

Higher Education as Coastal Community Development: Lessons Learned From the University Centre of the Westfjords, Iceland

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Abstract

Theoretical and applied scholarship examines the role of educational institutions as a rural and regional development tool. In this article, we use the 20-year history of the University Centre of the Westfjords (UW), located in Ísafjörður (population 2,700), as a case study in university education as a community development tool. Close to 300 graduates from UW’s two coastal-themed master’s programs, plus countless study abroad and guest students and researchers, have contributed significantly to the region’s cultural and economic revitalisation. Many graduates choose to stay in the Westfjords, supporting community development through innovative projects, entrepreneurship, and social engagement. This retention of talent has been crucial in addressing demographic challenges such as outmigration and gender imbalances. The authors use methods from insider research in higher education to reflect on lessons learned about the role of universities in small-scale societies, using data on local economic impact and the immeasurable cultural impact of university institutions in rural coastal communities. We examine how UW has acted as a policy tool for societal transformation, enabling the region to move beyond economic, educational, and demographic stagnation. In this way, UW serves as a model for the concept of universities as collaborative platforms for promoting sustainable development in coastal communities through education and research grounded in local economic and cultural connections to the sea. By sharing these insights, this work contributes to the broader discussion on the unique challenges and opportunities of how university activities in coastal communities can serve as engines for regional development.

Keywords

community capital; community development; higher education institutions; Iceland; societal impact

1. Introduction

The growing literature on the civic university and the third mission of higher education institutions (HEIs) emphasises that universities are not only producers of teaching and research but also civic and cultural actors with explicit responsibilities to their surrounding societies (Benneworth et al., 2024; Carlsen et al., 2013; Hedin, 2009; Tomasi et al., 2020). Nordic universities, for example, are increasingly tasked with supporting rural and regional development through adapted education and lifelong learning, entrepreneurship and business formation, and applied R&D collaboration with local industry, often organised through networked triple helix arrangements that connect universities, firms, and public actors (Berlina, 2025; Hedin, 2009). Similarly, the concept of universities as anchor institutions has gained prominence in rural and peripheral settings, capturing their role as long-term, place-bound organisations whose decisions around employment, curricula, and engagement significantly shape local development trajectories (Berlina et al., 2025; Orphan & McClure, 2019). In many rural regions, a single HEI may be the only nearby provider of higher education and a major employer, making the sustainability of communities heavily dependent on its presence and orientation (Orphan & McClure, 2019; Raghavan, 2019). A civic university provides direct inputs to regional development (expenditure, human capital, knowledge services), makes developmental contributions by upgrading elements of the regional economic structure, and plays a transformative role in creating new paths and futures (Atterton & Thompson, 2010; Keerberg, 2018; Salomaa, 2019; Tomasi et al., 2020).

A core mechanism through which universities can address depopulation and skill shortages in peripheral regions is the provision of locally accessible and flexible higher education, including distance and blended learning. Using the term “peripheral higher education institutions” (PHEIs), Berlina et al. (2025) note that PHEIs serve as pillars of regional development by functioning as cultural and civic hubs and sustaining local public spheres and community events. PHEIs’ primary contributions are in the areas of social, civic, and territorial cohesion, as well as resilience and identity, by widening access for non-traditional and place-bound students and tailoring programmes to local labour markets. Such an expanded purpose and definition of PHEIs therefore leads to demands for funding and evaluation models that extend beyond research rankings and limited economic indicators often used to evaluate HEIs (Berlina et al., 2025). Similarly, from a community development perspective, Orphan and McClure (2019) document how a rural university systematically invests in different forms of community capital, i.e., human, cultural, social, political, financial, and built. Raghavan (2019) similarly finds that PHEIs can be powerful catalysts of rural development when they engage proactively with their communities, with residents perceiving university outreach as improving infrastructure, access to finance, and interactions with government agencies, ideally helping to fight out-migration.

In coastal rural regions, where the industrial base is often dominated by fisheries and related activities, these insights highlight the importance of aligning university education and research with both existing sectors and emerging opportunities in, for example, maritime economies, sustainable tourism, coastal planning, and environmental management. Universities may help regions branch into related or new paths, such as marine innovation, environmental services, or knowledge-intensive public services by training skilled graduates, undertaking applied research, and facilitating partnerships (Keerberg, 2018; Kurikka et al., 2020). Yet, this potential depends on governance arrangements, funding, institutional culture, and the ability to balance local embeddedness with global academic standards (Benneworth et al., 2024; Berlina, 2025; Hedin, 2009).

While this literature is generally optimistic about the potential of universities in peripheral development, it also highlights important tensions and risks. Policy makers often place high expectations on universities as transformative agents, sometimes without providing the necessary resources, autonomy, or supportive ecosystems. Academic drift towards research excellence, institutional mergers, and centralisation can undermine the capacity of peripheral campuses to maintain strong regional engagement, as investment and prestige concentrate in a few centres (Benneworth et al., 2024).

