

# **National Union of Icelandic Students**

*The National Union for Icelandic  
Students' Policy Regarding Equal  
Rights in Icelandic Universities*



National Union of Icelandic Students' Policy  
Regarding Equal Rights in Icelandic Universities

1st edition approved by LÍS at the 6th annual  
assembly at Bifröst on the 30th of March 2019

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Universities play an important part in the development and progression of Icelandic society. They have both a direct and indirect impact on each individual in our community. There must be equal opportunities for all that choose to pursue higher education. Universities and educational authorities shall guarantee equal access to university studies. Furthermore, all invested parties of Icelandic universities must acknowledge the unequal access that exists today and develop an equality policy that can lead to change.

## **1.1. Policy Development Within Universities and the Government**

All universities should have their own equal rights policy in which the goal is to strengthen the state of equality within their university. Universities should reflect on their position in society and lead the charge when it comes to social issues and implementation of equal rights. These policies should be regularly updated to ensure that they follow the quick changes in a growing community.

The Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture should create a comprehensive education policy as well as a policy specifically for the university system. Said policies should always be created with equal rights in mind, but should also be followed with a National Access Plan in order to specify the steps that need to be taken in order to secure equal and open access to higher education. The education policy and National Access Plan shall be written in collaboration with

students so as to guarantee that their interests and perspectives are taken into account.

University education should be open to all regardless of age, socioeconomic status, residence, disability, skin color, sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, race, beliefs, religion, origin, illness or other such societal position. Equal access does not only entail access into higher education, but also access to equal treatment as studies are ongoing. Guaranteeing students' access to teaching materials and lectures is a key step in securing equal rights to education. This affects, among others, students that are chronically ill, disabled, or live outside of the Capital Region. In these cases, electronic access is crucial. University buildings, the university surroundings, and events overseen by universities and student associations must also be accessible to all. Access to university studies is in many ways insufficient in Iceland. It is necessary for educational and governmental authorities to make improvements in this area. Good access should not be an occasional occurrence, it should always be guaranteed.

### 2.1. What is accessibility?

The basis for equality is accessibility. Accessibility is a concept that describes how well the environment serves each and every individual. Good accessibility serves the widest possible group of people. Accessibility can be both measurable and immeasurable. This must always be kept in mind whether it pertains to university housing issues, curricula, word choice, and more. It is important to consider that accessibility is something that must be consistently reviewed by all

invested parties in universities. Accessibility must be available for a more diverse group of people.

### 2.2. Enrollment Caps

Enrollment caps are a way to control the number of students in certain majors. Enrollment caps should never be used to improve a university's economic standing. Enrollment caps can manifest themselves by applicants being required to show their prowess in the field in question (i.e. entrance exams). Universities shall guarantee equal access to such exams by offering assistance to students that need it. For example, extra time to sit exams or the ability to sit exams in more languages than Icelandic. The goal of enrollment caps must be clear. Universities are responsible for gauging their impact and whether they have returned the necessary results.

### 2.3. Inclusion

Inclusion entails an unwavering and active want to provide everyone with equal opportunities to take part in all kinds of activities and always considering the needs of different groups. Actions must be taken if there are systemic barriers or if certain groups need special support. Universities in Iceland should incorporate inclusion into their work. For example, by taking the first step to review the homogeneous group of students that can be found in their promotional material.

It is common that those that lead discussions within the community comprise a homogeneous group. This is also com-

mon within Icelandic universities as well as within student movements. It is important for student movements, as well as other parties within Icelandic universities, to provide minority groups with platforms and support when discussions take place or decisions are made about their issues. Furthermore, it is important for power players in the community to think about accessibility to student movements for all groups of people in Icelandic universities. It is important that all marginalized and minority groups are guaranteed the ability to contribute to discussions and decision-making. Strong and diverse role models can make a difference in opening the minds of those in Icelandic universities. With consideration to this, it is important to secure access to education for different groups of people.

