



# **“It is not only the Teacher who is Talking; It is an Exchange”**

Immigrant Students’ Experiences of Learning  
Environments and Teaching Methods used in  
Icelandic Universities

Artém Ingmar Benediktsson

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of a PhD degree



**UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND  
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**



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**“It is not only the Teacher who is Talking; It is an Exchange”  
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Methods used in Icelandic Universities**

A thesis for a PhD degree in Educational sciences

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## Preface

This PhD dissertation (180 ECTS) includes five academic papers and the synopsis that unites them, presents the theoretical framework of the study, explains the research design in detail and discusses the main findings.

The main supervisor is Dr. Hanna Ragnarsdóttir, professor at the University of Iceland. Dr. Lise Iversen Kulbrandstad, professor at Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, is a co-supervisor. Dr. Guðrún Geirsdóttir, associate professor at the University of Iceland, is on the doctoral committee. I am deeply grateful for the support and work of my supervisors. Hanna Ragnarsdóttir has supported me since the start of this project. She has always provided constructive feedback and encouraged me to develop further. My main supervisor is also a co-author on all the papers in this dissertation, and I am thankful for the time that she spent on reading and editing the manuscripts. I am also very grateful to Lise Iversen Kulbrandstad, whose valuable comments and words of support motivated me. Furthermore, I am especially thankful to her for supervising me and providing support during spring 2019 when I spent one semester at Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences. This was an exceptional experience, during which I acquired new knowledge, met with local researchers and gained an understanding of the Norwegian school system. I appreciate Guðrún Geirsdóttir's effort to read this dissertation and provide feedback. I am also thankful to all my colleagues and peers both in the University of Iceland and Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, including members of the research group to which I belong. Additionally, I owe gratitude to the Icelandic Centre for Research (Rannís) for financial support of this research project.

I also want to thank all the participants of this study and the staff members of the University of Iceland, University of Akureyri and Reykjavík University for showing interest in this project and providing additional information on matters related to the research. My special thanks go to my husband, Guðmundur Bjarni, who has always been supportive and spent many hours reading my works and sharing his reactions and thoughts. This helped me throughout the writing process. Finally, my deepest thanks to my family and friends, your support has always meant a lot to me.



## **Abstract**

This article-based dissertation aims to explore immigrant students' experiences of teaching methods and learning environments in three Icelandic universities. The main goal is to provide deep insight into immigrant students' perspectives on the learning process and to find out which teaching methods they consider being relevant. Furthermore, the dissertation's goal is to analyse the main challenges, including language-related issues, that immigrant students experience during the learning process and what support services are available to them. The study aims to make an important contribution to the current discussion about immigrant students' position in higher education. The study is relevant in the Icelandic context because it is the first extensive research project conducted in Iceland about immigrant students' experiences of higher education.

The theoretical background of the study includes constructivist theory, multicultural education theory and second-language teaching and learning theories. The main focus is on learner-centred and culturally responsive approaches to teaching that encourage students to be independent and active learners, to use previous experiences in the learning process and to exchange knowledge with teachers and peers. When it comes to second-language teaching and learning theories, the study mainly focuses on communicative approaches to teaching and the methods that incorporate the teaching of grammar in lessons that are primarily focused on communication or meaning.

The research is a qualitative study, based on focus groups and individual in-depth interviews. Forty-one first-generation immigrants who are pursuing higher education in one of the three target universities on an undergraduate level participated in the study. The participants have been recruited through maximal variation sampling based on characteristics such as age, gender, origin, field of study, number of years in Iceland and proficiency in the native language(s), Icelandic and English.

The findings revealed that, although the participants' experiences of the learning process are mainly positive, they encounter different challenges, which are often language related. In some cases, they lack information on available support services, and thus, they rarely use them. According to the findings, culturally responsive teaching and assessment are uncommon as

fully established methods. The findings indicate that the majority of assessment methods are summative and involve high-stakes final examinations.