This article draws on 20 years of PHEI experience in a remote coastal community, reflecting on the role of the University Centre of the Westfjords (UW) in Ísafjörður, Iceland (Figure 1). In Iceland, research on Icelandic higher education shows that regional universities can significantly increase the supply and retention of qualified professionals in their immediate micropolitan centres, but that on-campus provision alone tends to have limited reach into more remote rural communities (Bjarnason & Thorarinsdottir, 2017). When students must relocate to study, they are less likely to return to the smallest and most remote settlements after graduation, thereby contributing to ongoing rural depopulation and urban concentration of human capital (Bjarnason & Edvardsson, 2017). In contrast, distance education, delivered by universities in ways that allow rural students to remain in their communities while studying, emerges as a key mechanism for strengthening educational levels and professional capacity in remote regions (Bjarnason & Edvardsson, 2017). Although there are other political, social, or economic drivers that may play a role in demographic changes (Bjarnason & Thorlindsson, 2006), rural academic opportunities still increase the chances that graduates stay in or return to their home communities, especially in welfare professions such as teaching and health care that are critical for sustaining basic services in small settlements (Berlina et al., 2025; Bjarnason & Thorarinsdottir, 2017). For coastal regions facing depopulation and ageing populations, this has direct implications for the viability of schools, health services, and local administrations.



Figure 1. Location of UW in Ísafjörður, with the school building circled in the foreground, and student housing in the background.

Upon its founding in 2005, UW was therefore tasked with the purpose of community development and the goal to respond to and balance the local needs for distance education, in-person education, research, and other educational services. The remote Westfjords of Iceland had experienced a transformational shock in their mainstay maritime industry and a related significant population decline from the early 1990s until 2015. These conditions are similar in many Nordic and European peripheries where HEIs are increasingly tasked with supporting regional resilience and transformation (Berlina, 2025; Hedin, 2009). In coastal settings, this implies that universities must engage with the dual challenges of socio-economic restructuring and environmental change, i.e., climate impacts on fisheries, marine ecosystems, coastal infrastructure, and hazard risk, while also addressing demographic decline and social inequalities. The call for neo-endogenous, place-based, and sustainable development (see e.g., Benneworth et al., 2024) provides a conceptual entry point to understand how universities like UW can function as collaborative platforms in such contexts.

This longitudinal case study on UW contributes to a thematic issue that stresses the need for transformative, socially just, and environmentally sustainable development in marine and coastal regions and explicitly foregrounds universities as platforms that connect science, policy, and communities. Universities can host forums that bring together different stakeholder groups to deliberate on issues such as marine spatial planning, aquaculture development, coastal hazards, and climate adaptation. They can co-design student projects and research that address real-world challenges and produce tangible benefits for communities and ecosystems. In doing so, they embody the role of collaborative platforms, translating science and engagement into lasting social impacts. This article examines how UW has developed from a distance-learning hub into an international teaching and research institution, and how it contributes to community and regional development in the Westfjords. The discussion links this empirical case to debates on universities in peripheral regions and the balance between regional development and academic missions. In this way, the case study of UW links together concepts of the civic university and third mission in the unique context of the broader sustainability challenges facing coastal and marine communities.

2. Theoretical Framework and Methods

This article is situated at the intersection of debates on coastal peripheries, regional development, and the evolving role of universities as civic and collaborative actors. In response, we conceptualise UW as a PHEI embedded in a remote coastal region undergoing long-term socio-economic restructuring, demographic decline, and environmental change. Our theoretical framework brings together several strands of literature: work on peripheral and coastal regions, depopulation, and path dependency; neo-endogenous development and the role of PHEIs in regional transformation; research on universities as anchor institutions, social rural campuses, and providers of accessible higher education; and the civic university and third mission debates, including critical reflections on the tensions and limits of university-led development (Table 1). This work is a reflexive, longitudinal case study of a single HEI. We collected and triangulated multiple data sources (e.g., institutional documents such as annual reports, internal reviews, and board minutes) that document how UW has evolved, how it has been perceived locally, and how it has interacted with wider regional dynamics. Our approach follows work on insider research in higher education, which highlights both the value and the challenges of researching one's own institution (Healey, 2016; Savvides et al., 2014; Trowler, 2011). Therefore, the results and discussion sections are combined and reflect on the various concepts overviewed in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of UW's contributions to peripheral coastal development through different theoretical lenses.

Theoretical lens/concept	UW role/practice	Main type of impact	Example/indicator
Neo-endogenous development (Benneworth et al., 2024)	Founding of UW as locally rooted but externally connected PHEI	Demographic, knowledge, institutional	Shift from distance hub to international master's and visiting field schools
Social rural campus/anchor institution (Benneworth et al., 2024; Berlina et al., 2025)	UW as demographic and cultural anchor in Ísafjörður and surrounding villages	Demographic, social, cultural, identity	Missing age group filled; student-led cultural events
Access & demographic sustainability (Bjarnason & Edvardsson, 2017)	Offering local higher education access + attracting students from outside the region	Demographic, skills, welfare services	Number of local residents graduating from UW programmes
Civic university/collaborative platform (Tomasi et al., 2020)	Co-produced theses and research projects with municipalities, NGOs	Knowledge, policy, practice	Share of theses with local partners; funded adaptation projects
Community capitals (Orphan & McClure, 2019)	Investments in student housing, entrepreneurship, and cultural activities	Built, financial, social, cultural	Student housing units; number of graduate-led ventures
Tensions and limits (Benneworth et al., 2024; Keerberg, 2018; Pinheiro, 2020)	Limited Icelandic enrolment; uneven regional reach; resource constraints	Governance, institutional, scalar	Share of Icelandic vs. international students; spatial concentration of impacts

We first conducted a systematic review of institutional documents produced since UW's establishment. This includes a comprehensive collection of founding documents, strategic plans, annual reports, board minutes, programme descriptions, external evaluations, and reports. These materials were used to trace UW's development, priorities, funding base, and regional role over time, where each document was reviewed systematically, noting similarities, differences, and omissions/changes over time. Similar document-based institutional case studies have been used to understand how universities enact regional sustainability roles (Radinger-Peer et al., 2021; Sedlacek, 2013). We also analysed internal student data and teaching- and curricula-related records, including enrolment and graduation statistics, student origin, stays in the region after graduation, and current career status (where possible). This allowed us to examine who UW has attracted and where students have contributed to the Westfjords labour market and community life.