### **2.4. Campus Buildings**

University buildings and surroundings must be accessible. Both visible and invisible access should be taken into account while designing new buildings. Universities shall ensure that students, faculty, and others are not just capable of working within buildings, but also that they feel well within these buildings. Improvements need to be made as soon as possible to older buildings to ensure their accessibility. The same applies to university surroundings. They must all satisfy the strictest requirements of accessibility. Building maps with accessibility information should be beside the buildings' entrances. These maps should include clear markings and signposts in Icelandic, English, and braille. Access

to academic institutions outside of the Capital Region should be improved.

### **2.5. Socioeconomic Equality**

It must be ensured that students can pursue education regardless of socioeconomic status. This is possible to achieve with both good student housing options at an affordable price as well as secure assistance from the Icelandic Student Loan Fund (Icelandic: Lánasjóður íslenskra námsmanna, abbreviated as LÍN). This is one of the grounds for equal rights among students.

#### **2.5.1. Student Housing Issues**

Students must have realistic options in the student housing market as well as the general rental market. A small minority of students are allocated student housing. As a result, municipalities and rental companies must work urgently to increase the student housing options in the universities' close surroundings. The accessibility of these buildings must also be taken into account. Therefore, it is important that all students get allocated housing that fulfills their accessibility needs. A student's position in society must be taken into consideration when determining who gets priority to student housing.

#### **2.5.2. The Icelandic Student Loan Fund**

The Icelandic Student Loan Fund is a fund that is intended to move Iceland towards societal equalization. It is necessary that it fulfills its role as such. The Icelandic Student Loan Fund shall

provide students in Iceland, as well as Icelandic students abroad, with the possibility to pursue a university education. Loans for daily expenses given by the Icelandic Student Loan Fund should always be set, at a minimum, in accordance with full basic support of consumption norms set by the Ministry of Welfare. Additionally, calculations of basic support must be reviewed so that they reflect the actual circumstances of students. In order to compete with Iceland's neighboring countries, the Icelandic Student Loan Fund shall implement an incentive system.

Universities in Iceland should celebrate the diversity within their walls and see to it that everyone has the opportunity to take part. It is important that Iceland's diversity reflects itself in curricula, university employees, students' representatives, and in university promotional materials. Words and actions that reflect prejudice or hate should not under any circumstances be acceptable in Icelandic universities. It is necessary for action plans and resources to be in place for individuals that come to be on the receiving end of harassment or attacks of some kind. There should be liaisons working in all schools, that students should be able to look to for assistance.

Marginalized and minority groups need to be supported in Icelandic universities by giving them wide access to programs and support. Needs assessments are necessary so that students can be offered individualized programs.

It is important to keep intersectionality in mind as one individual can be a part of one or more minority groups. Keeping intersectionality in mind will help lead to open-minded and accessible Icelandic universities.

### 3.1. Social Dimension

Social dimension is the diversity that exists within a community. Social dimension in Icelandic universities means that they should reflect a cross section of the community. Compared to the diversity that one can find in Iceland, the student body does not actually reflect the community. Equal access to education cannot be accomplished unless students

reflect Iceland's diversity in a satisfactory manner. It is important to investigate the obstacles that prevent people from pursuing education. In order to be able to create enlightened policies, reliable information about students must be available. The Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture is required to collect key information about university operations. This information should be public, as was the plan when data collection began. It is important to consider equality and diversity in the collection of information, so as to ensure that partiality or prejudice are not protected in any sense.

### 3.2. Gender Equality

Gender is a social construct that results from a number of sociological, political, social, and psychological dimensions. There are more than two genders contrary to what the well-established gender binary says. All students should be free to identify as whatever gender they please, regardless of what gender they were assigned at birth.

The fact that gender equality has not been achieved has an impact on Icelandic universities. This reflects first and foremost in uneven gender ratios. Women comprise the majority of students, but this ratio is not equal in all departments and majors in Icelandic universities. On the other hand, men comprise the majority of faculties, which implies that women have a difficult time in the academic world. It is obvious that women need to be empowered in STEM (science, technology, engineering, medicine) fields and that gender stereotypes need



to be broken down in Icelandic universities. The same applies to empowering men in fields such as education and healthcare.<sup>1</sup>This can be accomplished by uplifting role models as well as with early intervention in which men's success in education is safeguarded immediately in earlier levels of education. Such actions have a direct impact on the group of people that eventually becomes students. Incisive policy development within the government, and then in Icelandic universities, is fundamental to achieve gender equality.