Group work was also one of the main themes in the interviews, and the participants' experiences of this vary from being highly positive to negative. The majority of the participants have taken courses in Icelandic as a second language to improve their language skills. Their perspectives on language teaching are varied. While they are generally satisfied with the courses where implicit teaching methods are applied, their attitudes towards courses using explicit teaching of grammar are often negative.

The study highlights the importance of shifting away from a traditional lecture-based approach to learner-centred approaches to teaching, such as culturally responsive teaching, assessment and support. These are likely to create an empowering learning environment where every student has equal opportunities and access and feels valued. The findings have been presented and discussed in five academic papers that are included in this dissertation. The papers provide a coherent picture of the patterns in the collected data and reveal different dimensions of the participants' experiences of the learning environments and teaching methods in the Icelandic universities.

**Keywords:** immigrants; higher education; multicultural education; culturally responsive teaching; qualitative research

## Ágrip

### „Það er ekki eingöngu kennarinn sem talar, þetta eru samskipti“ Reynsla innflytjenda í háskólanámi af námsumhverfi og kennsluaðferðum í íslenskum háskólum

Tilgangur þessa doktorsverkefnis í formi vísindagreina er að skoða reynslu innflytjenda af kennsluaðferðum og námsumhverfi í þrem íslenskum háskólum. Meginmarkmiðið er að veita innsýn í reynslu innflytjenda af háskólanámi og athuga hvaða kennsluaðferðir þeir telja að henti þeim til náms. Ennfremur er markmið verkefnisins að skoða helstu áskoranirnar, þar á meðal tungumálaörðuleika sem innflytjendur takast á við í námsferlinu og hvaða stoðþjónusta stendur þeim til boða. Rannsóknin er mikilvægt innlegg í þá umræðu sem nú er í gangi um stöðu innflytjenda í háskólanámi á Íslandi og í Evrópu. Rannsóknin hefur einnig gildi í íslensku samhengi vegna þess að þetta er fyrsta umfangsmikla rannsóknarverkefnið sem unnið hefur verið á Íslandi um reynslu innflytjenda af háskólanámi og kennsluaðferðum.

Fræðilegur bakgrunnur rannsóknarinnar er þríbættur og byggir á hugsmíðahyggju, hugmyndafræði fjölmennigarlegrar menntunar og annarsmálsfræði. Aðaláherslan er lögð á nemendamiðaða- og menningarmiðaða nálgun á kennslu, sem hvetur nemendur til að vera sjálfstæða og virka námsmenn, að nota fyrri reynslu sína í námsferlinu og að deila vitneskju með samnemum og kennurum. Hvað varðar kennslu annars máls og námskennungum þeim tengdum er aðaláhersla þessarar rannsóknar lögð á tjáskiptaaðferðir. Slíkar aðferðir teljast vera nemendamiðaðar og hvetja nemendur til að taka virkan þátt í námsferlinu og tileinka sér tungumál í gegnum samskipti við samnemendur og kennara.

Þetta verkefni er eiginleg rannsókn þar sem gagna er aflað með rýnihópum og ítarlegum einstaklingsviðtölum við innflytjendur. Þátttakendur eru fjörutíu og einn háskólanemi sem eru í grunnnámi við einn af þeim þrem háskólum á Íslandi sem rannsóknin náði til. Við val á þátttakendum var leitast við að hafa sem jafnasta dreifingu eftir upprunalandi, aldrí, kyni, lengd búsetu á Íslandi, námssviði, íslenskukunnáttu, enskukunnáttu og kunnáttu í móðurmáli.