Next, we undertook a review of all completed master's theses and funded projects associated with UW. For theses, we coded broad themes, empirical foci, and connections to the Westfjords and coastal Iceland more generally in order to assess how student research has engaged with local and regional challenges. For funded projects, we mapped thematic focus, partnerships (e.g., municipalities, agencies, NGOs, private sector), and geographical distribution to understand how UW's research and outreach have evolved. This broad institutional mapping reflects earlier case studies where universities are examined as regional sustainability actors through projects, teaching, and outreach activities (Radinger-Peer et al., 2021; Sedlacek, 2013).

We then linked internal data to official statistics and secondary sources on demographic change, labour markets, and education in the Westfjords and Iceland as a whole. This provided a contextual baseline against which to interpret UW's activities and potential contributions to regional development. Additionally, we draw on ongoing communication with local stakeholders, both formal and informal. Over two decades, UW's director and staff have maintained regular contact with municipal representatives, local as well as national politicians, private companies, NGOs, and community organisations through board meetings, project collaborations, public events, and everyday encounters. Although these interactions are not formally documented as interview data, they offer valuable qualitative insights into how UW is viewed and its significance in local discussions about the region's future. This attention to relational dynamics and shifting insider/outsider positions resonates with methodological reflections on negotiating such roles in educational research (Savvides et al., 2014).

Finally, for the 20-year period we are reviewing, UW has had the same director, first author P. W., while second and third authors C. C. and M. K. have worked at UW for 11 years and 7 years, respectively. Therefore, this is explicitly insider research. We consider this internal perspective as a valuable source of practical knowledge regarding decision-making, limitations, conflicts, and crucial moments in UW's development and continuous growth. Following the insider-research literature, we recognise both the advantages of intimate contextual knowledge and the risks of bias, power asymmetries, and selective memory (Fleming, 2018; Healey, 2016; Trowler, 2011). To address risks, we systematically cross-check personal recollections against documentary evidence and statistical records, and we make our positionality explicit throughout the article. Across these data sources, our analysis is interpretive and iterative. We identify key moments and patterns in UW's 20-year trajectory and relate them to wider processes of coastal depopulation, regional policy, and changing expectations of universities. In doing so, our design parallels other longitudinal institutional case studies of universities' regional sustainability roles that combine institutional data, policy documents, and stakeholder perspectives (Radinger-Peer et al., 2021; Sedlacek, 2013). The goal is not to provide a comprehensive evaluation of UW, but to use this unusual depth of access to explore how a small coastal PHEI can function as a collaborative platform for sustainable development in a remote coastal region.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. *Founding Rationale and Regional Context*

3.1.1. Coastal Peripheries, Depopulation, and Regional Lock-In

UW was founded in a context that closely resembles what Keerberg (2018) describes as a "periphery of the periphery": a remote coastal region on a remote island, characterised by long-term demographic decline, limited higher-education provision, and concerns about brain drain. The Westfjords region combines characteristics of remoteness, small-scale societies, and a high degree of economic and demographic vulnerability (Kokorsch & Benediktsson, 2018a). Peripheral regions such as the Westfjords often face structural disadvantages rooted in long-term dependence on a monotonous industrial structure, a limited institutional landscape, and path-dependent development trajectories in which past decisions constrain present and future options (Benneworth et al., 2024; Carlsen et al., 2013; Kokorsch et al., 2018b; Kyllingstad, 2021). In such contexts, economic restructuring, the decline or closure of key employers, and demographic

shifts, including youth out-migration and gender imbalances, can lead to lock-ins or even path exhaustion, where the dominant development path no longer provides adaptive capacity for new challenges (Carlsen et al., 2013; Kurikka et al., 2020).

Coastal peripheries are particularly exposed to these dynamics. They are often specialised in fisheries and related marine industries, which are vulnerable to policy changes, such as quotas and other forms of ocean privatisation (Chambers et al., 2017; Kokorsch & Benediktsson, 2018b), technological change (Skaptadóttir, 2000), global market shifts, and climate change (Wilke & Kristjánadóttir, 2023). When these sectors restructure or decline, the consequences for small communities can be drastic in terms of employment, population loss, and local revenue (Kohoutek et al., 2017; Kurikka et al., 2020). Such transformation is not only economic. It is also institutional and cultural, reflecting governance routines, power relations, and expectations about the local place identity and what futures are imaginable (Benneworth et al., 2024; Kokorsch et al., 2018b; Kyllingstad, 2021). Such has been the experience in the Westfjords, where population numbers dropped from around 10,479 in 1980 to 6,746 in 2016 (lowest population) before rebounding slightly to 7,176 in 2025 (Statistics Iceland, 2025).

