

# **STATUS AND EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH A FOREIGN BACKGROUND IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN ICELAND**

**RESULTS OF AN ONLINE SURVEY**



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# INTRODUCTION

This report presents the results of an online survey on the status and experiences of students with a foreign background in Icelandic public universities. The survey is the first part of the project Inclusion in the Icelandic University Community, funded by the Ministry of Higher Education, Industry and Innovation.

With the emergence of a multicultural society and changes in Iceland's social composition, it is important that educational institutions respond to—and evolve alongside—the diverse needs of different groups. Equal opportunities for education and training are the foundation for successful participation in society and also contribute to building an inclusive society.

The two-year collaboration project aims to develop approaches that promote increased inclusion in the university community, increase the number of immigrants in higher education, and prevent drop-out among them. This will be done, among other actions, by implementing support measures, services, and counselling for students with a foreign background, developing an inclusion policy and a reception/onboarding plan for the universities, and providing education and training for staff.

The survey was available from 28 January to 4 February 2025. Data collection and analysis were carried out by the project manager and the Research Centre of the University of Akureyri (RHA), in cooperation with the public universities.

## KEY FINDINGS

- The main results indicate that the vast majority of students are satisfied with basic aspects of their studies and lives, such as housing and academic progress, but many still face a range of challenges.
- A total of 320 students participated: 68% women, 30% men and 2% gender-diverse. Participants come from many places, most (60%) from Europe, and are at different study levels, most at undergraduate or master's level.
- Around 40% of students have personally experienced prejudice on campus, and 33% have witnessed prejudice towards others. It is noteworthy that 16% answered "don't know" when asked whether they had witnessed prejudice.
- A majority of students (about 66%) consider their mental health generally good, yet about one-third experience loneliness.
- Financial worries are common—about two out of three students are concerned about their finances—and many need to work a lot while studying.
- About 80% are satisfied with their housing situation, but there is a need for additional support services, especially in Icelandic language learning and social inclusion.
- Students with a foreign background often have good social support from other international/foreign-background students—over 90% have friends of foreign origin—but considerably fewer (about 59%) have Icelandic friends.
- About 73% of students say they would like to make more friends among their fellow students.
- There is a need for additional support services, especially for Icelandic language learning and social inclusion.
- About 51% rate their Icelandic proficiency as rather low, very low, or none.
- A more detailed analysis of these aspects is presented in the following chapters, along with results from individual institutions.

# DEFINITIONS

**Students with a foreign background** are those born abroad or in Iceland with a mother tongue other than Icelandic, regardless of citizenship, residence permit, or length of residence in Iceland. The group is highly diverse, including immigrants, second-generation immigrants, and international students.

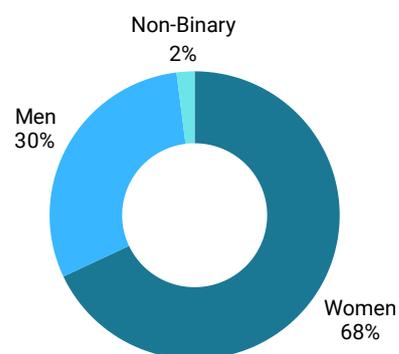
**Immigrants in studies:** Students who are defined as immigrants in Icelandic society (cf. Statistics Iceland's definition), have legal domicile in Iceland (often with a permanent residence permit) and study at Icelandic universities.

**International students** are students who come to Iceland specifically to complete an entire programme (BA/BS, MA/MS, PhD), often on the basis of a residence permit for studies, or who study temporarily, or begin their studies from abroad—often with English as the language of instruction.

**Exchange students** are students who come temporarily, often for one or two semesters, through cooperation agreements (e.g., Erasmus+) and often receive specific services (e.g., from the International Office).

# RESPONDENT BACKGROUND

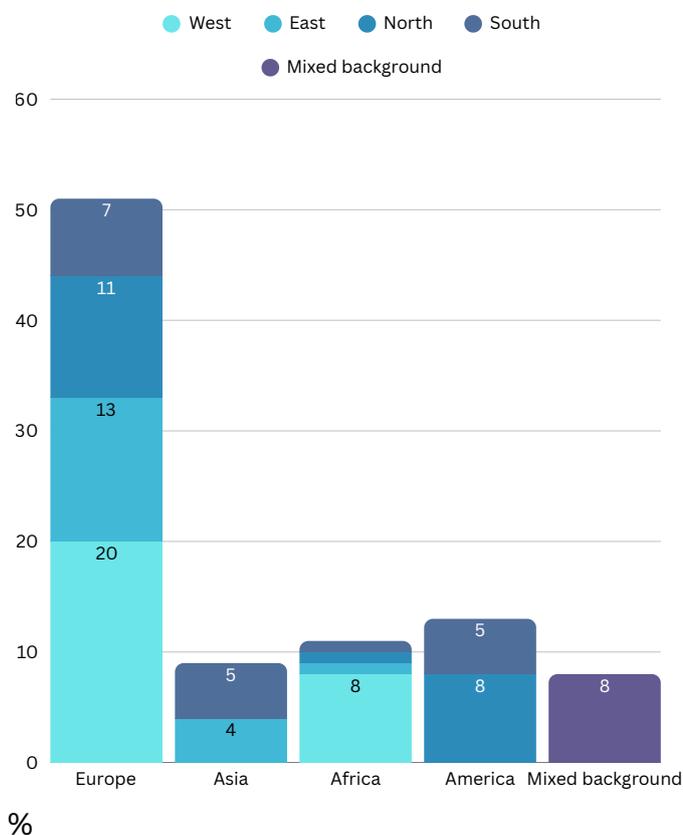
A total of 320 students with a foreign background responded across four universities in Iceland: the University of Iceland, the University of Akureyri, Hólar University, and the Agricultural University of Iceland. The responses indicate that a large share of participants are in undergraduate (46%) or master's studies (35%), 18% are in doctoral studies, and 8% are exchange students. Survey respondents were 68% women, 30% men and 2% gender-diverse individuals.