Gendered and sexual harassment and gendered and sexual violence are completely unacceptable. It is necessary for Icelandic universities to take gendered and sexual harassment and gendered and sexual violence very seriously. Education and awakening need to take place. This is in the hands of all invested parties in Icelandic universities as well as student associations. Processes and resources should be established within universities so as to react accordingly to such issues.

### **3.3. LGBTQ+ Issues**

#### **3.3.1. LGBTQ+ Students**

It must be ensured that Icelandic universities are ready to take LGBTQ+ students in with open arms and that they are not discriminated against. Part of this is for educators and faculty to have received education in LGBTQ+ topics. Universities shall work to make education about LGBTQ+ topics a requirement for all of their educators. All students should feel secure in their educational environment and have the freedom to express

themselves, their sexuality, and their gender. It is important for universities to ensure that action plans are in place in the event that discrimination and/or violence, whether it is verbal or physical, arise. Universities shall work deliberately to have restrooms for all genders. Such restrooms are incredibly important for transgender individuals, but they can also be useful for parents with young children, the elderly, or individuals that need aid, possibly from someone of another gender. It is important to guarantee that LGBTQ+ students have their voices heard in Icelandic universities. Therefore, it is also important for student associations to secure the presence of these students.

#### **3.3.2. The Gender Binary**

The gender binary needs to be uprooted in curricula and teaching. The gender binary is as the name says: the idea that there are only two genders and that one's gender is determined by their sex. The gender binary appears everywhere in the community, including Icelandic universities. Students should be able to have the power to choose their name and pronouns electronically within all Icelandic universities. All university registration forms that ask for the applicant's gender shall have the option to choose something aside from just man or woman. Language that promotes the deep-seated gender binary shall not be used.

### 3.4. Disabled Students

A disability does not lie in one's traits, but rather in the circumstances that one is in due to a disabling environment. There must be special consideration taken to handicapped and visually impaired students where it concerns campus surroundings. Many things need to be changed so as to abide by regulations. This includes signposts, lighting, door width, and more. It is also necessary to secure electronic accessibility. This entails that the electronically-available information be simple and easy to read.

Disabled students have different positions in society depending on whether or not their disability is visible to others. As a result, it must be guaranteed that they will not face discrimination and that there will always be as much consideration given to all disabled students regardless of the visibility of their disability.

### 3.5. Parents

Compared to the other Nordic countries, there is a higher percentage of students here that have at least one child<sup>2</sup>. Parents should be able to pursue education in Iceland without issue. It is unacceptable that parents are forced to drop out due to their finances. Therefore, it is necessary for students' parental allowances to be increased. Parental allowances should not be considered earnings by the Icelandic Student Loan Fund, who subsequently reduces the basic support of child-rearing students. Likewise, children should be supported regardless

of how their parents perform academically. Parents should be able to apply for an exception from the minimum requirements for academic progress both during and after pregnancy. Icelandic universities must also take expectant parents into account. It must be possible for pregnancy to have no impact on the progress of their studies. This entails, for example, exemptions from attendance requirements.

This could apply when an expectant mother needs to go to a maternity clinic, as an example. There needs to be clear rules with concern to this so that exemptions are not given on a whim. Icelandic universities should have the goal of establishing flexible courses. This entails, among other things, accommodating the different needs of students with regards to timetables and the accessibility of course materials. Child-rearing students should have the option to obtain electronic course materials should they be unable to attend class due to circumstances outside of their control.

All municipalities in Iceland should subsidize places for students' children in preschools. Preschools should be open under the auspices of invested parties within Icelandic universities. It is necessary to guarantee that facilities in Icelandic universities allow parents to take their children with them to school. For example, there should be changing stations in all university bathrooms. Furthermore, these changing stations should be accessible to all genders.

Students that have families often are

less capable of attending events connected to university social life. As a result, all student associations should work on making events accessible to all and have a wide range of events.

## 4.1. Teaching Methods, Teaching Styles, and Instructors' Education

Teaching styles should be diverse and instructors should be capable of accommodating the various needs of students. Education in gender studies, LGBTQ+ issues, and disability issues should be required for those studying education. This leads way to open-mindedness and increased perspective into students' needs. Also, instructors should be consistently re-educated so that their knowledge and skills are in-line with social developments and changes.