3.1.2. Neo-Endogenous Development and Universities in Peripheral Regions

Neo-endogenous development emphasises locally grounded strategies that are driven by regional actors but draw selectively on external knowledge, networks, and resources (Benneworth et al., 2024). This approach stands in contrast to both purely exogenous growth models and simplistic self-help narratives that ignore structural constraints (Kokorsch, 2022). For peripheral regions with thin institutional landscapes and limited innovation capacity, universities can become crucial agents and hubs, connecting local stakeholders to wider circles of expertise, funding, and policy while simultaneously nurturing local capabilities and leadership (Atterton & Thompson, 2010; Berlina, 2025; Hedin, 2009). Nordic and European case studies demonstrate that regional universities and colleges can contribute to upgrading local skills and economic structures, but that this is highly dependent on their embeddedness and the presence of complementary actors. In Tromsø, for example, a research base in marine and Arctic sciences did not automatically translate into a vibrant regional industry because of a lack of engineering capabilities, weak company–university linkages, and thin local markets (Carlsen et al., 2013). In Telemark, by contrast, the expansion of a university college was seen as an opportunity to challenge the region’s low-skill equilibrium, provided that teaching and research could be aligned with new industrial trajectories and not only reinforce existing patterns (Kyllingstad, 2021). Similar strains are visible in the Ústí region in Czechia, where universities play an important role in personal, relational knowledge exchange but face weak incentives for lifelong learning and limited scope to reshape industrial structures without supportive funding and policy frameworks (Kohoutek et al., 2017). However, such development can also lead to a “cathedrals in the desert” problem, where universities produce academic knowledge that is poorly aligned with regional needs, or where politically motivated investments create PHEIs with weak local linkages (Benneworth et al., 2024).

To counteract the development of a “cathedral in the desert,” UW was conceived as a locally embedded institution explicitly tasked with community development, in line with neo-endogenous development ideas that emphasise locally grounded initiatives which selectively draw on external knowledge and networks. The idea of founding a university centre was very much a bottom-up initiative, initiated by local politicians and other community leaders and companies. This was partially due to the experience of shifting national

goals over time related to education, universities, and research centres. Initially, UW served primarily as a distance-learning centre for residents of the community and the wider Westfjords, filling a regional gap in university-level provision. Over time, however, it became evident that servicing only existing residents would not be sufficient to significantly alter demographic trajectories. The strategy therefore shifted towards a dual role: enabling local people to study without leaving, while also attracting new residents, i.e., students, staff, and visiting academics, to a region that had long lacked a university presence. This was done by the establishment of a master's program in 2008, developed and operated through UW, but accredited through and in close collaboration with the University of Akureyri. As of 2025, UW has around nine core positions, including 1.25 full-time research positions (Figure 2). The steady growth in staff is expected to continue, with the strategic plan aiming for five full-time research positions by 2030. In addition, UW has outsourced or co-organised shared positions throughout the years, such as bookkeeping, cleaning, technical services, and exam proctoring. The visiting instructors for the master's programs and the permanent partner programs (such as study abroad programs hosted at UW) make up another five and two positions, respectively. In parallel, UW's role needed to be differentiated from that of the local adult continuing education provider, which was not equipped at the time to handle activities such as proctored university examinations or advanced academic programmes. This division of labour between adult learning and university-level education became part of the regional education landscape.