Picture 1. Gender

Respondents come from many places; just over half originate in Europe (50%)—including 20% from Western Europe, 13% from Eastern Europe, 11% from Northern Europe and 7% from Southern Europe. Others come from Asia (18%)—including 6% from South Asia, 5% from East Asia and 4% from Southeast Asia; Africa (11%)—including 3% from East/North/Southern Africa and 8% from West Africa; and the Americas (13%)—including 8% from North America and 5% from South/Central America—along with a small number born and raised in Iceland.

Half of the respondents have lived in Iceland longer than 3 years; of these, 7% were born in Iceland. 23% have lived here for less than 1 year, and 27% for 1 to 3 years. Participants were asked about their parents'/guardians' education. 57% of respondents reported that at least one parent/guardian had completed a university degree. About 51% rate their Icelandic language skills as rather low, very low, or none at all.

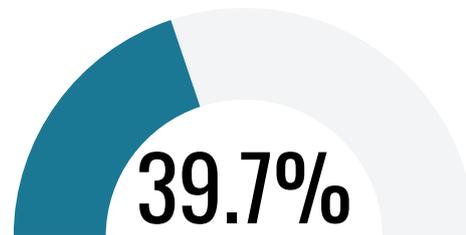


Picture 2. Background

# PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION

## Experiences of prejudice

Just over one third of the students with a foreign background had personally experienced cultural or skin colour-related prejudice in the university environment. 40% had experienced cultural or skin colour-related prejudice (19% rarely, 17% sometimes, and 4% often), while 60% had never experienced it.



of students answered in the affirmative (rarely, sometimes, or often) that they had experienced prejudice.

These responses indicate that while the majority do not experience direct discrimination, a substantial group does encounter prejudice.

When the responses are analysed by gender and origin, notable differences emerge. Male students are less likely than female students to experience prejudice: 71% of men reported never experiencing prejudice, compared with 58% of women. Only 29% of gender-diverse participants had never experienced prejudice, indicating that this group experiences prejudice much more often.

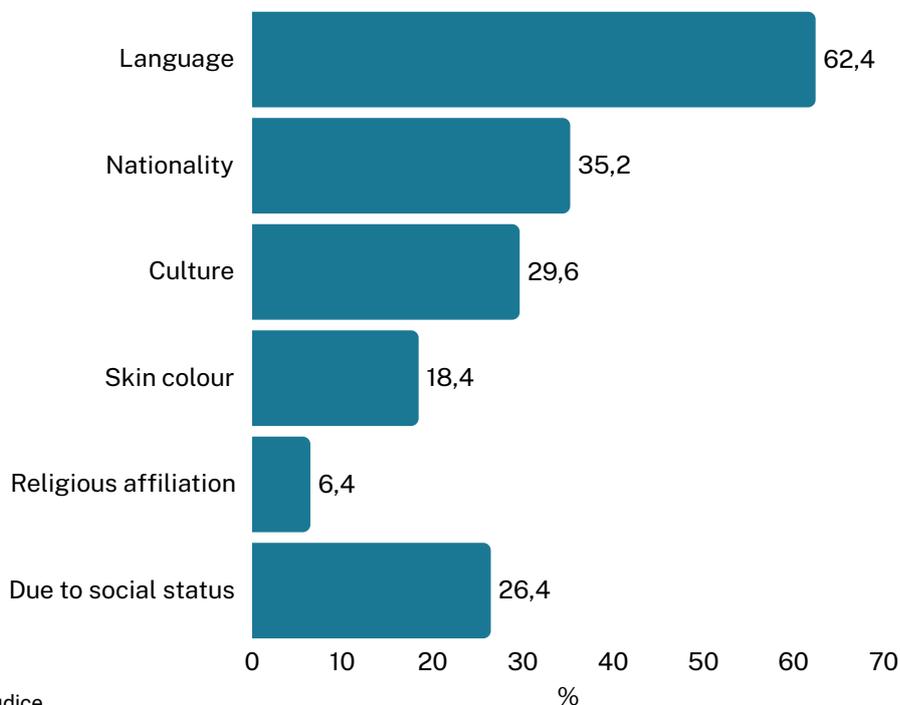
Origin also matters. Students from Western and Northern Europe appear least likely to experience direct prejudice (about 74–75% had never noticed it). In contrast, a much lower share of students from South/Central America (only 29%) and those of mixed origin (35%) had avoided prejudice entirely. These figures suggest that students with a foreign background who are “more different” from the traditional Icelandic majority (e.g., in appearance, culture or language) are more likely to face negative discrimination.

