my closest friends in Ísafjörður and I'm grateful to have met so many kind, adventurous, and generous people — both students and locals.



Name: Kelly Program: Coastal and Marine Management Graduation year: 2019 Nationality: Canada

I work as the Education and Outreach Coordinator TransCoastal Adaptations Centre for Nature-Based Solutions. I lead the Green Shores program on Canada's East Coast, which educates municipalities and property owners about using nature-based approaches that work with natural forces and help restore shoreline habitats. The variety of courses offered through the master's program gave me a broad base of knowledge that I now use in a multidisciplinary field. I also gave a lot of presentations during my master's, which really helped prepare me for the public education side of my current role.

One memory that stands out is the day I noticed the large map on the school wall had been flipped upside down. I asked Þórdís why, and she said it's good to look at the world from different perspectives — and to keep an open mind.



Name: Ellyn Program: Coastal and Marine Management Graduation year: 2014 Nationality: Canada

I am a PhD candidate at the University of Windsor in Canada, studying the large-scale movements of Greenland halibut in the Arctic using acoustic telemetry and various analyses. My time at UW sparked my interest in Arctic research and gave me valuable field experience through courses like marine mammals in Húsavík and aquaculture in Tálknafjörður, which prepared me for my current work.

Some of my favorite memories include soaking in hot pots, seeing the midnight sun and northern lights, going to Aldrei fór ég suður, learning to knit, and hiking from Ísafjörður to Bolungarvík and around Hornstrandir.





Our Courses and Instructors

The master's courses at the University Centre of the Westfjords are far too many to cover on a single page. Here is a sample of some, presented by those who know them best—the course instructors.



Course: Coastal and Marine Ecology Instructor: Dr. Filipa Samara (Westmann Islands Research C., UI)

I am passionate about the ocean and I love sharing that with students. I focus on marine conservation and environmental challenges faced by coastal and marine organisms and humans on a global scale. I try to convey to students the wonders of oceanic ecosystems, framed in a scientific research approach, while keeping a focus on the environmental crisis we are facing today and the importance of conservation.

UW has a great atmosphere that makes it a special place to teach and learn. The staff are friendly and make students and teachers feel like part of one big family



Course: Public policy Instructor: Dr. Jóhanna Gísladóttir (Agricultural University of Iceland)

It is always such a pleasure to teach at UW. The students are engaged and diverse, coming from different parts of the world which creates a vibrant learning environment. In the course I encourage my students to dissect the 'problem' that the policy is meant to address and look at the context.

My favourite memory is the pub quiz every Wednesday night at Dokkan brewery! I am a big quiz nerd and just love it when people from the community and the students have fun together.



Course: Geographic Information Systems Instructor: Dr. Jiří Pánek (Palacky University)

My course at UW aims to introduce geographic information systems (GIS) to the students and show them how maps can be used to enrich their research as well as presentations. For most of my students, this is their very first encounter with GIS, and after 3 weeks, they are confident users of the technology and can produce very nice maps! I try to convey to my students that a map can speak more than 1000 words. If they can communicate their results spatially/visually, it will increase the chance that their results will reach the audience.

I love the environment at UW, the team and the location. I teach in winter, so my travel arrangements are usually quite hectic, but somehow Gunna Sigga always makes it possible for me to reach my destination!



Course: Climate change in coastal regions

Instructor: Dr. Patricia Manuel (Dalhousie U.)

The course, fully titled Planning for Climate Change in Coastal Regions: Adaptation and Mitigation, always centers on planning — especially environmental and community planning — with climate change as the focus. Coastal areas are political spaces where protecting nature, development, and addressing climate impacts are key challenges. About 10% of the world's population lives in vulnerable coastal zones, making these areas vital for cultural, economic, and environmental wellbeing globally.

My favorite memory is exploring coastal planning in Ísafjörður and nearby towns. The warm welcome and pride of the communities stood out. This experience is one of the reasons I keep returning to UW.



Course: Regional transformation and development Instructor: Dr. Joost Dessein (Gent U.)