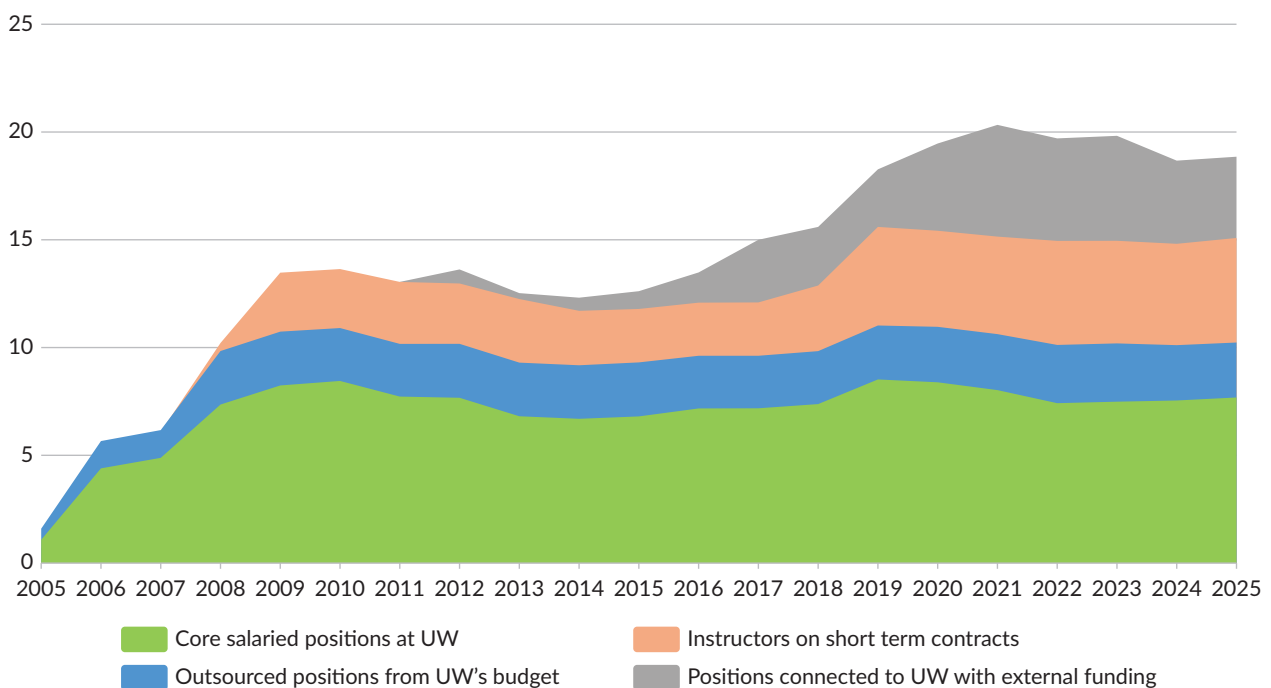


Figure 2. UW staff positions 2005–2025 in full-time equivalents.

This neo-endogenous orientation needs to be understood against the backdrop of national industrial policy debates. The founding context was also shaped by national debates on industrial development. While large industrial projects were being developed in other parts of the country (e.g., an aluminium smelter in the East of Iceland), municipalities in the Westfjords explicitly decided against encouraging heavy industry (Fjórðungsþing Vestfjarða, 2006). UW thus became part of an alternative development trajectory: Instead of relying on a single large employer, regional stakeholders invested in a knowledge-intensive, educational anchor that would bring skills, diversity, and new forms of innovation to a then vulnerable coastal

economy/community. Universities do not bring the same sheer numbers of jobs as heavy industry, but they can contribute a different quality of development: knowledge, skills, diversity, cultural life, and new forms of innovation. UW was established as a non-profit entity, supported by a core annual contribution from the Ministry of Education and Culture (now called the Ministry of Culture, Innovation, and Higher Education), complemented by self-generated income through teaching and projects. Notably, although the funding stream is “educational,” the founding documents clearly frame community development as a central goal. This duality—being a HEI funded by the education sector while simultaneously serving as a community-development instrument—is a recurring theme throughout UW’s history. The close relationship with the University of Akureyri also shows how larger universities can partner with PHEIs that have a separate funding source for mutual benefit.

3.2. Logistics of a Rural PHEI

Given the small population of Ísafjörður (around 2,700 inhabitants, and less than 5,000 inhabitants within a driving distance of 200 km), it is not realistic to maintain a large permanent academic staff. Instead, UW has developed a block-teaching model in which the master’s courses are offered as intensive modules, typically lasting 2–3 weeks. The majority of instructors (75%) are invited from universities and organisations in Iceland and abroad, complemented by practitioners, such as managers, consultants, and public officials, who provide hands-on perspectives. The remaining 25% are instructors from within the Westfjords or UW staff. This model offers several advantages, such as the exposure of students to a highly international and diverse faculty and the flexibility to quickly incorporate emerging global trends in teaching topics. Students generally report that this format works well at the master’s level: focusing intensively on one topic allows them to engage in deep, critical learning. Some traditional academic tasks (e.g., extensive term papers) are almost impossible within such short blocks, but this is compensated for by the master’s thesis and the overall programme design. Furthermore, the decision was made from the outset to teach courses in English, with students bringing experiences from different countries and opening up for larger student numbers.

In addition to the intensive block course model, a strategic choice has been to prioritise in-person teaching, even when many universities elsewhere move towards online or hybrid models (Berlina et al., 2025; Laterza et al., 2023). Apart from the exceptional and comparatively short period during the Covid-19 pandemic, UW has consistently insisted on students physically attending courses in Ísafjörður. This reflects the conviction that certain forms of learning, especially at the master’s level, depend on experiencing a coastal community first-hand. In almost every course, there are guest lectures or field components involving the local community or the wider Westfjords region. Students learn about challenges and opportunities directly from people on site, not only from books and lectures, and they participate in field visits, excursions, and company visits, including to other coastal communities, fisheries, aquaculture sites, municipal offices, and other local institutions (Figure 3).

Furthermore, being exposed to local weather, darkness, and logistical challenges (including flight cancellations, storms, and long travel times) helps the students develop practical problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills that are only achieved through experiential learning. Similarly, group work is also central to many courses. Two cohorts of around 20 first-year students mean that roughly 40 master’s students live and study together through the winter, in addition to the second-year students and visiting students. This shared experience contributes to personal development and to the formation of a strong peer network, which is part of the professional identity of future coastal and regional practitioners.



Figure 3. Students visiting local aquaculture sea pens during a field trip.

The choice of coastal and marine management as the first master's programme was deliberate and closely aligned with the identity and needs of the region. The commercial fishing industry has long been a backbone of the Westfjords' economy and history, making it logical that the academic offer would connect with this maritime identity. However, the programme was not framed narrowly as fisheries management. Instead, it was conceived as an interdisciplinary coastal and marine management programme with a much broader purpose: to address environmental, social, economic, and governance dimensions of coastal areas. This aligns with international debates on integrated coastal zone management and sustainable development while simultaneously engaging with the lived realities and ongoing transformations of the nearby communities of the Westfjords. The courses also are forward-looking, exploring how coastal communities and marine industries might change under climate, policy, and market pressures rather than only documenting past trajectories. This design reflects the idea that universities in peripheral regions should not simply replicate urban universities but instead build on local strengths while engaging with global debates.