Among those who experienced prejudice, 62.8% experienced it from fellow students, while 38.9% experienced prejudice from teachers.

## Types of prejudice

Students who had experienced prejudice were asked more about its nature. The most common target was language: 62.4% of those who experienced prejudice said it concerned language.

Also mentioned were prejudice due to national origin (35.2%) and culture (29.6%). Prejudice due to skin colour (18.4%) or religion (6.4%) was less common in the university environment according to this survey. Just over one quarter also mentioned prejudice due to their social status, such as a refugee background.



Picture 3. Type of prejudice.

The results indicate that the most common form of prejudice relates to language proficiency or accent. Some students also appear to experience xenophobia linked to origin and culture, whereas prejudice based on appearance or religion is less common in the university environment, according to these findings.

## Witnessing prejudice

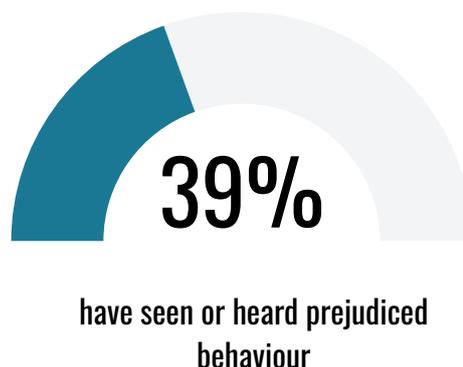
About 34% said they had seen or heard prejudiced behaviour towards other students with a foreign background (15% rarely, 14% sometimes, 4% often), while just over 50% had never witnessed this. About 15% answered "I don't know" to this question. This points to a lack of awareness of prejudice within the university community.

Men are slightly less likely than women to witness prejudice: 67% of men had never seen prejudice towards others, compared with 60% of women.

The data show a strong correlation between origin and whether students had witnessed racism. Students from outside Europe had witnessed prejudice much more often. Up to 72% of students from West Africa had witnessed

prejudice, along with 67% of students of mixed origin, 62% from East/North/Southern Africa, and 61% from South/Central America.

Students from Asia fall in between, with about half reporting that they had witnessed prejudice. For example, 54% of students from East Asia and 53% from South Asia had seen prejudice. By contrast, European students were much less likely to have witnessed prejudice—only 23%–31%.



Among European students, those from Northern Europe reported the lowest figure at 23%, Eastern and Southern Europeans were both at 25%, and Western Europeans were the highest at 31%. The difference is striking—up to 49 percentage points between West Africa and Northern Europe. This strongly suggests that prejudice is systemic and primarily affects visible minority groups on campus, while European students are much less likely to be aware of it.

Overall, responses to the questions on prejudice support the view that this is a shared problem across universities and groups, though it manifests in different ways. Language and perceived foreign origin were the main targets of negative behaviour.

## Who shows prejudice?

A majority of students with a foreign background had either experienced or witnessed prejudice from fellow students (78% witnessed, 62.8% experienced), and a high proportion reported similar experiences in interactions with teachers (36.2% witnessed, 38.9% experienced). These data show that prejudice is both a personal experience and a social phenomenon in the university community.



7 out of 10 students either experience prejudice from, or witness prejudice by, their fellow students.



4 out of 10 students either experience or witness prejudice from teachers.

## SERVICES, RIGHTS AND SUPPORT MEASURES

The survey sought answers on which services, rights, or support measures students with a foreign background feel are lacking at the universities. This was an open question, and respondents provided diverse answers that offer insight into their main needs. The following common themes emerged:

- **Improved information provision and guidance.** A lack of information in English (and/or their own language) about various aspects of university life, such as rules, curricula, services and rights. Some wanted guidance or access to a contact person (e.g., an intercultural officer) specialised in assisting international/foreign-background students with practical matters and communication with institutions.
- **Support with housing.** Difficulties in finding suitable housing; requests for university support in disseminating information.
- **Social inclusion.** Calls for support for social inclusion, e.g., events and projects that foster connections between domestic and students with foreign backgrounds.
- **Financial support.** Tuition fees and study-related costs can be burdensome; calls for grants, discounts and cheaper Icelandic language courses.
- **Support with job searching.** Suggestions for support in finding work alongside studies and better conditions for combining work and study.
- **Special academic arrangements.** A need for more courses in English, translated learning materials, and support for teaching in Icelandic and academic writing.
- **Intercultural competence and training.** Requests for training for teachers and staff to strengthen their understanding of multiculturalism and reduce prejudice, to support more active equality work, and to clarify procedures for responding to discrimination.



Picture 4. What is needed?

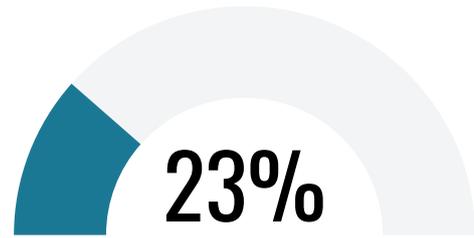
In addition to the above, many other ideas were raised, including: access to psychological services without language barriers, better facilities/support for students with families (e.g., information on preschools), academic and career guidance tailored to the situation of international students, and so on. Despite the variety of answers, a shared emphasis is on improving services and information flows for international/foreign-background students and creating an environment where they can use their abilities on equal terms with domestic students.

