

**Ávarp Jóns Atla Benediktssonar, rektors Háskóla Íslands, á viðburði í tilefni af  
formlegu upphafi alþjóðlegs áratugar frumbyggjamála. Haldið í Hátíðasal  
Aðalbyggingar Háskóla Íslands föstudaginn 22. apríl 2022 kl. 9**

Distinguished guests.

The International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022-2032 is now officially launched in Iceland, and we are delighted that the University of Iceland – through the Vigdis International Centre for Multilingualism and Intercultural Understanding – is the main national promoter of the Decade, a serious responsibility. Language has always been of great significance to Icelandic society, and the University of Iceland has played a key role in both academic research and higher education in the field of languages. Iceland is now involved in global processes and equality and diversity have become cornerstones in the University's strategic aim of helping to build a sustainable society. We therefore fully embrace the motto of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages: "Leaving no one behind – no one outside". We hope to make this motto a reality by 2032 and hereby declare our commitment to promoting equality and diversity in the study of indigenous peoples and languages, linguistic rights as human rights, language revitalisation and preservation.

By these means, we hope to help further the overall aim of the International Decade: to draw attention to the critical loss of indigenous languages and the urgent need to preserve, revitalise and promote them, not only among our university community but across Icelandic society. Furthermore, we believe that the University of Iceland, building on solid academic foundations and outstanding research and practice, can also contribute internationally by sharing our knowledge and expertise in areas such as language documentation and preservation in the digital age, digital tools for language learning and revitalisation, overcoming challenges faced by small linguistic communities, and the importance of translations and cultural production for language development.

On the occasion of this launch, I would like to highlight several initiatives that attest to the University's long-term commitment to appreciating languages and linguistic diversity and our excellent track record in this area. The University of Iceland is proud host to two prominent institutions named after former President of Iceland and UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador of Languages, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir. The first one is the Vigdís Finnbogadóttir Institute for Foreign Languages, a research centre within the School of Humanities that honours Vigdís for her contributions to foreign-language learning and appreciation through her work in the field of culture and languages. The second one is the Vigdís International Centre for Multilingualism and Intercultural Understanding, a UNESCO Category 2 Centre that began operations on 20 April 2017, placing great emphasis on a multicultural knowledge and approach to other nations and languages as well as on multilingualism as a tool to facilitate personal, cultural and economic achievements.

In 2020, on the occasion of Vigdís' birthday, and the 40th anniversary of her historical election as President of Iceland, the Icelandic government, the University of Iceland and the Vigdís Finnbogadóttir Institute of Foreign Languages established an international prize in her name. The Vigdís Prize is awarded annually to an individual who has broken new ground in their work in the name of culture, and languages in particular. The aim is to honour and highlight Vigdís' extraordinary contributions to languages and culture, which as everyone in Iceland knows are her particular passion.

In 2020 Jonhard Mikkelsen became the first recipient of the Vigdís Prize for his contribution to strengthening and developing Faroese, both within the Faroe Islands and abroad. Through his work, Jonhard Mikkelsen has played a vital role in strengthening the Faroese language and consolidating its position as a living language in the age of globalisation.

In 2021 the Vigdís Prize was awarded to Katti Frederiksen for her significant contribution to the language of Greenland through her poetry, scholarly writings, children's literature and participation in public debate. Katti's activism and her efforts to raise awareness of Greenlandic language issues, both domestically and internationally, are remarkable. We are delighted to have the Vigdís Prize winners with us today at the national launch of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022-2032 and we all look forward to their exciting talks!

I would like to take this opportunity to say that the winner of the 2022 Vigdís Prize will be announced later this year and to call on our partners and collaborators in the International Decade of Indigenous Languages to publicise the Prize and raise awareness about it internationally.

The exhibition room of Veröld – House of Vigdís hosts *The Living Language Lab*, a multimedia glimpse into the world of languages, where young audiences can discover how languages have evolved over the course of human history and how they have migrated around the globe. This exhibition has been developed by a team of acclaimed linguists at the University of Iceland led by Professor Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir, in collaboration with the companies Gagarín and Andrúm. The University of Iceland is proud to support this initiative, since the Living Language Lab is a state-of-the-art tool for communicating specialised knowledge about the history of linguistic diversity in Iceland and globally to teenage students. By sharing these messages with future Icelandic generations, we hope to encourage awareness, understanding and knowledge about the importance and equality of all languages.

In conclusion, I would like to agree with Dr Tawfik Jelassi's statement that this is a Decade for all of us. I call on all citizens, experts, and stakeholders to join us in raising awareness about the importance of linguistic diversity and the critical loss of languages. Only through valuing and supporting diversity and equality of cultures, languages and peoples can we build a diverse, informed, democratic and sustainable society.

Thank you.