Niðurstöður leiddu í ljós að þrátt fyrir að reynsla þátttakendanna af námsferlinu sé aðallega jákvæð, þurfa þeir að takast á við ýmsar áskoranir, sem eru oft tungumálatengdar. Í sumum tilvikum skorti þá upplýsingum um tiltæka stoðþjónustu og var þjónustan því sjaldan nýtt. Niðurstöðurnar sýna þar að auki að menningarmiðuð kennsla er sjaldan notuð sem heildstæð kennsluaðferð. Niðurstöðurnar gefa til kynna að námsmat er yfirleitt lokamat og felur í sér lokapróf sem hefur mest vægi. Hópavinna var einnig eitt af meginþemum viðtalanna en reynsla þátttakenda af henni er breytileg allt frá því að vera mjög jákvæð til neikvæðrar. Meirihluti þátttakenda hefur tekið námskeið í íslensku sem öðru máli til að bæta tungumálakunnáttu sína. Viðhorf þeirra til tungumálakennslu eru fjölbreytt. Nemendurnir eru almennt ánægðir með námskeið þar sem óbeinar kennsluaðferðir (e. implicit teaching methods) eru notaðar en hinsvegar eru skoðanir þeirra á beinum kennsluaðferðum (e. explicit teaching methods) við kennslu í málfræði oft neikvæðar.

Rannsóknin varpar ljósi á mikilvægi þess að hverfa frá hefðbundinni kennslu sem byggir á fyrirlestri í átt að nemendamiðuðum aðferðum við kennslu, svo sem menningarmiðaðri kennslu, menningarmiðuðu námsmati og stuðningi. Líklegt er að slíkir kennsluhættir skapi styrkandi námsumhverfi þar sem sérhver einstaklingur hefur jöfn tækifæri, jafnan aðgang að menntun og telur sig vera metinn að verðleikum. Niðurstöðurnar hafa verið birtar í fimm fræðigreinum sem eru hluti af þessari ritgerð. Greinarnar veita heildstæða mynd af rannsókninni, þeim mynstrum sem er að finna í gögnunum sem safnað var og draga fram mismunandi upplifun þátttakenda af námsumhverfi og kennsluaðferðum í íslensku háskólunum.

**Efnisorð:** innflyttjendur; háskólanám; fjölmenningarleg menntun; menningarmiðuð kennsla ; eigindleg rannsókn

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## List of Papers

This thesis is based upon the following papers, listed by Roman numeral.

Paper I: Benediktsson, A. I., Wozniczka, A. K., Jónsdóttir, K. L. S., & Ragnarsdóttir, H. (2018). Kennsla og stuðningur í íslenskum háskólum - Reynsla innflytjenda. *Netla - Veftímarit um uppeldi og menntun*. doi:10.24270/netla.2018.5

Paper II: Benediktsson, A. I., Wozniczka, A. K., Tran, A. D. K., & Ragnarsdóttir, H. (2019). Immigrant students' experiences of higher education in Iceland: Why does culturally responsive teaching matter? *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education (NJCIE)*, 3(2), 37-54. doi:10.7577/njcie.2850

Paper III: Benediktsson, A. I., & Ragnarsdóttir, H. (2019). Communication and group work in the multicultural classroom: Immigrant students' experiences. *European Journal of Educational Research*, 8(2), 453-465. doi:10.12973/ejer.8.2.453

Paper IV: Benediktsson, A. I., & Ragnarsdóttir, H. (2020). Icelandic as a Second Language: University Students' Experiences. *Tímarit um uppeldi og menntun*, 29(1), 3-21. doi: 10.24270/tuuom.2020.29.1

Paper V: Benediktsson, A. I., & Ragnarsdóttir, H. (2020). Immigrant Students' Experiences of Assessment Methods Used in Icelandic Universities. *Multicultural Education Review*. [Published online prior to the inclusion in a final print and online journal issue]. doi:10.1080/2005615X.2020.1756090



## **1 Introduction**

Immigration around the world is changing the cultural composition of societies and bringing new opportunities and challenges to educational institutions at all levels. In order to acknowledge diversity and provide equal access to education regardless of ethnicity, language skills, socioeconomic status or any other status, educational institutions adjust their curricula, implement new teaching methods, provide relevant support and develop inclusive policies (e.g. Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Banks, 2009; Gaebel & Zhang, 2018; Sinacore & Lerner, 2013; Todorovski, Nordal, & Isoski, 2015).