Material from each university suggests that needs may differ somewhat depending on the size and type of university.

# HEALTH AND WELLBEING

## Mental and physical health

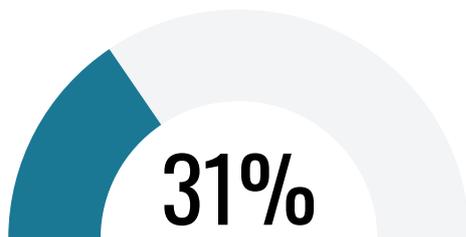
Most students with a foreign background considered themselves to be in good health, both mentally and physically. About 66% rated their mental health as good, and 79% their physical health as good. These results are positive in themselves, but they suggest that mental well-being is linked to social circumstances and experiences of prejudice.



of students rated their mental health as poor

Students who had experienced prejudice or social isolation were less likely to report good mental health.

## Loneliness and social isolation



of students struggle with loneliness

One in three students with a foreign background reported struggling with loneliness (31%). About half (47%) said they were not lonely, and others were neutral. This loneliness may be linked to having few or no close friends within the university community, whether Icelandic or other international students.

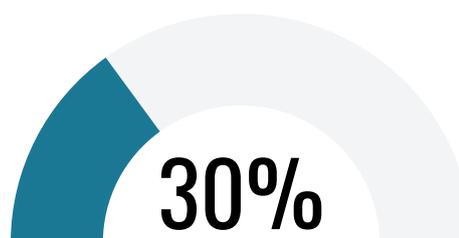
Results from other survey questions support this interpretation: 73% wanted to make more friends or acquaintances among fellow students, indicating that many consider their social network within the university community to be limited. Just over one third had Icelandic friends, but nearly all (92%) had other international friends—highlighting that their friends are more often other students of foreign backgrounds than domestic students. These findings on social well-being indicate a need for targeted measures to counter isolation, such as strengthening connections between foreign-background and domestic students and creating opportunities for interaction.

## Stress and strain

Many international students experienced considerable strain in daily life. In addition to demanding studies, many mentioned needing to work alongside their studies, which negatively affects mental health. In open responses, time constraints and heavy workloads were frequently mentioned as causes of difficulty, both as barriers to learning Icelandic (see Icelandic proficiency and learning) and more generally as barriers to participation in social life.

It is also likely that uncertainty about the future—such as whether one will be allowed to remain in Iceland after graduation—causes stress. Just over 30% of international students said they were “worried about being able to meet the requirements to renew their residence and study permit.” This uncertainty can be a significant source of stress for students who intend to stay or work in Iceland after their studies.

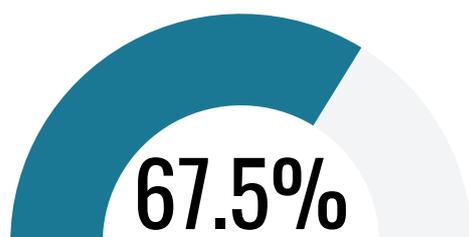
Overall, this highlights that the mental health of students with a foreign background may be threatened by social isolation, prejudice and strain. Although most consider themselves in good health, there is a substantial minority who struggle with distress or anxiety related to these factors.



are worried that they may not be able to meet the requirements to renew their residence and study permit

## FINANCIAL SITUATION AND WORK ALONGSIDE STUDIES

Financial circumstances and money worries were prominent in the lives of many students with a foreign background. A majority had some form of financial concern: about 68% were worried about their finances, including 29% with very serious worries. About 19% reported not having such concerns. Limited access to loans and grants, such as those from the Icelandic Student Loan Fund (LÍN), may help explain this situation.



are worried about their financial situation

Many international students needed to rely on paid work alongside their studies to make ends meet. The survey shows that about one-third of students (33%) strongly agreed with the statement “I have to work so much that it disrupts my studies,” and another third also rather agreed.

This suggests that roughly two out of three international students find it difficult to study as well as they could because of a heavy need to work. Such strain may not only reduce academic performance but also affect mental health and social life, as discussed above.

The situation is not uniform or entirely negative: about 20% do not feel that working so much affects their studies. This may reflect differences across subgroups (e.g., some have scholarships or savings and need to work less). The proportion reporting financial worries appears to vary across universities; for example, the share was 29% at AUI and 46% at UI, though such comparisons should be interpreted with caution due to differences in response rates.

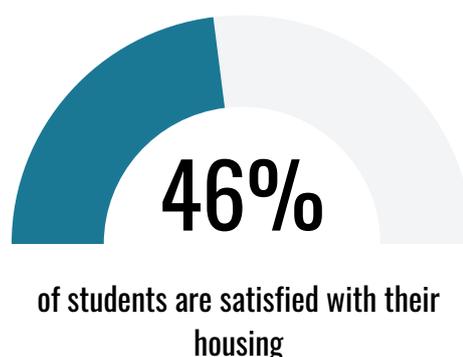
## HOUSING

The survey results present a fairly positive picture of housing among students with foreign backgrounds, with some reservations. About 80% were satisfied with their current housing (46% strongly agreed and 34% rather agreed with the statement), while 9% were dissatisfied. These figures suggest that most have managed to secure adequate accommodation in Iceland. Many live in student housing or share housing with other students, which may explain the high satisfaction rate—student housing often offers affordable, practical solutions.