Finally, the construction of student housing in Ísafjörður is an important material expression of UW's development and impact. In the beginning, the decision was made to forego student housing, and rather connect the students to the local rental market, thereby providing economic input into the community rather than internal to UW. Since the socio-economic and demographic decline that started in the early 1990s, Ísafjörður saw almost no new residential construction. But in the mid 2010s, the housing market tightened due to modest population growth, second home ownership, and growth in tourism, and it became clear that a dedicated student housing would benefit the local community. The student housing project, initiated in 2022 to secure accommodation for incoming students, addresses this practical constraint while signalling that higher education is a long-term fixture in the town's built and social landscape. This was challenging in a context where external developers were reluctant to invest; however, the development was supported by the

municipality in terms of the building plot and a loan from the national Housing and Construction Authority. The student housing now functions both as essential infrastructure and as a symbol of local development.

3.3. Community Impacts

3.3.1. Demography and the “Missing Age Group”

Consistent with research on PHEIs as demographic anchors, UW has contributed to altering the age structure and demographic dynamics of Ísafjörður. Each year, UW brings approximately 30–40 full-time students and 100 international exchange students, in a missing age cohort that had largely left the town and region for education and work opportunities elsewhere. Since UW was founded in 2005, Ísafjörður’s population initially continued to decline, reaching a low of 2,492 inhabitants in 2015, before gradually increasing to 2,723 as of 2025 (Statistics Iceland, 2025). This reflects also local developments in R&D as well as rapid growth in the fish farming industry. Over this period, the 20–29 age group has grown from 13% to 15% of the population, and the number of women in this age group has risen from 157 to 205, with the gender ratio in this cohort shifting from 56% to 49% male (Statistics Iceland, 2025, authors’ own calculation). Thus, Ísafjörður is running counter to the still male-skewed pattern in the overall Westfjords. While Iceland overall, and the capital region, have experienced strong overall growth and broadly balanced gender ratios, Ísafjörður now slightly exceeds the national average share of 20–29-year-olds, suggesting a modest but notable strengthening of young adult presence in town. Even when the absolute numbers are relatively small, in a town with around 2,700 inhabitants and a region with roughly 7,000 residents, each student and each graduate can have disproportionate local impact.

While many students leave after graduation, a growing number stay in the region, start businesses, or remain somehow connected (i.e., as PhD students who eventually teach or supervise thesis research). Importantly, students are not drawn away from other Westfjords communities or struggling rural areas of Iceland; most arrive from outside the region and often from outside Iceland (Figure 4). UW thus adds to the regional population base rather than merely redistributing it, an important consideration in regional development.

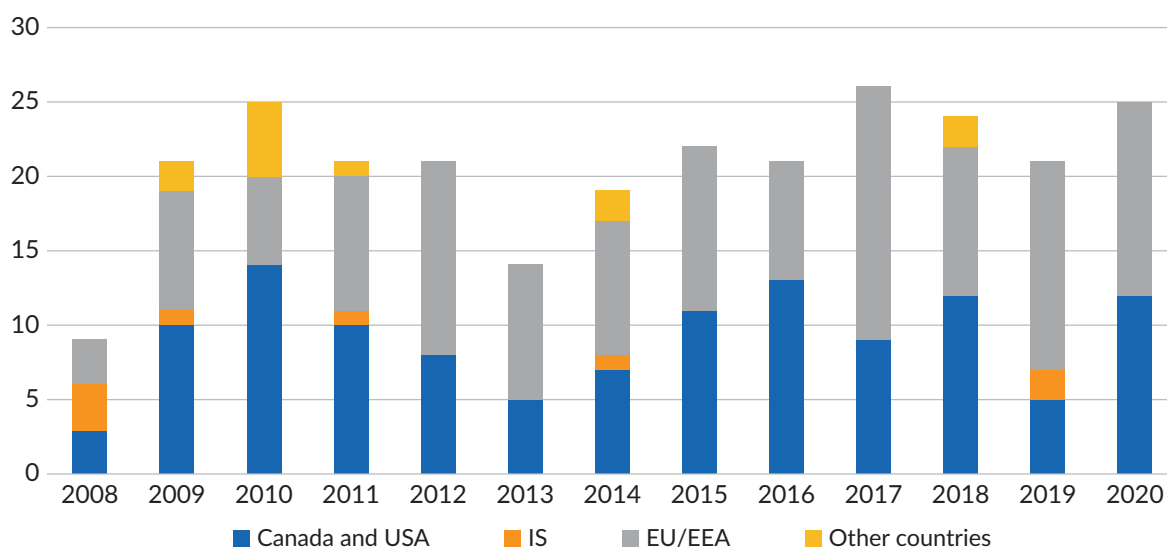


Figure 4. Number of students according to country of origin, 2008–2020. Note: IS = Iceland.

3.3.2. Cultural Life and Intangible Contributions

UW also functions as a hub for learning communities and communities of practice that extend beyond formal degree programmes. Local narratives emphasise that students and staff contribute significantly to cultural and social life: running cafés, joining cultural groups, organising events, and participating in local associations and sports clubs. These activities strengthen several forms of community capital, i.e., human, cultural, social, and political (Table 2), contributing to a sense of vibrancy and diversity in Ísafjörður. Even residents who are not directly involved with UW often express pride in hosting an international university centre that carries the name of the Westfjords. This symbolic presence shapes local identity and external perceptions of the region.