My course introduces various aspects of regional development from sociological and political spectives. I use global examples alongside field excursions in the Arctic Westfjords, highlighting contrasts that reveal similarities and differences in regional development processes, sparking student enthusiasm. I try to share my passion for rural sociology and uniqueness of rural places worldwide, especially the stunning Westfjords with its challenges and opportunities.

UW's international staff and students, who all ended up in this remote but hospitable town, make it special. My favorite memory is losing my flat key. When I told Gunna Sigga, she laughed and said: "don't worry, unless you dropped it in the fjord, we'll have it back soon. I'll post it on facebook". And indeed, few hours later, somebody found it.



Course: Coastal Communities in an era of Leisure and Tourism Instructor: Dr. Pat Maher (Nippissing U.)

I think this course is eye-opening to students. They all "think" they know tourism, or have maybe worked in the industry, but the academic study of how a community engages or feels tension with the masses is unique for many. I think even the students who don't see a connection to their own work at the outset, see the important linkages by the end of the 2 weeks.

I think the student cohorts, and the block teaching with world-experts makes UW unique. What's special for me – are the unplanned moments like taking a tour of Ísafjörður and ending up having 10 mature graduate students jumping on the trampoline, showing the 3-5 year old kids their moves.



Course: Arctic Ocean Governance Instructor: Dr. Romain Chuffart (U. of Akureyri)

The course provides an interdisciplinary overview of legal, political, and environmental governance in the Arctic, covering key like UNCLOS, resource geopolitics, sovereignty, and Indigenous self-determination. In the course, students participate in the Arctic Circle Assembly in Reykjavík, engaging with policy-makers and experts to see governance in action. I encourage students to think critically about Arctic governance as a complex negotiation of power, agency, and justice across disciplines, aiming to equip them with analytical tools to envision a more just and sustainable future.

What makes UW special is the disciplinary diversity and strong engagement of students. One of my favorite moments is seeing students return from the Arctic Circle Assembly motivated to work for change both academically and practically.



Course: Physical Processes of Coastal Environments Instructor: Dr. Jana Cox (Utrecht U.)

My course is a mixture of fundamentals of coastal physics, looking at human interventions and climate change at the coast and how these changes can be addressed in policy. We explore global case studies —for example, students dive into a delta of their choice and creatively communicate its risks and changes.

UW creates a special learning environment where students can bring their own experiences and talents to the table to tackle challenges from different perspectives. This leads to really fun and diverse discussions with opportunities for the teacher and students to also learn from each other.



Course: Coastal Food Systems Instructor: Dr. Kristen Lowitt (Queen's University)

Food is one of our most intimate connections to environments, cultures, and geographies. This course uses food systems - which involve all the steps that food goes through to reach our plates - as a lens on to contemporary issues facing coastal communities, from regional economic development to climate change to food access. Interdisciplinary thinking and collaboration is a key theme of my course.

UW is special for its diverse students and the unique "living laboratory" of Ísafjörður, where we visit local food producers and businesses to learn experientially.



Course: Tools for Community Development Instructor: Dr. John Colton (Acadia U.)