However, the dissatisfaction reported by about one in ten students is important. Dissatisfied respondents most often mentioned overcrowding, high rent, and difficulties obtaining rental contracts, especially in the capital area, where the housing market is challenging. Some students there have to accept poorer or more expensive housing than they would prefer.

In responses about which services are lacking, housing was mentioned several times—some wanted more help from universities in securing housing or providing housing information. Students arriving from abroad for the first time may find it particularly difficult to navigate the Icelandic housing market.

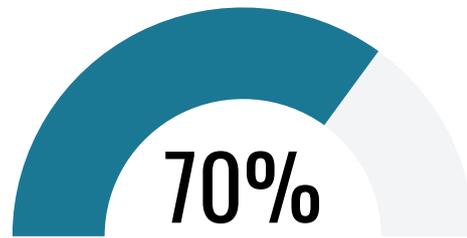
Thus, while most live in acceptable housing conditions, a certain group faces difficulties and would value increased assistance or information from universities.



# SOCIAL LIFE AND PARTICIPATION IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

## Engagement in social life

Students with a foreign background generally showed interest in university social life, but many did not seem able to be as active as they would like. About 70% wanted to be more active in university social life, but 42% rarely or never participated in events.



would like to be more active in university social life

The main obstacles were academic and work-related workload, which limit time for social life, as well as language and cultural differences. Students did not always feel they had much in common with Icelandic students in social activities. Some mentioned that university social life is often centred on Icelandic culture, the Icelandic language, or pre-existing friendship networks that can be difficult to enter.

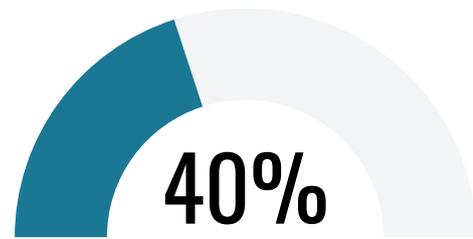
## Student associations and invitations to participate

Many students did not feel that organised social activities were aimed at them. When asked about the statement “Student associations invite me to join them to engage me and appeal to me in social activities,” about 43% agreed (i.e., felt they were specifically welcomed), while about 30% disagreed. This indicates that social activities do not always reach international students, despite efforts by some associations to improve access. Student associations and clubs could do more to reach students with a foreign background, introduce them to activities, and encourage participation. Some student associations have already launched international committees or special events for international students, which is a positive step.

## Building connections within studies

Teaching practices also matter for social inclusion. Just over 60% believed that teachers encourage networking through group work, but about 20% disagreed, feeling that teachers organise coursework so that students work mostly independently or with their own friendship groups rather than mixing groups.

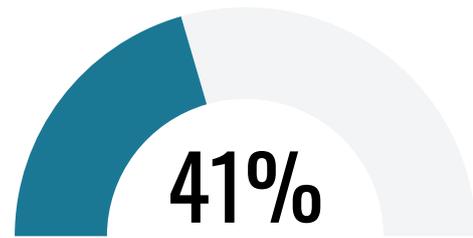
If teachers use group work thoughtfully, it can help international students get to know Icelandic classmates. These results suggest teachers can play a role in bridging gaps—for example, by forming groups to ensure mixing or by designing projects that require cooperation among all students.



ósammála að kennarar hvetji til tengslamyndunar með hópavinnu.

## Friendships and support networks

As noted earlier, international students' friendships were often limited to other international students. About 58% strongly or rather agreed that they have Icelandic friends. However, 92% have friends of foreign origin.

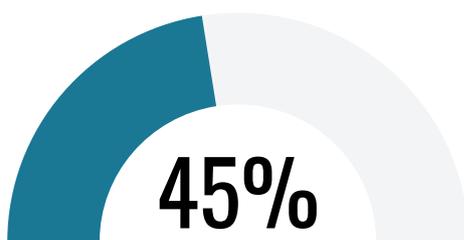


of students have no Icelandic friends.

This suggests that international students met their social needs within their own group (e.g., friendship circles among exchange students), rather than forming connections with Icelandic student groups.

## Loneliness and social exclusion

When asked directly, "I form connections with my fellow students in class," about 55% agreed, while 20% disagreed. About 45% also said they are "rarely or never invited to group work by other students" (without teacher involvement).



of students said they are rarely or never invited by other students to take part in group work

Some students felt that Icelandic students had little interest in getting to know them—not out of hostility, but rather because they already had their own friend groups and might even assume international students would leave Iceland after their studies. This lack of integration creates a certain social separation within schools.

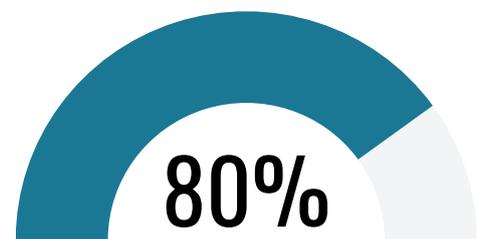
# STUDY PROGRESS AND SATISFACTION WITH STUDIES

## Satisfaction with studies

The overall picture of students' responses to their studies is fairly positive. About 60% were satisfied with the university's study offerings (the range of courses and fields). A similar share—just over half up to two-thirds—were satisfied with teaching arrangements (e.g., teaching methods, lectures versus practical instruction).

