

Icelandic or English at Icelandic Universities?

Ari Páll Kristinsson and Haraldur Bernharðsson

Summary

Aim

The aim of this report is to enable university administrators to form and implement a policy on how Icelandic and English can be used side by side in administration, research, instruction and for communication in general at Icelandic universities. This policy must ensure the future of Icelandic as a language of instruction and research while English is used for its best advantage in an international setting.

Universities in Iceland

There are seven universities in Iceland (enrolment in the fall of 2011 in parentheses): The University of Iceland (13,919), Reykjavik University (2,468), University of Akureyri (1,493), Bifröst University (431), Iceland Academy of the Arts (414), The Agricultural University of Iceland (238), Hólar University College (172). The University of Iceland has the broadest offerings of academic programs and has Ph.D. programs in the social sciences, medical sciences, humanities, education, engineering and the natural sciences.

Icelandic legislation and language policy

Recent law (2011) on the status of the Icelandic language and the Icelandic sign language stipulates that Icelandic is the language of schools at all levels of education. Six out of seven universities have a documented language policy. All of them feature three main points: 1) Icelandic is the principal language of the universities, 2) instruction in English should mostly be confined to the graduate level, 3) the importance of Icelandic terminology is emphasized as well as exquisite usage of the Icelandic language.

Publications

Scholarly publications: In 2011, approximately 70% of scholarly publications by faculty members at the University of Iceland were in English and around 92% at Reykjavik University (Fig. 1). The proportion of academic publications in English has increased in recent years (Figs. 2 and 3). The language of writing differs considerably from one field to another. At the University of Iceland (2011), academic publications in Icelandic were 3.3% in engineering and the natural sciences, 17.9% in the medical sciences, 47.5% in the social sciences, 50% in education, and 55% in the humanities.

Doctoral dissertations: In the period 2000–2011, 84.2% of all doctoral dissertations at the University of Iceland were in English, while 15.8% were in Icelandic. In the period 2007–2011, dissertations in the medical sciences, engineering and the natural sciences were exclusively in English.

Language of instruction

The proportion of classes taught in English at the seven universities in Iceland ranges from 0% (The Agricultural University of Iceland) to 23% (Reykjavik University) (Fig. 13). Instruction in

English is significantly higher at the graduate level than at the undergraduate level. E.g., at the University of Akureyri, 8.6% of undergraduate courses are taught in English, while the percentage is 36% at the graduate level. Approximately 90% of the reading materials used in university courses in Iceland are in English (Ingvarsdóttir & Arnbjörnsdóttir 2010).

Nationality of teachers and students

The enrolment of international students in universities in Iceland increased by 740% in the period 1997–2010, but the number of Icelandic students studying abroad still exceeds the number of international students studying in Iceland. The enrolment of international students at the University of Iceland is around 6.2%. Around 6.1% of the faculty at Icelandic universities are non-Icelandic citizens.