ICELAND

1 MAIN APPROACHES TO EXTERNAL EDUCATION COOPERATION AND THEIR OBJECTIVES

Internationalisation of Higher Education: key figures

Throughout the last century internationalisation has been a characteristic of the Icelandic higher education system. The small size of the higher education system and limited supply of post-secondary education\(^1\) has meant that up to 35\% of Icelandic students seek education abroad. The majority of the students have sought higher education in the Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon countries that has provided them with both important linguistic and cultural knowledge. These extensive international ties between the Icelandic population and the higher education system have created a clear advantage with enhanced flow of ideas and knowledge, greater opportunity to build up research networks, and permits students to obtain needed linguistic, cultural, and professional expertise.\(^2\)

The extent of students seeking education abroad is much higher compared to other countries, even though the figures show a significant decrease in recent decades.\(^3\) According to OECD figures, the proportion of Icelandic students in tertiary education studying abroad is 25.4\%.\(^4\) The highest proportion of Icelandic students studying abroad in 2004 went to the Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon countries, with the highest percentage going to Denmark or 46.1\%, 14.4 went to the U.S. and only 1\% to Canada.\(^5\)

Studying in the Scandinavian and the EU countries has become more attractive for Icelandic students. Conversely, there has been a drop in students studying in North America. The changes in patterns of student mobility may be a result of the Bologna process with mounting convergence in the structure of higher education in Europe. Secondly, the language spoken is critical for selecting a foreign country in which to study. Indeed, an increasing number of institutions in non-English EU countries now offer courses and programmes in English to attract foreign students, especially so in Nordic countries. Traditionally Iceland has had a strong relationship with the USA and the UK, while the Nordic dimension also remains important. Recently, the European dimension has become more important for Iceland, resulting in the need for the universities to develop and maintain appropriate cooperation with continental European countries, without weakening the ties with traditional partners.

In terms of incoming students, the inflow of foreign students in any substantial numbers is recent phenomenon and coincides with the period of reconstruction post 1998. In the four

\(^1\) ISCED 5 and 6


\(^3\) Over the last decade the Icelandic higher education system has been developing towards a more comprehensive system, even though the highest academic degree programmes are still not offered in all disciplines and fields. As a consequence of this development the relative number of Icelandic students studying abroad has dropped significantly in recent years.


\(^5\) Source: Statistics Iceland. Note: Includes only those students outside Iceland who apply for assistance to the Student Loan Fund. In addition a number of students is attending HIE's in other countries without the assistance of the Student Loan Fund.
years to 2002, foreign student numbers rose by 70%. By 2002, they represented some 4.1% of all enrolments.

The greatest number of foreign students in Iceland is enrolled at the University of Iceland, which offers the greatest variety of subjects. The total number of foreign students at universities in Iceland is currently around 5% of all students enrolled. The greatest number of foreign students is coming from European countries, but quite a number is coming from overseas and the students are altogether of over sixty nationalities. Student exchange and other forms of co-operation with other countries at the compulsory and upper-secondary school levels in Iceland is mainly tied to Scandinavia, but exchanges with other European countries, e.g. the France and the UK, are also emerging.

At compulsory and upper secondary levels, between 700 and 800 pupils from the age of thirteen to seventeen come to Iceland every year from the other Nordic countries, and this number of pupils is growing.

**Key policies and strategies in place**

Part of the government policy in this regard has been to encourage students to go abroad to seek higher education. The government’s Icelandic Student Loan Fund, the most prevalent form of financial assistance for students, does not discriminate between students who wish to go abroad or study at home.

The Government of Iceland has recently been strengthening bonds and increasing contact with people of Icelandic descent in North America (e.g. Leifur Eiríksson Foundation Scholarships), demonstrating the government’s awareness of the necessity of creating and maintaining a balance in international activities.

The current legislation provides for large independence of the higher education institutions (HEIs) to generate their own policy in this matter. The Ministry has left the development of agreements with foreign institutions to HEIs, which explains why there are relatively few bilateral education agreements between Iceland and other governments. There are numbers of fellowships awarded to students of foreign countries for studies in Iceland. These schemes are operated on a reciprocal basis.

In terms of incoming students, the inflow of foreign students in any substantial numbers is a recent phenomenon and coincides with the period of reconstruction post 1998. By 2002, they represented some 4.1% of all enrolments. Attracting foreign students is a matter for the individual university, which has the latitude to determine the range of services it will commit to this head. Amongst government initiatives taken to stimulate foreign student presence are the setting up of an Office of International Education to deal with the logistics of student exchange, the organization of post-graduate programmes to encourage cross frontier mobility and the teaching of programmes in English.

In Iceland, free access to higher education is seen as a fundamental right, rather than as a service to be traded on the world market. This has probably impeded the Icelandic government from formulating policy aimed at attracting foreign students for economic reasons. Unlike institutions in other countries, Icelandic higher education cannot profit economically from attracting foreign students other than through the national public funding model. Thus the “import” dimension and international marketing are lacking from the internationalisation of higher education in Icelandic.

---


7 Ibid.

**Nordic co-operation in the field of education**

Iceland participates in a number of multilateral programmes. Nordic co-operation in the field of education has a long tradition. The Nordic Committee for Cultural Affairs was established in 1947 and the Nordic Council in 1952.