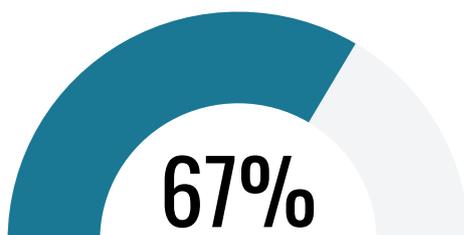
About 80% said they were satisfied with their own study progress—how well they are learning and meeting academic requirements. Only about 10% expressed dissatisfaction with their progress.

This suggests that most of these students are fairly ambitious and have adapted to their studies. Those dissatisfied with their progress most often mentioned obstacles such as language difficulties when reading materials, excessive workload outside the university (reducing time for study), or a lack of guidance.



of students are satisfied with their own study progress

## Assessment systems and perceptions of quality



of students said that they “always receive good guidance from the teacher regarding course material and assignments”.

The survey did not ask specifically about grading, but open responses suggest that some international students find it difficult to adapt to academic requirements at first. Those coming from different educational systems need to adjust to how assignments are assessed, how essays are written, and so on. Some mentioned they would have liked more foundation in academic Icelandic or English. In general, however, there is no dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching or the programmes; rather, challenges arise from studying in another language and in an unfamiliar environment.

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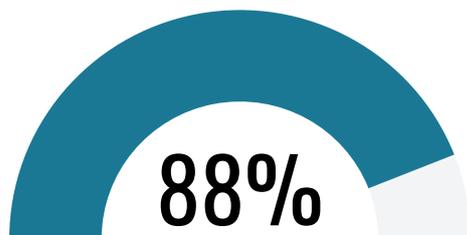
## ICELANDIC LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND ICELANDIC LANGUAGE LEARNING

### Current language proficiency

At the beginning of the survey, participants were asked to assess their proficiency in Icelandic. The responses indicate a wide range of skill levels. In the quantitative results, about 11% rated their Icelandic as very good, while about 27% rated it as very low; the largest group rated it as “fair” or “good.” This varies by length of residence in Iceland: those who have lived here more than 7 years generally have good proficiency, while those who are newly arrived (less than 1 year) most often have very limited skills.

### Attitudes towards learning Icelandic

Attitudes towards learning Icelandic are generally positive. An overwhelming majority (about 88%) agreed that “the university should offer Icelandic teaching to students with a foreign background or provide support for those who want to study Icelandic.” Over 70% “strongly agreed” with this statement. Across all institutions, there was near-unanimous support for increasing support for Icelandic language learning for international students.



of students agreed that “the university should offer Icelandic language instruction to students with a foreign background, or provide support for those who want to study Icelandic.

However, responses also show that a considerable share of students do not themselves engage in formal Icelandic study while in university. When asked “What are you doing to learn and use Icelandic?” responses included taking Icelandic courses, speaking with Icelanders when possible, watching TV content, or using language-learning apps. But many admitted doing little, using only English in daily life, and postponing learning Icelandic. In fact, about one-third of students were not trying to learn Icelandic in a structured way at the time the survey was conducted.

Based on open responses, the main reasons some students do not study Icelandic were grouped as follows:

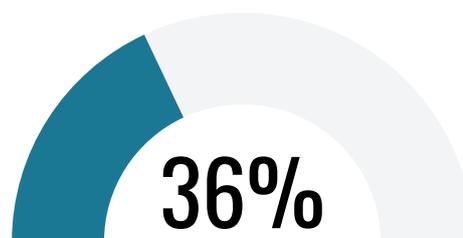
- **Lack of time and workload.** Most frequently mentioned: lack of time due to work and/or studies. Many were in full-time study and working at the same time, or in demanding graduate programmes, and did not have time to take on language learning in addition. Some also complained that university courses in Icelandic were scheduled at inconvenient times that conflicted with other commitments.
- **Cost and accessibility.** Many noted that general Icelandic courses (outside the university) are expensive, and they cannot afford them. There is also a lack of free or affordable ways to learn (e.g., free online materials). Some said it is difficult to find good teaching materials suitable for adult learners.
- **Language environment and practice.** Many worked or studied in English and therefore did not get enough practice in Icelandic. Icelandic classmates and colleagues often automatically speak English to those with a foreign background, so opportunities to practise Icelandic are limited. There is a lack of relaxed settings to speak Icelandic socially, such as conversation groups or group activities.
- **Lack of motivation or support.** Some were interested in learning but did not receive support from the university or their employer. Others mentioned that society does not encourage them—they even felt excluded and that “Icelandic is used as a barrier or a tool of power,” which reduces motivation to learn.
- **Prioritisation and circumstances.** Many wanted to focus on their studies first and postpone Icelandic learning. Some also felt it “doesn’t pay to learn the language if [you] plan to be here for a short time”—a sentiment often relevant to exchange students. Others saw few job prospects, even after learning Icelandic, and gave up.