The proportion of immigrant students in higher education institutions is often viewed as an indicator of successful integration in society (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015; Gaebel & Zhang, 2018). A number of studies on immigrant students in higher education have been conducted around the world (e.g. De Vita, 2002; Ecklon & Rønn, 2007; Erisman & Looney, 2007; Jabbar & Hardaker, 2013; Lau & Lin, 2017; Owens & Lynch, 2012; Popov et al., 2012). Studies conducted by Erisman and Looney (2007) and Owens and Lynch (2012) explored the barriers that immigrants encounter when they sought to enrol in colleges and universities in the USA. Their research revealed several challenges that immigrants experienced during the learning process, including language-related issues, the lack of relevant support and cultural prejudice. Jabbar and Hardaker (2013) researched the role of culturally responsive teaching for supporting ethnic diversity in a British university. De Vita (2002) and Popov et al. (2012) specifically studied multicultural group work in British and Dutch universities respectively, and what impact multicultural group work has on student performance. Ecklon and Rønn (2007) explored non-ethnic Danes' experiences of the Danish health education system with a focus on how students adapted to the Danish educational culture, and their participation during the education process. Lau and Lin (2017) investigated international students' perspectives on the learning process and teaching methods applied in a bilingual university environment in Taiwan, where both Chinese and English were used as languages of instruction.

The aforementioned studies all point out that higher education has a positive impact on immigrants' self-image, contributes to their sense of

belonging and generally improves their integration into societies. Education empowers immigrants and gives them the confidence to seek better jobs and to contribute to further development of their societies. In the European context, the Bologna Process Implementation Report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015) reveals that immigrant students in many European countries are less likely to participate in higher education and are early school leavers. The participation gap between native-born and foreign-born students in Iceland, Norway, Finland and Sweden, is between four and eight percentage points (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015). The statistics in Norway show that, while the overall number of people pursuing higher education is growing every year, the number of immigrants pursuing higher education is gradually dropping (Tønnesen & Larsen, 2018).

Studies in North America show that, besides language-related issues, immigrant students must negotiate multiple identities when pursuing tertiary studies, i.e., ethnic, national and student identities. They sometimes also find themselves in a grey zone somewhere between local, exchange and international students (Buddington, 2002; Maramba, 2008; Sinacore & Lerner, 2013). These results indicate that more research should be conducted to better understand immigrant students' experiences and the reasons for immigrants being less likely to pursue higher education and more likely to drop out.

## **1.1 Icelandic context and previous research**

The number of immigrants in Iceland is growing every year. According to Statistics Iceland, the percentage of immigrants was 12.6% of the total population of the country in 2018 (Statistics Iceland, 2018b). The percentage of second generation immigrants was 1.3% and other residents with foreign backgrounds was 6.9% (Statistics Iceland, 2018b). In other words, 20.8% of the population of Iceland had a foreign background of some sort in 2018. Statistics Iceland provides an official definition of term immigrant as a person who is born abroad to parents and grandparents who were also born abroad (Statistics Iceland, 2018b).

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, immigrants are the foreign-born population of a country, i.e., all residents who have ever migrated from their country of birth to their current country of residence. Immigrants often have a different native language than the population of their current country of residence, and some elements of their background, such as language and culture, will always be part of the immigrants' identity (OECD/European Union, 2015). According to

Statistics Iceland (2018b), second generation immigrants are persons born in Iceland who have two parents who were immigrants. Residents with foreign backgrounds are either persons with one immigrant parent or persons born abroad with both parents born in Iceland (Statistics Iceland, 2018b).

With the expansion of the immigrant population, the number of immigrant students in Icelandic universities is growing as well. There are no official numbers on how many immigrant students are registered because the registrars classify students according to their citizenship, and they rarely distinguish between immigrant, international and exchange students. Since some immigrants have become Icelandic citizens, it is difficult to obtain concrete numbers on immigrant students who are pursuing and graduating from higher education in Iceland. However, according to numbers published by Statistics Iceland, approximately 19% of all newly registered university students were non-Icelandic citizens in autumn 2017 (Statistics Iceland, 2018a).