Icelandic universities are responsible for recording their lectures for visually impaired students. These lectures shall also be subtitled for hearing impaired students. There must also be good access to audiobooks. There also must be the option to have interpretation, including sign language interpretation.

## 4.2. Distance Studies and Flexibility

It is necessary to give distance students more access to university education so that they are on equal footing with on-campus students. Recordings of all classes should be accessible to all students. Icelandic universities should also invest in user-friendly software and technology that increases the quality of distance studies. Equal access for both distance and on-campus students should be the goal.

## 4.3. Teaching Materials

All teaching materials that are used

in Icelandic universities must be viewed critically with regards to the perspectives and histories of other parts of the world, minority groups, and women, which are often put on the back-burner or are even forgotten. Teaching materials must thoroughly cover the diversity and history of Icelandic society. This entails discussion of women's history as well as the history of minority groups. Students must be ready to accept Iceland's diversity as curricula must take it into consideration.

The Icelandic language is especially male-centric. Resultantly, people's choice of words comes automatically from a male perspective. Since the Icelandic language is male-centric by nature, it is important for curricula to uproot this train of thought and appeal to all.

Students' health includes everything that pertains to their standard of living. Good physical and mental health can make the difference in one's studies. Relevant research on student health should be put to use when investigating what can prevent health decline and what leads to good health.

To ensure that everyone has equal opportunities to take part in Icelandic universities, it is necessary to provide healthcare services that are accessible to students. It is also important to look at student health throughout the duration of the study period. Access to quality healthcare services for students in the beginning of their academic careers can help prevent health problems later. Icelandic municipalities must have information about healthcare services accessible.

Education is key when it comes to protection of students' mental and physical health. It is important for education to be targeted and well put-together. Collaboration between invested parties, student associations, and Icelandic universities must increase when it comes to the creation and presentation of education and programs. For example, Icelandic universities could take a more active role in making the Réttinda-Ronja information services known ("Ronja's Rights" (unofficial English translation) is an information bank run by the National Union of Icelandic Students. It provides information to disabled students about their rights).

## 5.1. Mental Health

All students should have access to mental health services. They lead to better student health overall and counters withdrawals from studies. There should be free psychological services offered within the walls of Icelandic universities. These services could be utilized at the beginning of a student's treatment. Universities shall provide information about where students can look to in their surroundings and communities should they need further help. It is the universities' and government's responsibility to increase student accessibility to mental health services. The financial burdens of psychological services are an unacceptable pressure on students that

need their services. Therefore, it must be ensured that finances never stand in the way of getting proper help. It is also important to have an open conversation about mental health so as to thwart prejudices.

## 5.2. Physical Health

It would be ideal for universities to have a movement room that students can use for free. Movement is important for both mental and physical health. Therefore, the possibilities for movement within Icelandic universities need to increase. Working and studying facilities for faculty and students may not have a negative effect on the musculoskeletal system. Health must be kept in mind when building and planning university campuses as well as when choosing nutritious food options. In collaboration with urban planners, the unhealthy