- **Negative experiences.** A few had tried learning Icelandic but stopped because the language is difficult. Some ended up in courses that were too challenging and lost confidence. Others mentioned a lack of practical opportunities to use Icelandic in daily life and, therefore, quickly forgetting it.
- **Already speaks Icelandic.** Some respondents pointed out that these issues did not apply to them—they were already fluent in Icelandic or had partially grown up in Iceland and therefore did not need special instruction. Others learned gradually through everyday use (“learning by doing”).

These reasons clearly illuminate the challenges of Icelandic learning among international students and explain why Icelandic instruction is in high demand. Students want support to overcome these obstacles. It is clear that without targeted assistance, a large group will not study Icelandic, simply because their life and studies do not allow it, or they do not see sufficient benefit.

## Use of Icelandic in studies

It is noteworthy that not all students feel they need Icelandic to pursue their studies. In fact, in some programmes it is entirely possible to get by using English alone (e.g., in certain fields at the University of Iceland and the University of Akureyri, where much of the teaching material is in English). In other cases, however, a lack of Icelandic can be a barrier.



of students agreed with the statement: “Course materials provide me with a clear summary of key terms in Icelandic that I can use to search for information in a language I know if I need to.”

Only about 36% agreed with the statement “Course material gives me a clear summary of key terms in Icelandic that I can use to search for information in a language I know if I need to.” About 24% disagreed, suggesting that in some cases Icelandic term lists or bilingual study materials are lacking. This is especially important for students who are not strong in either English or Icelandic—they need materials to understand key concepts so they can seek further knowledge in their mother tongue when necessary.

## **BREAKDOWN: THE SITUATION OF STUDENTS AT EACH UNIVERSITY**

Students from four universities participated: University of Iceland (260 respondents), University of Akureyri (45), Hólar University (8), and the Agricultural University of Iceland (7). Although the main lines are similar across institutions—e.g., all face challenges related to language and social isolation—some features or deviations are specific to each university. Below is a summary for each.

### **UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND (UI)**

UI is the largest institution and has the most students with a foreign background. The environment is diverse, but it can also be easy for international students to “disappear into the crowd.” Results show that international students at UI experience prejudice more often than at other institutions—only 58% had never experienced prejudice (compared with 69–86% at the other universities). The share who had witnessed prejudice was also highest at UI (38%). This may be because diversity is greatest at UI; students of different backgrounds interact extensively, and prejudice becomes more visible. They were very strong in their demands for Icelandic instruction and improvements in that area. Financial concerns were prominent among UI students—Reykjavík is more expensive than other regions, and many students are financially independent. The survey shows that 31% of UI students were very worried about their finances, higher than at any other institution. Socially, international students at UI often turned to one another, forming their own groups (e.g., ESN – Erasmus Student Network), and had less interaction with Icelandic students than they would like. They attended events such as International Day, but could be more visible in general student social life and within the student councils/department associations.

## UNIVERSITY OF AKUREYRI (UNAK)

UNAK is much smaller than UI but still has several students with foreign backgrounds, especially in humanities and social sciences and in health sciences. Results indicate that students in Akureyri generally experience slightly fewer difficulties than at UI. Prejudice appears less common: 69% said they had never experienced prejudice. Those who did often pointed to language as the source, but incidents seemed fewer in number. Socially, students at UNAK benefit from the small-community setting—they are more visible, and it is easier to connect with both other international students and Icelanders. This is reflected, among other things, in a somewhat higher share of people with Icelandic friends and a somewhat lower loneliness (inferred from the data). Still, they wanted more opportunities: about 61% wanted to be more active socially, the same share as at UI.

Regarding Icelandic instruction, UNAK does offer some courses, but students want more and longer courses, ideally integrated into the programme. Some exchange students in Akureyri did not feel motivated to learn Icelandic because they could use English everywhere. Financial worries were also fairly high (about 22% very worried). What stands out for UNAK is community spirit—several international students mentioned they were welcomed in Akureyri and that the town is friendly.

Hólar is a very small specialised institution in rural Iceland, located in Skagafjörður, with a focus on tourism and event management, equestrian studies/training, and aquaculture-related fields. Only 8 students with a foreign background responded, which severely limits generalisations, but provides some indications. Few reported personally experiencing prejudice (37% rarely or sometimes; 63% never). A larger share appeared to have witnessed prejudice towards others (43%). In such a small school, a single incident can have a strong impact. Students at Hólar are few, and many are in distance learning, which affects social life. Those on campus likely form a local social group, but this is more complex with distance learning. You also need Icelandic proficiency to be admitted into equestrian programmes, where often about half the students have a foreign background; these students therefore generally already have fair or good Icelandic skills when they begin. In open responses, respondents said they relied heavily on close friends, often other international individuals, and that rural social life is limited; most nevertheless said they had Icelandic acquaintances. Some described loneliness, while others did not. Social connection seemed linked to how well they had adapted to the place and community. Students at Hólar stated that various services and supports were lacking. There is neither an international officer nor as many organised events, and English-language information is limited. Students appreciated the personal approach (everyone knows the rector and teachers), but wanted more professional support. All 8 respondents from Hólar strongly agreed that Icelandic teaching for international students is lacking.