In this research, the term *immigrant student* is applied to immigrants pursuing tertiary studies. The term immigrant student differs from the terms international student and exchange student. The term international student has a much broader meaning and defines anyone who is enrolled in courses at institutions of higher education who is not a citizen of the country where the institution is located (Open Doors, 2004). The term exchange student refers to foreign students who travel abroad to live and study as part of a scholarly exchange such as the Erasmus programme. Exchange students are registered in their home universities and usually study abroad for one or two academic terms (Open Doors, 2004).

Several smaller-scale studies have been conducted in Iceland focusing on immigrant students in higher education. Ragnarsdóttir and Blöndal conducted two studies on immigrants pursuing higher education in Iceland. The first study, University education in light of globalization<sup>1</sup> (Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2007), involved 16 undergraduate students at the University of Education, now the School of Education at the University of Iceland. The study revealed that, although the participants held positive attitudes towards education in general, they experienced marginalization and some prejudice during the educational process (Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2007). They described how their previous experiences and knowledge were less valued and even ignored (Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> Háskólastigið í ljósi hnattvæðingar: Rannsókn á stöðu og reynslu erlendra nemenda við Kennaraháskóla Íslands.

The second study, A multicultural learning community: Students' experiences of studies in education program at the school of education, University of Iceland<sup>2</sup> (Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2014), focused on seven immigrant women enrolled in the undergraduate program of International Studies in Education, which is taught in English and specifically designed for students of foreign origin. The findings highlighted the importance of educational programs designed with special attention to culturally responsive teaching methods (Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2014). The participants in the study stated that education had had a positive impact on their lives and empowered them. They were thankful for having the opportunity to pursue a university education in English. During their studies, they experienced equality, social justice and democracy (Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2014).

A case study of the International Studies in Education programme was conducted by four professors who taught in and/or created the programme (Books, Ragnarsdóttir, Jónsson, & Macdonald, 2011). The findings showed that, even though the process of creating the program and putting it in practice was challenging, the outcomes were positive. The programme contributes to the important goal of making education accessible to everyone, and the experiences of the students in the programme are generally positive. The results of this case study are comparable to the results of Ragnarsdóttir's and Blöndal's (2014) research.

Although earlier research in Iceland provides some insight into immigrant students' experiences of higher education, these studies are limited to one department or undergraduate programme. This makes the current study highly relevant because it explores the experiences of immigrant students who are pursuing higher education in different departments and programmes in three Icelandic universities.

The University of Iceland, a public university, was established in 1911 in Reykjavík. As of 2017, it had 12,296 registered students (University of Iceland, 2018). As Iceland's biggest university, the University of Iceland offers a variety of programmes and has a significant number of immigrant students. The University of Akureyri is a public university that was established in 1987. It is located in northern Iceland and had 2,074 registered students in 2017 (University of Akureyri, 2018). Reykjavík University, a private university, was established in 1998. It is located in Reykjavík and had 3,800 registered

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<sup>2</sup> Fjölmenningarlegt námsamfélag: Reynsla nemenda af alþjóðlegu námi í menntunarfræði við Háskóla Íslands.

students in 2016 (Reykjavik University, 2017). These three universities offer study programmes on all academic levels. The undergraduate programmes in these universities are generally taught in Icelandic, except for single courses designed for exchange students, the International Studies in Education BA and language-based bachelor degrees that are taught in the target languages.

## **1.2 The origins of the study**

The study is a part of the larger *Educational Aspirations, Opportunities and Challenges for Immigrants in University Education in Iceland (2016-2018)* project that is funded by the Icelandic Research Fund (*Rannís*). The project is the first extensive study on immigrants at universities in Iceland. The project is managed by seven researchers, each researcher with his or her own area of interest. The main research areas are immigrants' educational aspirations and access to formal university education in Iceland, immigrants' experiences of teaching methods and learning environments, obstacles that immigrants face during their studies, support available for immigrant students, policies regarding immigrant students, university staff members' perspectives on communication with immigrant students and immigrant students' future plans and career opportunities.