Nordic co-operation Nordic co-operation is extensive in a number of fields, including education. Primarily, the co-operation is based on projects within university, upper secondary, compulsory and adult education. Entities from all the Nordic countries participate. In 2004, the Nordic Ministers of education signed a declaration on the recognition of certificates of higher education, the Reykjavik Declaration.

The Nordplus system of grants was established by the Nordic Council of Ministers in 1988. The aim of the Nordplus scheme is to strengthen the Nordic region as one market for education.

**Bilateral Development Assistance**

Iceland International Development Agency (ICEIDA) focuses its efforts on only a few areas where Icelandic expertise is thought to be most useful and where Icelanders are well advanced. Thus, many projects are related to training and capacity building in fisheries, fisheries research and institutional development. In all countries where ICEIDA is involved in co-operation, it supports small projects in the health, education and social sector and more emphasis is now being placed on such activities. The scope of activities of ICEIDA has grown substantially in recent years.

The scope of activities of ICEIDA in the field of education and training cover mostly Africa (Uganda, Mozambique, Malawi and Namibia) and Nicaragua. Coinciding with the increased level of Icelandic development cooperation, the Icelandic authorities decided in 2004 to add Nicaragua to the number of partner countries. In 2007, as in previous years, Malawi was ICEIDA’s biggest receiver of development aid with around 27% of the budget. The cooperation between ICEIDA and the Malawi Government dates back to 1989 and has been focused on the health, fisheries, and education sectors.

2 **MAIN ACTORS INVOLVED AND THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES**

**Key actors**

The administration of international co-operation in the field of education is the responsibility of the *Ministry of Education, Science and Culture*. The Ministry is directly responsible or involved in half of the instruments identified in Iceland. The general policy of the Ministry has been to entrust the institutions for entering into agreements with counterparts abroad. This explains that there are almost no bilateral agreements in force between Iceland and other countries in this field. The Ministry of Education oversees the extensive cooperation in culture, education and science takes place within the framework of the Nordic Council of Ministers on Iceland’s behalf. Each year, the Ministry offers numerous grants to individuals and groups to support cultural promotion abroad. There are also several funds that give grants to support the promotion of Icelandic culture internationally.

Cultural affairs have also received special attention in the work of the *Foreign Service*. Sometimes the Foreign Service has taken the initiative; on other occasions, it has made its contribution in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. The Government of Iceland has recently been strengthening bonds and increasing contact with people of Icelandic descent in North America, for instance through the Snorri Programme or the Leifur Eiríksson Foundation Scholarships. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is responsible for the policy's implementation.

---

Finally, the key actor in the field of capacity building and development is the Icelandic International Development Agency (ICEIDA), a government institution under the auspices of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. ICEIDA itself was founded in 1981 but its forerunner, Icelandic Aid to the Developing Countries, operated for some 10 years. According to the legislation governing ICEIDA, the Agency is to promote co-operation between Iceland and developing nations. The main goal of such co-operation is to support these nations in improving their economy, strengthening their social development and political independence within the framework of the United Nations. Iceland is committed towards achieving the goal set by the United Nations of using 0.7% of GNP for development aid.

ICEIDA is a consultant body to the Icelandic Government in general and to the Minister for Foreign Affairs in particular on co-operation with the developing countries. One of ICEIDA’s purposes is to co-ordinate and supervise bilateral development projects and also other development projects that Iceland might be entrusted with by the United Nations or other international bodies. ICEIDA also advises other Icelandic entities engaged in co-operation between Iceland and the developing nations, including private companies interested in commercial activities in these countries. In its operations, ICEIDA aims towards helping people to active self-sufficiency by capacity building and improving knowledge and practical know-how, as appropriate in each case. Priority is given to improving the living conditions of the poorest, where women and children are usually the vast majority, by increased aid in the health and education sectors. Some programmes are jointly managed with the Ministry of Education but also other Ministries such as Fisheries and Marine Resources, Gender Equality and Child Welfare.

Management and coordination arrangements

In co-operation with the University of Iceland, the Ministry of Education operates the Office of International Education. The Office, serving all institutions at the tertiary level, handles student exchange both through agreements with individual institutions abroad and the student exchange programmes which form a part of the Nordic co-operation and the co-operation with the European Union, in which Iceland participates being a party to the Agreement on the European Economic Area. HEIs in Iceland have in recent years emphasised the importance of participating in exchange and co-operative programmes with the aim of facilitating the possibilities for staff and students alike to spend a period at a foreign university.

Another important government body is the Icelandic Government Study Loan Fund that supports Icelandic students going abroad for studies, in particular for studies towards a second and a third degree. The fund grants student loans that are estimated sufficient to cover living expenses. Tuition fees are eligible for regular loans for graduate studies, while loans to cover tuition fees at undergraduate level are available at going market interest rate. Repayment of regular loans begins two years after the completion of studies.

Finally, a number of Foundations manage programmes that are funded by the Icelandic government. The Leifur Eiriksson Foundation, governed by a board of trustees appointed by the Central Bank of Iceland, the Icelandic Government, and the University of Virginia, was founded for the purpose of providing recognition and financial assistance to further scholarly study and research through student exchanges between Iceland and the United States. The Snorri Foundation manages the Snorri programme, a cooperative assignment between the Nordic Association and INL-Iceland (Icelandic National League). The program is sponsored by the Government of Iceland, under the Ministry of Education.