



Status and Development of Equality at the University of Iceland

2016-2021

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SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Description of the research

Completed for	University of Iceland Equal Rights Committee
Purpose of the research	To examine the status and development of equality at the University of Iceland for the period 2016-2021

Accountable parties

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MAIN PROPOSALS

The main actions proposed in this report are based on the findings of the research.

- 1. Education and Training.** Ensure that staff and managers at the University of Iceland receive thorough, compulsory education and training:
 - on equality in a broad sense (development and status of all discrimination factors)
 - on the intersectionality of discrimination factors
 - on accessibility in a broad sense
 - on integration of the equality dimension
 - there was a call for a dedicated Division of Education and Training in central administration.

 - 2. Services.** Ensure that services are provided for students and staff at the University who require specific adjustments, with regards to all discrimination factors:
 - by increasing the number of staff working in diversity and inclusion
 - by hiring a dedicated ombudsman/contact for each minority group, e.g. disabled people, people of foreign origin, LGBTQ people, etc.

 - 3. Accessibility.** Ensure accessibility and available facilities for students and staff at the University, especially those belonging to minority groups, with regard to all discrimination factors. Accessibility to the following requires improvement:
 - physical human environment
 - digital environment
 - language and culture

In particular, all information and data related to learning and working at the University of Iceland should be made accessible to all users, e.g. in consideration of language proficiency, visual impairments etc. at all schools, faculties and units.

 - 4. Gender balance.** Reviews and action guided by experts are required in order to balance gender ratios within UI departments, faculties and schools. This work will continue to take into account exemplary practice from other countries, but it is also
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important to map each individual unit and take action in accordance with internal and external challenges.

5. **Rules of procedure on bullying and other violence.** It is vital to map and define bullying and other violence and align with procedures for tackling sexual and gender-based harassment and violence.
6. **Image and representation of equality at the University of Iceland.** The diversity of staff and students at the University should be made more visible in text and images, with regard to all discrimination factors, e.g. gender, age, origin, disability, etc. The image and representation of the University should also reflect its status and policy.
7. **Strategic planning.** Strategic planning should be coordinated, i.e. aligned across schools, faculties and units at the University of Iceland.
8. **Research into the status and development of equality.** Study design, survey format and the conclusions of the report on the status and development of equality should be designed in a way which enables all students and staff at the University to participate, with regard to all discrimination factors.
The research plan should be adapted to achieve the goal of mapping necessary reforms in a systematic way. This will make it possible to get a better idea of diversity and inclusion work within schools, faculties and other units and promote standardised procedures.

Increased dialogue and collaboration between all stakeholders at the University of Iceland is considered the key to implementing all action.



INTRODUCTION

Equality action at the University of Iceland has always been in line with priorities in wider society and the legal framework. As is the case for Icelandic society in general, for a long time the primary focus was on traditional gender equality and the first action of the UI Equal Rights Committee was to implement the provisions of the 1991 Act on Equal Status and Equal Rights of Women and Men (Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir, 2004). At the same time, the University's equality policy was intended to apply to other defined minority groups and in 2002 it was decided that the Equal Rights Committee would systematically work to advance equality in a broad sense for minority groups.

In order to implement this shift in focus, it was decided that the scope of this report would be expanded beyond the topics mapped by previous reports on the status and development of equality at the University of Iceland. The study design was therefore updated with the goal of learning about the status of equality in a broad sense (for further details, see the section on methodology). The study aimed to map as precisely as possible the status and development of equality for everyone at the University of Iceland.

The report is roughly divided into seven sections: methodology, theory and regulations, equality action, statistical data, survey results, primary focuses, and inclusion for all. The report ends with a brief summary. The report discusses different groups of people learning and working at the University, their status, challenges they face, their suggestions, and potential reforms. A lot of attention is devoted to accessibility in a broad sense, since this topic was raised as a priority by participants. Discussion of accessibility overlaps somewhat between the different sections of the report, since the same theme was repeatedly highlighted in different contexts. Theoretical chapters are supported by comments from participants.