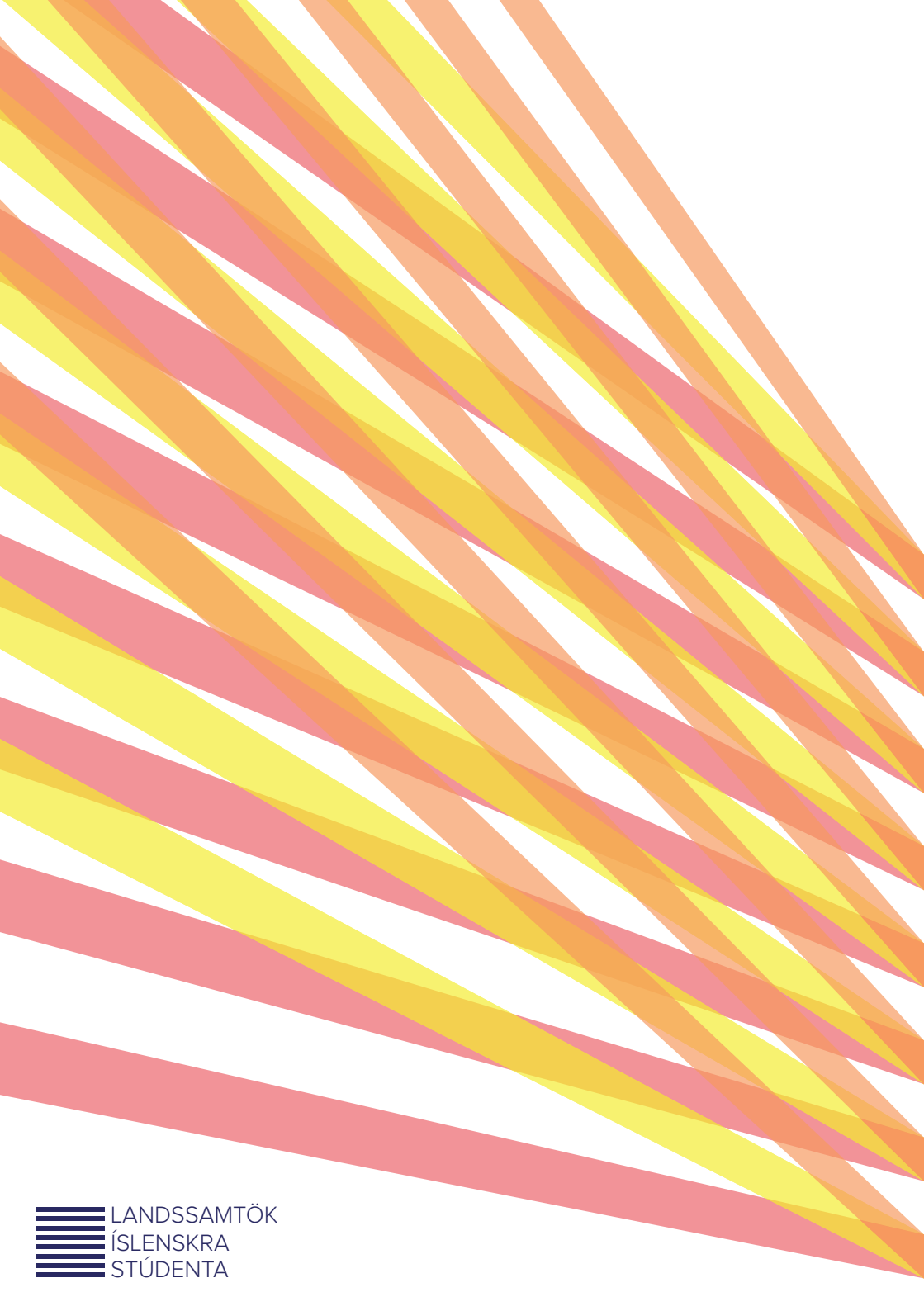
effects of pollution must be counteracted. Faculty and students must be environmentally-aware. Increased environmental awareness could occur by, among other things, encouraging the increased use of more environmentally-friendly and healthier travel options than private vehicles, for example. Examples of better options could be public transportation, cycling, or walking. These options help reduce emissions and airborne particle pollution. In order for this to happen, all levels of government must strengthen public transportation so as to give more people the option to use it.

### 5.3. Student Illness

Universities should accommodate students that fall ill for longer or shorter periods of time with flexible grading and attendance requirements. Students that fall ill should have the right to postpone their exams whether they are in the middle or end of the semester. Similarly, institutions that oversee student housing, as well as the Icelandic Student Loan Fund, should take students' illnesses into consideration and be able to accommodate them should a student not fulfill requirements due to serious illness. The insecurity that comes with homelessness or financial difficulties affects students more and can lead to withdrawal from their studies or further illness.

1 Mennta og menningarmálaráðuneyti, Skýrsla um stöðu íslenskra háskólanema: aðgengi efnahagur og tækifæri til náms (Reykjavík: Mennta og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2018), 3.

2 Mennta og menningarmálaráðuneyti, Skýrsla um stöðu íslenskra háskólanema: aðgengi efnahagur og tækifæri til náms, 4.



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