# AGRICULTURAL UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND

AUI is located in Hvanneyri, Borgarfjörður, and offers programmes in agricultural studies (upper-secondary level), agricultural sciences, natural and environmental sciences, and planning at BSc, MSc, and PhD levels, as well as related fields. Only seven international students participated, so results must be interpreted with caution. Few in this group experienced prejudice; only one of seven reported personal experience (86% said they never did). This is the lowest share reporting prejudice among the institutions. Responses may indicate a socially integrated and positive environment, but the low response rate/small group may affect results. A similar pattern emerged for witnessing prejudice, with 17% reporting sometimes witnessing such incidents. International students at AUI are a diverse group: some are exchange students staying briefly, while others are immigrants residing longer in Iceland and enrolled in study. Based on the survey, about half reported good proficiency in Icelandic and strong social connections. New students described feelings of isolation; a few mentioned loneliness. Social life in Hvanneyri seems limited outside the university, but within it, a close community forms. Because there are few international students, they have substantial contact with Icelandic classmates in teaching and group projects.

Regarding services, students complained about a lack of formal support and noted that all communication from the university is in Icelandic, which can be challenging. AUI has an English website, but students asked specifically for more bilingualism in teaching—for example, translating slides and key terms into English or Latin so they can follow. Icelandic instruction was also important to them: 71% agreed that the university should offer Icelandic teaching.

# SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

## Summary of key findings

According to the survey, students with a foreign background at Icelandic universities are eager to study and largely satisfied with their stay, but they face specific challenges.

**Prejudice** was a real problem for about 40% of the group, especially in the form of negative attitudes towards their languages and cultures.

**Social isolation and loneliness** affected about one-third of international students; they connected mainly with other international students rather than Icelandic students.

**Their mental health** was not generally poor compared to peers, but those who experienced xenophobia or social rejection often felt worse well-being.

**Financial worries** were common, as they dealt with tuition fees, limited grants, and often difficult labour-market conditions, leading to substantial work commitments alongside studies.

Despite this, they were **satisfied with their studies** and determined to succeed; they rated their teachers and learning environment positively in most respects. The biggest unresolved issue in their view was **language**—both having realistic opportunities to learn Icelandic and being able to follow their studies better with the help of bilingual materials.

## Recommendations

Based on the results, the following recommendations can be made to improve the situation and experiences of international/foreign-background students.

### Structured Icelandic teaching and language support



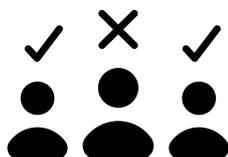
Universities should offer systematic Icelandic courses for international students at different proficiency levels, free of charge or subsidised. Icelandic learning should also be integrated into degree studies where possible (e.g., by making it credit-bearing and offering short “Icelandic for academia” courses). It is also important that teaching materials take these students’ circumstances into account—for example, teachers could prepare short weekly glossaries in English/Icelandic to ensure everyone understands key concepts.

### Strengthening social connections



Universities should implement systems that promote mixing between international and domestic students. Examples include a buddy system in which each new international student is paired with an experienced Icelandic student who introduces them to the social life and customs. Student associations should regularly hold multicultural events and explicitly welcome international students. Teachers can contribute through group work and projects that mix students. Such interventions would reduce loneliness and increase social participation, improving well-being and potentially academic outcomes.

### Response plans against prejudice

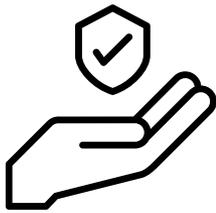


Each institution needs clear policies and procedures for addressing prejudice or discrimination when they occur. This includes educating both staff and students about diversity and acceptable behaviour, providing avenues for reporting incidents, and responding promptly and firmly to complaints. Prejudice undermines students’ sense of safety and has clearly harmful effects, so prevention and response are crucial.



### **Improved information and services**

All universities must ensure that essential information about studies, rules, rights and services is available in English (and/or other relevant languages). Each institution should have a designated contact person for students with a foreign background who can be reached with questions or problems and who can help connect newcomers to the community, etc.



### **Financial support and guidance**

It is recommended that universities and the authorities explore possibilities to increase international students' access to grants and loans—for example, allowing them to apply for the study grants available to domestic students, or establishing special funds for high-achieving students. We should offer financial counselling tailored to international students (who may deal with currency issues, residence permit regulations, etc.). Reducing the need for students to work 30+ hours per week alongside full-time study would improve both academic performance and health.



### **Targeted feedback and monitoring**

Finally, follow up with regular surveys or dialogues with international students. Universities should monitor progress—for example, by repeating a similar survey after a few years—to see whether conditions improve. International students should also be encouraged to be active in the university community, for example, by serving as representatives on student councils or committees related to teaching practices and services.

## CONCLUSION

Students with a foreign background are a valuable part of the university community in Iceland, and they must have equal opportunities to benefit from their studies and to thrive academically and socially. This report has highlighted key issues that require attention. Much of this can be improved with relatively straightforward measures, if there is the will to do so. Icelandic universities have become more international over time and offer much, but the results show that more is needed. By implementing targeted improvements—especially in language learning, social inclusion, and support services—universities will not only enhance students' experiences but also strengthen their entire community, as diversity is best utilised when everyone can thrive. It is our hope that these results and recommendations will be put to good use, so that the Icelandic university community becomes, in the future, even more open, fairer, and more accessible to people of all backgrounds.



**2026**