

Universities as pillars of sovereign societies. The case of a small nation in the North Atlantic. Fyrirlestur við Fróðskaparsetur Færeyja, í tilefni af sextugsafmæli þess háskóla og veitingar heiðursdoktorsnafnbótar, 12. september 2025.

Kæru Færeyingar, kæru vinir! Ég óska ykkur hjartanlega til hamingju með afmæli Fróðskaparsetursins. Megi þessi öflugri háskóli áfram vaxa og dafna, ykkur og umheiminum til heilla.

I will continue in English, the *lingua franca* of the academic world. Congratulations on your anniversary. Sixty years is a fair amount of time in human terms and also for institutions. The period of youth is over, the time of maturity has long since arrived but let us still remember that there will always be time for fun and play, for new developments, for rethinking, for fresh ideas and decisions – just like in peoples' lives.

I am both honoured and grateful to be given this opportunity to take part in this important milestone in your history – and by that I mean the not only the history of Fróðskaparsetrið, but also the history of the whole Faroe Islands, and indeed the West Nordic region. I also take your kind invitation as an expression of the mutual desire here in the Faroes and back home in Iceland to strengthen yet further our collaboration in all possible fields, not least in higher education.

A good university is one of the pillars needed to support a strong, sovereign society. This we can see here in the Faroe Islands. This you know better than I do, and this is certainly the case in the recent history of this small nation in the North Atlantic. But let me give you a brief description of another case in that region, that of my home country and the first university that was founded there well over a century ago. It might be of relevance as you continue on your way to further progress, prosperity and preservation of your national identity and freedom.

When we Icelanders describe our history from relative poverty and foreign rule to independence and riches we often point to a few milestones: In political and constitutional terms we mention a separate constitution in 1874, home rule in 1904, sovereignty through a union treaty with Denmark in 1918, and, finally, the severing of all formal ties with that overseas power and the foundation of the Republic of Iceland in 1944.

However, independence was and is not only about formal status within in a kingdom or the wider world. Economic advances were needed as well. Therefore, we also highlight some key dates in that regard: The founding of two banks in 1885 and 1904, the first motorboat in 1902,

the first trawler owned by Icelanders in 1905, the first tractor in 1920, and so on. I am tempted to add one more year in this regard. A while ago, an old Icelandic lady was asked what she considered the most revolutionary change during her long lifespan. She thought for a bit and then she said, with strong conviction in her voice: Rubber boots. That made so much difference and to the best of my knowledge, they were first imported to Iceland in 1902. For the first time since the settlement of the island, you could walk outside and not get wet feet.

And there are cultural and societal changes, something we can also call confidence-building measures, or even self-help courses. Again, we can give a few pertinent examples: The foundation of co-operative societies, the oldest one in 1882; trade unions, the first one in 1897; guilds and other associations, also in the fields of culture and recreation; the formation of The Reykjavík Theatre Company in 1907, the Icelandic Youth Association in the same year, and the Icelandic Sports Federation in 1912. – And of course the formation of the University of Iceland.

For the next few minutes, I will focus on that step. It was taken on 17 June, 1911, exactly one century after the birth of Jón Sigurðsson, the undisputed leader of Iceland's "national awakening" and struggle for increased freedom from Denmark in the nineteenth century. I refer here mostly to a recent work on the history of the university, available online. There was, it is stated there, a "clear emphasis that the foundation of the university was intrinsically tied to the struggle for an independent nation-state". The first rector, Björn M. Ólsen, stated this in no uncertain terms: "Good universities are the nurseries of culture for all nations, the true sources of growth and development in the best sense of those words."

Ólsen and others realized that the task ahead was massive. The new university was tiny, with fewer than fifty students, nine professors and two associate professors. Moreover, despite the clear connection with nation- and state-building, the political body was not always content with the university, especially in the decades before the Second World War. It was in many ways an elitist institution. It produced officials, priests, lawyers, and learned scholars who often saw themselves as higher-placed experts in their fields, even as if they were living in a separate world.

Here's the danger, dear friends. Yes, a university can and should be a pillar of society, but not an ivory tower. I don't know about the Faroe Islands but in Iceland some people tended to distrust experts, the "know-it-all experts from the south" as they would say, referring to officials or others from Reykjavík, especially if they came from the university.

In countries big and small experts and academic need to find the right balance between, on the one hand, specialization, the defence of rigorous scientific methods and knowledge through intensive study, and on the other hand, the willingness to engage with the wider world, the general public, be eager to explain and share our expertise without the appearance of arrogance or what is known in Icelandic as *menntahroki* – scholarly haughtiness.

Another danger is easily apparent in universities in small societies – the close connection with nation-building that can be both a strength and weakness. Earlier this summer, I had the honour of discussing that aspect in more detail at an international conference here in Tórshavn, organized by NUSCT, the Network of Universities of Small Countries and Territories. There we focused on the unique role universities can play in such surroundings, not least in the preservation of local culture and language.