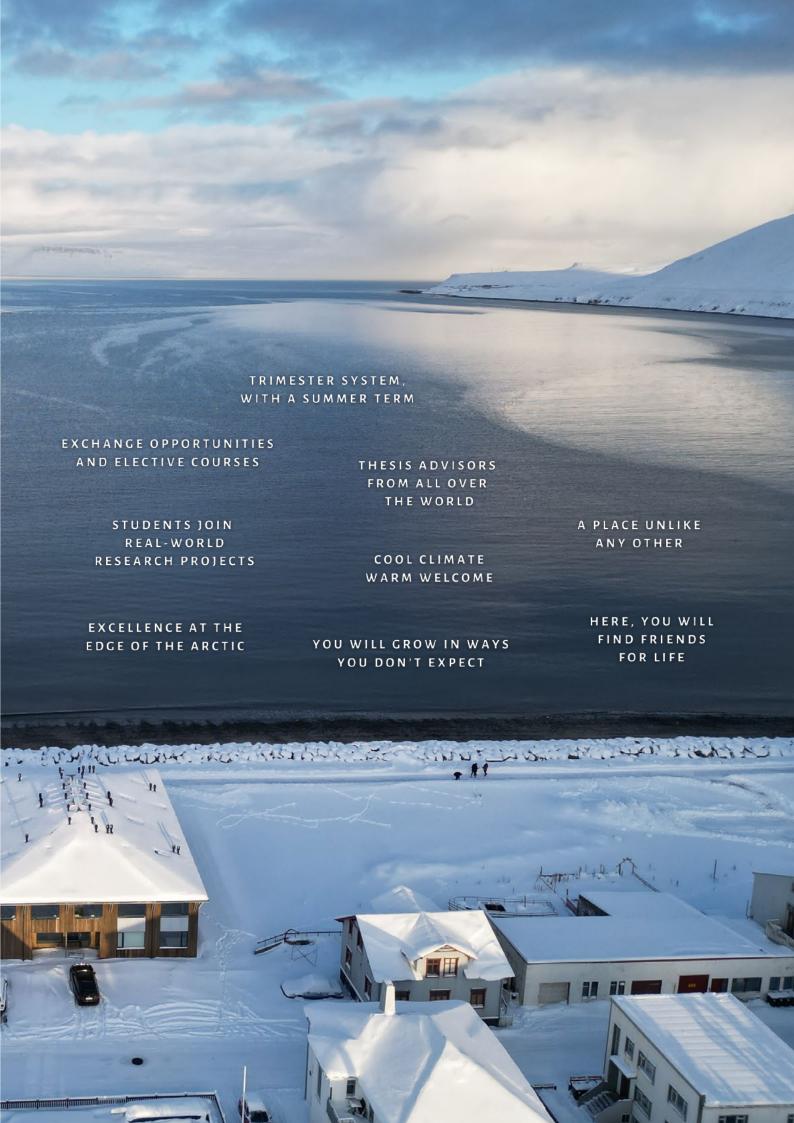
I teach Marine Renewable Energy and Tools in Community Development, where students develop strategies for sustainable regional economic development, including grant writing Asset-Based Community Development. The course builds on earlier learning and lets students apply parts of their thesis. I emphasize that every community has unique cultural, social, environmental strengths that can be harnessed creatively, focusing on what's strong rather than what's wrong.

UW is special for its interdisciplinary mix of students from many countries. I have fond memories of student potlucks, hikes, field trips, and even getting married in Ísafjörður, where students joined the celebration. One graduation I'll never forget involved watching a football match under a tent with students, staff, community, and the President of Iceland, with hot dogs, of course.

Examples of courses that have been taught in the master's program:

