

**Address by Jón Atli Benediktsson, Rector of the University of  
Iceland, at the opening of the conference 'Democratic  
Constitutional Design: The Future of Public Engagement'. Held in  
Veröld – House of Vigdís on Thursday 27 September 2018**

Prime Minister, Katrín Jakobsdóttir, ladies and gentlemen.

It is my honour and pleasure to open this conference on constitutions entitled: 'Democratic Constitutional Design: The Future of Public Engagement'.

This conference is held by the EDDA Research Center at the University of Iceland in collaboration with the Prime Minister's Office, the Vigdís Finnbogadóttir Institute and the Norden Association.

Discussion will focus on the latest trends and strategies in the field of democratic public participation in official policy and decision making.

The location and timing of this conference are not coincidental; the Icelandic government is currently fulfilling its pledge to continue the comprehensive review of the Icelandic constitution, with cross-party collaboration and extensive input from both experts and the general public. A lot of work has already gone into this project in recent years, for example by the National Forum, Constitutional Committee and Constitutional Council, as well as by constitution committees for the periods 2005-2007 and 2013-2016.

It is vital that the remaining work is completed to a high standard, making full use of all available knowledge and research in the field. The involvement of the academic community is therefore extremely important and this conference at the University of Iceland, with contributions from leading Icelandic and international experts, represents critical input to the review of the constitution.

This work also creates a huge responsibility for universities, since as well as guiding and informing the process, it is important that our experts actively engage with society and are open to input from the public, even radical reform proposals. The academic community can often act as an essential intermediary between the conservative approach of 'the system' and radical ideas from grassroots movements. So we might say that universities are the best possible forums for discussions on politics, public administration and constitutions, in order to give the discourse greater depth and clarity.

This conference is more than an academic conference on scholarly topics. It is also an attempt to highlight the most up-to-date and original thinking on constitutional design with public engagement, in order to support the review process now being launched. It therefore has a political purpose, in a certain sense, but political only in the precise way that the University can be political – to strengthen

public discourse by contributing the best possible knowledge and reasoning.

Ladies and gentlemen. Finally, I would like to thank everyone who has been involved in preparing this conference for their excellent work. There is an exciting three-day programme ahead and I hope you all find it enlightening, enjoyable and useful.

Thank you very much.