

Address by Jón Atli Benediktsson, Rector of the University of Iceland, at the symposium "The Treasure Within: Diversity and Learning in Iceland. 10th Anniversary of International Studies in Education". Held in room H-2017 at Stakkahlíð on Friday 29 March 2019 at 3.20 pm.

First Lady Eliza Reid, ladies and gentlemen.

I want to start by offering my heartfelt congratulations to all those involved with the International Studies in Education programme on its 10th anniversary. The programme was established in the wake of the economic crash in Iceland – at a time when universities and public institutions were faced with severe funding cuts, so it was not exactly a favourable time for innovation. On top of this, this happened just after the merger of the Iceland University of Education and the University of Iceland in the summer of 2008 and the newly created School of Education was just beginning to take shape. It is a sign of the ambition and drive of the School of Education that they refused to be intimidated in the face of adversity, founding a new undergraduate programme in this time of upheaval, specifically targeted at students interested in an international approach to education studies or those who want to work with bilingual children and the children of immigrants in Iceland.

In the decade that has passed since the International Studies in Education Programme was established, Icelandic society has changed a lot. For example, at the beginning of last year there were around 40 thousand foreign citizens resident in Iceland - almost 10% of the entire population - a figure that has doubled in just over a decade. It is therefore a fact that Iceland has become a multicultural society and all the signs indicate that this trend will continue in the years ahead.

In this regard, it is important to remember that foreign citizens here in Iceland are not a homogeneous group. They come from different countries, for different reasons, and speak different languages. This change to the demographics of Iceland means new demands and new challenges for Icelandic society, not least at all levels of the education system.

Research shows that educational institutions – not least universities – play an important role in encouraging social equality, for example by ensuring equal access to education and using teaching methods, support measures and counselling that is suitable for a diverse student population. Schools and universities have a great deal of responsibility in this respect and can make a dramatic impact on the welfare and empowerment of foreign citizens.

The University of Iceland has set itself the very clear policy target of being counted among the world's leading universities and being competitive on the international stage. In recent years, the number of international students has risen dramatically at the University, especially among Master's and PhD students. This development is enormously positive and expands the cultural diversity of research, teaching and learning. The University has an important social role to play, not only in Icelandic public life, but also in ensuring that Iceland is an active member of the international community and strives to tackle important global issues, for example climate change and migration caused by human conflict. Education and education systems lay the foundation for our success in tackling the challenges ahead, where cooperation between states and nations is vital.

Now, as we look back, it is incredible to see how much foresighted the founders of the International Studies in Education Programme, ISEP, were, how successful they have been and how the programme has developed.

ISEP is not only a study programme, but also a forum for related research, and has led to the publication of research papers by key researchers affiliated with the program.

Despite the outstanding work to date, we still have a long way to go in gathering the necessary knowledge of how foreign citizens and their children fare in the Icelandic school system. We need to provide more support for research in this area over the next few years. There is a lot at stake here.

We need to ensure that we can harness the enormous human capital of foreign citizens in Iceland and at the same time lay the foundations of a diverse and thriving society in the years to come.

Congratulations on the tenth anniversary!