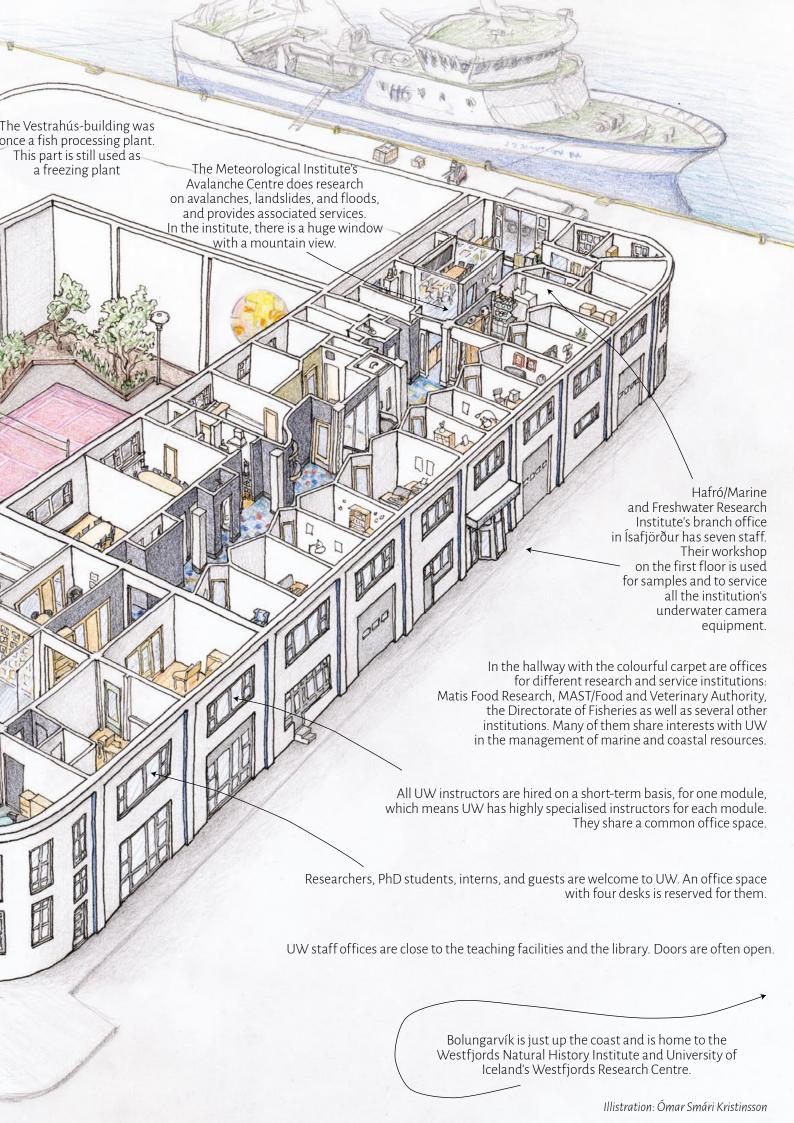
- Adaptation Planning
- Applied Methodology
- Aquaculture, Environment, and Society
- Approaches and Perspectives from Geography
- Academic Writing
- · Business Incubator
- Coastal and Marine Management
- Coastal Arctic Scenarios
- Communicating Climate Change
- Community and the Built Environment
- Conflict Resolution
- · Coping with Disasters
- Data Analysis and Interpretation
- Education and Labour Markets
- Equality and Diversity
- Environmental Certification and Eco-labelling Schemes
- Environmental Impact Assessment
- Environmental History
- Ethics: Conservation and Resource
- Fisheries Management and Tech.
- Human Ecology
- Icelandic Society and Environment
- Indigenous Voices and Community Development
- Innovation and Entrepreneurship
- Innovation in Aquaculture
- Law of the Sea
- Marine Protected Area Managem.
- Marine Renewable Energy
- Marine Spatial Planning
- Maritime Anthropology
- Migration and Population Development
- Oceanography
- · Of Ships and Sea
- People and the Sea
- Policy Appraisal and Evaluation
- Pollution in the Coastal Arctic
- · Proposal Writing
- · Regional Geography
- · Regional Policy Evaluation
- Resource Economics and Policy
- Sociology of Rural and Remote communities
- Talking About Science
- The Blue Economy and Coastal Communities
- The Global Context
- Understanding Regional Economy
- Welfare and Development





The classrooms and the library are centrally located. The library is one of In the courtyard is the only legal outdoor badminton field in the the most specialised in the country, it collects primarily volumes related to the two master's programmes taught at UW. Around 40% of the titles country. When it is windy in Ísafjörður, we use it for basketball. are only available here in Iceland. In summertime, students and staff take coffee breaks out in the sun. The coffee lounge is the heart of UW. Here, we hold open lunch lectures each Friday. The Multicultural Centre of Iceland The Akureyri room gives used to be here. It recently merged University of Akureyri staff the with the Directorate of Labour and opportunity to work at UW moved down to new office space for certain periods of time. on the first floor in 2025. **UW** teaching facilities. The Lifelong Learning Centre is on the first floor. When all teaching facilities are occupied at UW, it is nice to be able to use the teaching facilities there - and vice versa. The Foreign Ministry's Translation Service is in the building and knows all about the tricky ways of translating EU-speak to Icelandic. The School for International Training (SIT), a Vermont-based university, has been a UW partner institution since 2007. SIT has office space within UW with a two-person staff and a range of instructors on short-term contracts. The main entrance is under the blue gable. Reception is on the second floor and knows about everything and everyone in the building. The Westfjords Municipalities' Association and the Westfjords Regional Development Agency are on the first floor

and work to promote the Westfjords. They share UW's interest in coastal, marine, and regional development issues.