Table 2. Community capital examples of UW students while enrolled in master's studies.

Community capital form	UW example
human	Sports teachers, business developers, tour guides, social service workers
cultural	International bike race and cultural events like Halloween, joining choirs and orchestras, running and working at the café, open mic nights and pub quizzes
social	Knitting, learning Icelandic, international networks
political	Management and development recommendations through thesis research
financial	For every kronur of government support, there are 2 kronur left behind in the local society (Þórisson, 2010)
built	Largest renter in shared office space, student housing

As evidenced by the UW experience, recent work suggests that the impacts of such institutions are often more social and civic than captured by common economic indicators. Benneworth et al. (2024) argue that small rural campuses operate primarily as social rural campuses, acting as hubs for local learning communities and communities of practice rather than simply generating agglomeration effects via spin-offs or high-tech clusters. These campuses act as sites where global knowledge is translated into local solutions, where students, staff, and residents co-produce new practices, and where social infrastructure, identity, and long-term assets are built (Benneworth et al., 2024).

In coastal and marine contexts, such anchoring roles gain added importance. They can strengthen local identity and attachment to place in areas experiencing depopulation and economic instability. Furthermore, there is a growing trend of graduates staying in the area to pursue entrepreneurial or social innovation activities in the Westfjords. Local job creation includes one UW graduate as a founder of a seaweed farming venture, one as a founder of a cycling-related tourism/sports initiative, and others deeply involved in other small business start-ups, while still others were hired as experts in local companies and research institutions.

3.3.3. Research Projects and Local Case Studies

Outside of the teaching activities, master's students' thesis research and research by UW staff comprise an important part of UW's impact on the local communities. UW's knowledge production is shaped by its embeddedness in a thin institutional landscape where it often acts as the main local knowledge actor. Roughly half of the master's theses focus on Iceland and many specifically on the Westfjords. These projects frequently originate from questions raised by local municipalities, companies, NGOs, or residents. These

stakeholders are then involved in data collection, reviewing results, and public communication, illustrating the co-production of regionally relevant knowledge. Therefore UW serves as a low-threshold interface between academia and community, with about half of the theses produced by each graduating cohort being co-produced in some way. Thesis topics often address practical issues such as fisheries and coastal management, tourism development, climate change adaptation, transport accessibility, and community resilience (Figure 5). Comparative theses, in which international students examine both an Icelandic and a home-country case, contribute additional value by situating Westfjords experiences within broader coastal and marine debates. For local stakeholders, these comparisons can be particularly useful in terms of policy recommendations.



Figure 5. Major research topics in students' master's theses and research projects at UW.

Beyond student theses, UW has expanded its externally funded research activities since 2016, securing grants from local and regional bodies, national R&D funds, and Nordic and international programmes. These projects frequently involve students as research assistants or as thesis writers embedded within project frameworks, giving them early exposure to international research networks and applied research practice. Many of these projects focus on climate change adaptation and sustainable development in coastal and remote communities, thereby reinforcing UW's role as a civic university institution and collaborative platform.

3.4. Challenges

Despite its regional embeddedness, UW faces several tensions that reflect wider debates about the limits of university-led development in peripheral regions. One recurring issue is the limited number of Icelandic students in the master's programmes; some cohorts include no Icelanders at all. While all programmes are taught in English, this alone does not fully explain the pattern; many Icelanders who are comfortable with English might prefer to study abroad rather than in a small domestic town. This leads to perceptions elsewhere in Iceland that UW is "for foreigners," raising the question about *for whom* UW primarily operates. Politicians often ask how many Icelandic students are enrolled. Theoretically, this is interesting because universities are often conceptualised as international spaces by design. The case therefore raises questions about what counts as "serving the national interest": Is educating non-Icelandic students about Icelandic coastal challenges, who

later work abroad, a public good? Or should the benchmark be the number of Icelandic students enrolled? In theoretical terms, this tension reflects different understandings of the public good provided by a PHEI: Is the benchmark national human-capital formation, local community development, or contributions to global knowledge on coastal and marine issues?

Another challenge is how to better integrate international students and graduates into the Icelandic labour market and society. Many students engage in local life and learn Icelandic, but structural barriers, e.g., language requirements, recognition of foreign qualifications, and labour-market regulations, limit long-term retention. This challenge is not unique to the Westfjords; it reflects a broader Icelandic and Nordic debate about how to retain international graduates and migrants, at a time when 17% of Iceland's population has a migrant background. UW's students thus embody wider opportunities and tensions in the country's migration and integration policies.

As mentioned previously, operating a PHEI in a remote coastal town entails substantial logistical transportation and infrastructure constraints. Flights can be cancelled due to weather, leading to delays in the arrival of instructors and sometimes forcing short-notice course adjustments. Roads and power supply can be affected by storms or avalanches, and the winter darkness affects daily life and study routines. These conditions demand continuous flexibility from staff and students, but they also reinforce UW's identity as an institution that both experiences and studies peripherality. These frictions reflect broader concerns about the sustainability of small, specialised institutions: Limited size, constrained resources, and national performance metrics geared towards research excellence may undermine long-term engagement capacity unless supportive multi-scalar frameworks are in place (Berlina et al., 2025; Kyllingstad, 2021; Pinheiro, 2020). Paradoxically, these challenges are also part of the learning experience: Students gain a grounded understanding of what it means to live and work in Arctic and sub-Arctic coastal communities.