This report, on the status and development of equality at the University 2016-2021, completed by the Social Science Research Institute at the request of the UI Equal Rights Committee, is the fifth report of its kind.

BRIEF SUMMARY

This report demonstrates that the ambitious action taken over the past few years to advance equality at the University of Iceland has resulted in a meaningful Equality Action Plan and raised awareness of diversity and inclusion among students and staff. The majority of survey respondents believed that University operations reflect a commitment to equality, which is one of



the three core values at UI. At the same time, it became clear that diversity and inclusion work is more effective in some schools, faculties and units than others. Participants called for a comprehensive strategy and implementation across all schools. Diversity and inclusion work varies depending on the issue or the discrimination factors behind the discrimination against certain groups. This study placed particular emphasis on accessibility in a broad sense, i.e. access to the physical human environment, the digital environment, and language and culture. Participants were enthusiastic about improving diversity and inclusion work at the University.

Minority groups and those who represent them vary in their ability to assert their interests. The level of social consensus also varies according to the social power dynamics surrounding individual issues (see, e.g., Verloo, 2006). People advocating for equality need to be conscious of treating all minority groups and their interests equally at all stages – from grass-roots campaigning to institutional action – and not least after a level of operational and institutional implementation has been achieved. If the expansion of the concept of equality is to be effective, it is essential that equal attention is devoted to different issues in discussions and action. At the same time, as Patricia Hill Collins (2000) pointed out, the individual struggles of all minority groups are just as important as the coalition between groups. Solidarity and cooperation between all stakeholders must form the foundation for the implementation of equality, guided by the principle of mainstreaming.

Multifaceted problems must therefore be tackled using carefully considered, multifaceted solutions. Participants and equality experts at the University are aware of this and believe that services at the University are overly dependent on staff providing unpaid support for students and others with specific issues or service needs. Participants called for "experts in every field", "ombudsmen" and "service providers" for the various different groups at the University who would "help people navigate the system", get to know the University community and learn to find their place in Icelandic society. Participants believed it was essential for each group to have its own advocate or "ombudsman" and also that everyone holding a position related to diversity and inclusion should be working together. So there should be specialised expertise in the issues affecting individual groups – e.g. non-binary people, people of foreign origin, disabled people, etc. – and in addition services should be based on dialogue and partnership between the ombudsmen.

The research elicited feedback regarding the urgent need for education on equality. Several



people mentioned that the University needed to provide more education on equality matters, that there was always room for improvement, and that it was important to maintain awareness and keep the discussion active. These comments reflect the fact that staff education on equality and accessibility is optional (see e.g. the section on the Student Counselling and Career Centre). As an example, one participant stressed that there was a need for "[education] for staff and strategic planning in all faculties, so that the faculty head and staff are genuinely accountable for demonstrating a commitment to equality in their behaviour and communication." When participants were asked on which issues education was most urgently needed (see Table 7), one answered:

All of them. Generally, education could reach more people with a rights-based approach. Because in essence all these issues are about human rights. Rights-based education is the strongest weapon we have against prejudice in all its forms. This education needs to be regular and systematic, because marginalised groups change but human rights shouldn't change.

Several participants also stressed the importance of centralised equality education. It was suggested that the best way to ensure a comprehensive approach and effective diversity and inclusion work would be to establish a special "Division of Education and Training" within central administration.

Participants mentioned in particular that when taking action to improve accessibility and inclusion for everyone at the University of Iceland, it was easy to look at research and effective solutions from other countries. One example mentioned was Syracuse University, which participants said "had been leading the way in guaranteeing accessibility for marginalised groups, including disabled people, LGBTQ people, people from ethnic minorities, etc." (for more details, see Ben-Moshe, Cory, Feldbaum and Sagendorf, 2005¹).

¹ Ben- Moshe, L., Cory, R.C., Feldbaum, M., og Sagendorf, K. (Eds.), (2005). *Building Pedagogical Curb Cuts: Incorporating Disability in the University Classroom ad Curriculum*. New York: Syracuse University <https://thechp.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/buildingpedagogicalcurbcuts.pdf>