Research

Research activity by staff at the University Centre of the Westfjords has expanded in recent years. To support this growth, the position of Research Director was established in 2020. While most research projects are linked to students' master's theses, a number of new collaborative projects have also emerged. These projects have received funding and reflect the core focus areas of the master's programs — coastal management and regional development.

Between 2020-2025 UW has...



Had an 84% success rate in funding.



Hired a total of 17 research assistants.



Published a total of 47 articles in peer-reviewed journals, covering a wide range of research topics.



Had **46** active or archived projects, with **78%** of them involving students in some way.



Seen that an increasing share of published articles (60%) from UW comes from master's students.



Funding for Research 2020-2025

Research activities brought in a total of just over 72 million ISK to UW from 2020-2024, or on average 7% of the annual budget. Of these projects, the majority of the funds were spent directly in the Westfjords society, in the form of salary for research assistants, or to local companies for research support. Of the funding won by UW staff, 9 student theses have been supported by research grants.

Additionally, there are research activities of the students where the money is not part of the UW record-keeping systems. For example, since 2020, 7 students have received NSN grants, a growing number of students have received Erasmus+ travel funding to carry out their thesis research, and 15 additional students have received external funding for their research.

Important domestic funding sources for research at UW include Rannís (The Icelandic Centre for Research), which administers several programs such as the Student Innovation Fund (NSN), the Climate Fund (Loftslagssjóður), and the Market Plan (Markaðsáætlun). Other key domestic funders are the Energy Research Fund (Orkurannsóknarsjóður), the Icelandic Regional Development Institute (Byggðastofnun), and Vestfjarðastofa through the Westfjords Development Fund (Uppbyggingarsjóður Vestfjarða) and Hafsjór af hugmyndum — "An Ocean of Ideas." Important international funding sources include the Nordic Council of Ministers, NordForsk, Creative Europe, and UArctic.



What Is Our Research About?

> WHALES FOOD E ENERGY

AQUACULTURE 2 COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT FISHERIES ...

MARINE LITTER MARITIME CULTURE

CLIMATE CHANGE W SEAWEED MARINE SPATIAL PLANNING MARINE ECOLOGY

TOURISM



Westfjords in **Focus**

Just under half of our publications focus on topics related to the Westfjords, highlighting regional and national impact of the knowledge generated through our research.



Our Research Partners

Our partners include not only instructors but also visiting researchers and a broader network of collaborators. International partners are involved in 43% of our projects, while the remaining 57% consist of smaller Icelandic initiatives, including student projects supported by Byggðastofnun (Icelandic Regional Development Institute), Innviðasjóður (Infrastructure Fund), and NSN (Student Innovation Fund).

Research Spotlight



Matthias Kokorsch, Academic Director at UW, and Jóhanna Gísladóttir, Assistant Professor at the Agricultural University of Iceland, are part of the Icelandic team CliCNord that studied the interaction between place attachment and natural hazards. They examined avalanches in the Westfjords and conducted a case study in Patreksfjörður and Flateyri.





About the Project

This research project aims to enhance the capacity of small communities in the Nordic countries to respond to climate change. It examines how prepared these communities are, their understanding of the issue, how local skills contribute to building resilience, and when external support is needed. Eight case studies are being conducted across Denmark, Sweden, Norway, the Faroe Islands, and Iceland. The project is funded by NordForsk for 13 million Icelandic króna and runs from 2021 to 2025.

CliCNord and UW

The project has resulted in seven published research articles from UW, ten conference presentations, three master's theses, and the hiring of a research assistant. Additionally, a project meeting was held in Ísafjörður, and the project has helped share research findings with the community.





FINPlast

Faroe Islands, 3–27% of cod are found with plastic in their stomachs. While many methods exist to study plastic ingestion in fish, these approaches are often difficult to compare. Large laboratories may have access to advanced equipment and specialized staff, whereas smaller labs have more limited resources. To make results more comparable across institutions, efforts were made to develop a standardized method suitable for all. Catherine Chambers, Research Director at UW, led the project, which was funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers Marine Working Group for 7 million Icelandic króna between 2019 and 2021.