From the perspective of Ísafjörður, UW is likely a clear success story in terms of community development and demographic stabilisation. However, when looking at the larger Westfjords region, the picture is more nuanced. Municipalities located further away from Ísafjörður still face many of the same challenges they experienced in the 1990s and 2000s, including ongoing out-migration of young people. UW does not "take away" residents from these municipalities; rather, it draws in new people to the region. Yet the direct spatial impact is strongly concentrated in and around Ísafjörður. This raises questions about the distinction between community development and regional development, and about how development is measured: by population numbers, by economic indicators, or by broader concepts such as well-being and cultural vitality. At the same time, there is a growing awareness of potential research fatigue in small communities as more research projects target the same villages. These projects could cause research fatigue, but results from projects that align with local priorities could also lead to increased momentum for development. Therefore UW recognises the sometimes conflicting responsibility to engage in local projects while also ensuring that projects do not overburden local communities.

Finally, there is an inherent tension in UW's dual role as both a university-level institution and a community-development tool. University institutions are, by design, selective: They admit applicants who meet certain criteria and then sort among them based on academic performance, and funding regimes emphasise research rankings over engagement (Berlina et al., 2025; Keerberg, 2018). Provision of lifelong learning and informal knowledge exchange, which are often most important for rural SMEs and civic actors,

can be discouraged by funding formulas that prioritise degree programmes (Kohoutek et al., 2017). If the sole aim were to maximise population numbers in the region, other policy instruments, such as large industrial employers or direct relocation incentives, would arguably be more efficient. Yet UW's funding derives from the education sector, while its founding documents emphasise regional development goals, placing it at the intersection of different policy logics. Balancing these two missions, academic excellence and inclusive regional development, requires constant negotiation and reflection. On the one hand, such institutions are often deeply embedded in local contexts and responsive to regional needs; on the other hand, their limited size, narrower disciplinary base, and constrained resources can make it difficult to sustain broad engagement portfolios, secure external research funding, or influence national policy debates (Keerberg, 2018; Kyllingstad, 2021). Their success depends not only on internal leadership and institutional culture, but also on supportive multi-scalar policy frameworks and stable funding that values engagement alongside teaching and research (Benneworth et al., 2024; Berlina, 2025; Berlina et al., 2025).

4. Conclusion: A Peripheral but Connected Coastal University Centre

As of 2025, 297 students have graduated from the master's programmes, accredited through the University of Akureyri and hosted at UW, with 150 instructors over the years, and countless guest students and researchers. From smaller cohorts in the first few years, to two master's programs and larger cohorts since 2020, UW has evolved over 20 years from a small distance-learning hub into an internationally recognised centre for teaching and research on coastal management and regional development. Its trajectory illustrates how a HEI in a doubly peripheral region can attract new residents in a missing age group, contribute to cultural vitality and community well-being, support local, regional, and international research on pressing issues such as climate change adaptation in coastal communities, enable student entrepreneurship and innovation, and act as a bridge between global research trends and very local needs. With just over half of the total institutional income coming from the government, UW is an example of how a PHEI can use government funds to meet the simultaneous needs of providing quality education while supporting community development.

At the same time, the case highlights persistent challenges, including the limited number of Icelandic students, the integration of international graduates, concentrated local (rather than regional) benefits, potential research fatigue of the local residents, and the tension between being a selective academic institution and serving as a community-development tool. Universities can promote revolutionary repertoires and new future pathways, but they can also inadvertently reinforce unsustainable trajectories if engagement is not reflexive, inclusive, and justice-oriented (Benneworth et al., 2024; Hedin, 2009). Widening participation in rural regions requires programmes that fit around family and employment responsibilities, address cultural barriers to higher education, and provide strong local support structures (Hedin, 2009). By attracting and retaining students, and offering pathways for local residents to upskill, a coastal PHEI can contribute directly to demographic stabilisation, gender balance, and community resilience. In the context of UW, these insights suggest that PHEIs are not only tools for individual career mobility, but also key components of a regional demographic and skills strategy. UW's role as a provider of international programmes further positions it as an opportunity for in-migration and cultural diversification in a small-scale coastal society.

The Westfjords can be described as a remote region of a remote island, a kind of double periphery. Previously, the region had not had the best reputation within Iceland and was largely unknown internationally. UW's teaching model, with its revolving international faculty and student body, has helped insert Ísafjörður and the Westfjords into global academic and professional networks. Over time, more and more external partners actively seek collaboration with the Centre in teaching and research. In this sense, the institution is both deeply peripheral and strongly globally connected. Furthermore, as global attention to climate impacts on coastal communities increases, UW's ability to respond flexibly with new courses and research has become a core strength that will aid in community resilience.

Overall, UW offers a rich practical case study of how university institutions can function as collaborative platforms for promoting sustainable development in marine and coastal regions, while navigating the complexities and contradictions inherent in such a role. In the paradox of the "universality" of universities, higher education administrations must ask the question of the purpose of HEIs, and particularly of PHEIs, with relation to regional development. In the trend of consolidation of university services in both Iceland and abroad, UW serves as a reminder of the importance of place-based learning, both for the responsibility that universities have to the general public, and in terms of the experiences of students.

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Conflict of Interests

All three authors are employees of the institution in the case study. As outlined in the methods, these affiliations do not affect the content of the article.

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