This is indeed a vital aspect. If we in Iceland or the Faroe Islands do not use our institutes of higher education to maintain and strengthen our language and culture, our history and heritage, then who else will do it? There is not much interest elsewhere, for instance in Denmark, our joint erstwhile overseas ruling power. I know that in other countries, the teaching of old Norse, old Icelandic if you like, is under threat. Yes, we must study that which is peculiar and unique to our societies, not only for ourselves but humanity as a whole.

This can be complex. If we focus exclusively on all things Icelandic or Faroese, we miss the vital context and connection with the outside world. If we are to use Icelandic or Faroese in our daily communication within our universities, for instance, that excludes – that creates the risk of insularity. While we cannot avoid the fact that we live on islands we can and should avoid insular thinking. As it happens, rector Ólsen mentioned that risk in his inaugural speech in Reykjavík in 1911, emphasising that the new university should counteract parochialism and chauvinism, features which he felt were clearly apparent in Iceland.

Dear listeners. I have focused on Iceland here, making comparisons that might be of use here in the Faroe Islands. Let's now widen our viewpoint, yes, let's not be insular or old-fashioned. It is no coincidence that the adjective in Icelandic for someone silly is *heimsk* or *heimskur*, deriving from *heima* – at home. *Heimskt er heimaalið barn*, the saying goes – silly is the child who always stays at home.

Furthermore, while respect for traditional values or methods may be praiseworthy, we must also move with the times. “Describe to me the role of universities in small societies.” This I

asked ChatGTP earlier this week. Seconds later I got a detailed reply: “While their roles are significant, universities in small societies face unique challenges: Resource limitations → Smaller tax bases and fewer private donors can restrict funding. Brain drain → Talented academics and students may leave for better opportunities elsewhere. Balancing global and local needs → Universities must compete internationally while staying relevant to local contexts. Political pressures → In small societies, close-knit networks can sometimes lead to undue political influence on academic freedom.”

Finally, I got this conclusion – and the somewhat scary conclusion here must be that I totally agree, and probably could not have put it in better words myself: “Conclusion: In small societies, universities are more than just educational institutions — they are engines of social progress, economic development, cultural preservation, and political influence. They act as knowledge hubs and community anchors, shaping both the identity and the future of their societies.”

Again, dear human friends: Is there a better example of rapid changes, technological advances and the globalization of human development than artificial intelligence and all its features? “Would you like me to make a comprehensive research-based report on this topic?” That’s what Chat Gpt asked me, probably sensing the temptation to ease my burden. “Write me a 1000 word lecture on this topic”, I replied to this friendly tool of mine and immediately received a reply, with a smiley: “Got it 😊 — I’ll prepare a 1000-word lecture on “The Role of Universities in Small Societies”. The tone will be academic but engaging, suitable for delivery to students, educators, or policymakers. I’ll structure it like an actual lecture, with an introduction, main body, and conclusion, and I’ll aim for around 1000 words.”

What I got is actually a decent lecture. I keep it in my files. But it is not and would not be mine. It does not have what universities must also possess, whether in small or big societies. It does not have passion. It does not have pride. And it does not have the mark of an individual. Universities, big or small, are nothing without individuals, their unique thoughts and aspirations, their unique determination and drive. Let me also reiterate that while I sincerely support the notion that our relatively small island universities in Iceland and the Faroe Islands must not be insular, they must still be among the most important pillars of our sovereign societies, sites of study into our culture and language, history and heritage – sites of pride in our nationhood.

Three years ago, I had the honour, as President of Iceland, to deliver a lecture at this university, on the issue of nationalism in turbulent times. I quoted Benedict Anderson, that authority on the origins and essence of nationalism, in particular his warning that we should not denigrate all its aspects or forms. And I also quoted Björk, our famous artist, and her song, Declare Independence:

With a flag and a trumpet,
go to the top of your highest mountain.
And raise your flag (higher, higher).
Declare independence.

So, to conclude, in my own words: Let our universities serve as pillars of our sovereign societies. In doing so, they must be outward-looking, advanced and progressive – anything but insular institutes with insular people, with *heimsk* people. But in all our academic aspirations to be global academic citizens, working with others near and far, let us not forget our duties and welcome devotion to our local communities. That would also be silly.

As I finish, I will leave you with one of the strongest memories of my childhood. We were sailing home, with Smyrill, from Tórshavn. As my father and I stood on deck, we could see the mountains of the Eastfjords appear in the haze and the fog, dad said to me: *Sjáðu Guðni, þarna er landið okkar, þarna er Ísland* – see Gudni, that's our country, that's Iceland. Little did I know then that I would return many times to the Faroe Islands, this wonderful country – nor did I have the imagination to believe that I would be given an honorary doctorate at this university. I am humble and proud, and immensely grateful. *Bestu þakkir, kæru vinir og grannar – bestu þakkir.*