Where do we want to be in 2030?

Maintain what

What UW is best known for are its two master's programmes. They are the driving force in UW's operations and attract well-qualified students annually who in turn enrich the community and often integrate into the labour market. The programmes have scored high in the formal evaluations by University of Akureyri, which accredits the programmes. UW has about 80 registered students at any given time. As the programmes are taught in person, students live in the Westfjords, a core goal of UW. Apart from students and their instructors, UW also attracts students for single modules, field schools, and research activities.

Many institutions nationally and internationally envy UW for this success, and we want to build on our successes and put emphasis on personalised educational and practical experiences in the unique environment. We want to engage graduates in the Icelandic and Westfjords workforce and we want to increase the economic impact in mind and our role in shaping the modern image of the Westfjords.

Meet the challenge to enhance the research activities

During its first years, UW was a typical teaching institution.
Research was primarily carried out through master's theses.
More recently, research and applications for research grants from the Academic Directors and the Research Manager have increased rapidly, even though UW has no official dedicated research positions.
Integrating research into UW's operations is thus a challenge.

Still, we have set the goal that by 2030, research activity will be sufficient to allow the creation of research positions. At the same time, we want to see UW recognised as a centre of studies and research for coastal management and regional development in Iceland.

Strengthen internal activities

UW is a small institution with a small staff that needs to fulfil a variety of tasks.

To strengthen our internal functioning, we want to support the professional development of existing staff, add new staff where possible, and consider opportunities to outsource specialised tasks and to cooperate with other institutions at universities or in the Westfjords.

Build on what we already have

We have built up two dynamic master's programmes.

The goal is not necessarily to keep adding new programmes. Still, we want to be ready to seize opportunities which could come our way, should new study options connect well to our or local interests.

There are also opportunities to use the existing programmes in different ways, such as as micro credentials or certificates programs in cooperation with national or international partners. This could increase participants in single modules and provide continuing education opportunities for Westfjords residents.

UW participates in a cooperative network to develop a study programme in aquaculture and advocates for part of this programme to be taught in the Westfjords.

We also welcome suggestions for new study opportunities which come from strong partners. New lines of study would need to build upon the region's and UW's expertise and strengthen the institution and the Westfjords as a whole. Examples could be a field school in natural hazard response in cooperation with universities or relevant institutions.

Leverage our large network

UW is a small institution with a large international network. We have around 260 alumni, 150 instructors that have come to teach modules, not to mention many thesis advisors and external readers. During recent years, new networks have emerged from research projects.

Many valuable connections have been developed, and we want to make better use of this network for the benefit of the Westfjords and Iceland. It is our goal to become a well-known centre for coastal management and regional development, and perhaps eventually aquaculture.

Our Vision for 2025-2030

Students

Close to 400 master's students will have graduated from UW's programs and close to 4000 students will have participated in summer courses and field schools at UW.

At any given time, 80 students are registered in the two core master's programs: Coastal and Marine Management or Coastal Communities and Regional Development. Additionally, 20 students are registered annually for single modules.

Reputation

UW will have a national and international reputation for being a centre for research and studies for coastal and marine management and regional development in Iceland.

Research and Network

Research activities will have grown and at least three positions will be involved with research.

UW's network will have been formalized and used to support UW's operations.

Study Programs

New programs will have been launched: in particular, in aquaculture and field studies in natural sciences or natural hazard topics.

Evaluations of the core master's programs will remain positive, and the graduation rate will remain at the same high level.

Employment

10 years after graduation, 10% of alumni will have worked for two years or longer in the Icelandic labour market or pursued ongoing studies in Iceland.

An emphasis will be put on connecting students to employment and society in the Westfjords and in Iceland.

Human Resources

The number of instructors and thesis advisors who have worked at UW will have grown to around 300 persons.

A consistent human resource policy and job development plan will have been established for all UW staff.