The research is a qualitative interview study that involves both focus groups and individual in-depth interviews. Forty-one immigrant students who have studied at one of the three target Icelandic universities on the undergraduate level for at least one year participated in the study. The participants were recruited through maximal variation sampling (Creswell, 2008) based on characteristics such as age, gender, country of origin, field of study, number of years in Iceland and proficiency in their native languages, Icelandic and English.

## **1.3 The aim of the study**

The present study "*It is not only the teacher who is talking; it is an exchange*" focuses on immigrant students' experiences of teaching methods and learning environments. The quotation in the title is from an interview with a student whose experiences of teaching methods and communication with teachers were positive. The student highlighted the importance of being able to actively participate in the learning process, use previous experiences and cultural background and exchange knowledge with teachers and peers.

The aim of the study is to provide deep insight into immigrant students' experiences of the education process and learning environments in the three

Icelandic universities. Further, it explores which teaching methods the participants consider to be relevant and empowering. The findings will make a significant contribution to the discussion about immigrant students' positions in higher education in Iceland and to the general dialogue on teaching and learning, especially in the light of the emphasis on learner-centred approaches to teaching. Additionally, understanding immigrant students' challenges provides higher education institutions with an opportunity to develop relevant support services to eventually improve accessibility to higher education.

### **1.3.1 The research questions**

The main research question is: "What are immigrant students' experiences of the learning environments and teaching methods used in Icelandic Universities?" In this research, the term *learning environment* is used to describe the learning context and school culture in the target universities, including course organization, university policies, support services and teacher-student and student-student interactions. The term *teaching methods* is defined here as a combination of principles and approaches that teachers use and apply during the teaching process to facilitate students' learning.

To answer the main question, five academic papers have been written for publication in double peer-reviewed journals. Each paper addresses the main research question from a different perspective, and together, they create a coherent picture of immigrant students' experiences of higher education in Iceland. The research questions in each paper are listed below.

- Paper I: Kennsla og stuðningur í íslenskum háskólum - Reynsla innflytjenda [Teaching and Support in Icelandic Universities. Immigrant Students' Experiences]
  - 1. What are immigrant students' experiences of the learning process in Icelandic universities?
  - 2. What are immigrant students' perspectives on teaching methods and educational support?
  - 3. What challenges do immigrant students encounter during the learning process in Icelandic universities?
- Paper II: Immigrant Students' Experiences of Higher Education in Iceland: Why does Culturally Responsive Teaching Matter?

1. What are immigrant students' experiences of culturally responsive teaching, applied to some extent by several teachers?
  2. What are immigrant students' perspectives on workload and language-related issues?
  3. What are immigrant students' perspectives on the relations with teachers, and why are power-sharing and equality in the classroom are important for immigrant students?
- Paper III: Communication and Group Work in the Multicultural Classroom: Immigrant Students' Experiences
  1. What are immigrant students' perspectives on multicultural group work and what challenges do immigrant students encounter during the group-work process?
  2. What are immigrant students' experiences of communication with teachers during the learning process?
  3. What are immigrant students' reactions to and reflections on the learner-centred approach and culturally responsive teaching methods applied by some teachers?
- Paper IV: Icelandic as a Second Language: University Students' Experiences.
  1. How do immigrant students experience the teaching methods of Icelandic as a second language?
  2. What are the participants' reactions to and reflections on implicit teaching methods that focus on developing communicative skills?
  3. What are the participants' experiences of courses where explicit teaching of grammar is applied?
  4. What are the participants' experiences of communication with teachers during the learning process?
- Paper V: Immigrant Students' Experiences of Assessment Methods Used in Icelandic Universities.

1. What are immigrant students' experiences of the assessment methods, including summative, formative and group assessment, used in three different universities in Iceland?
2. What are immigrant students' perspectives on special support offered by the Icelandic universities during the examination periods?

The goal of the papers is not only to provide insight into immigrant students' experiences of teaching methods and learning environments in the three target universities, but also to call on educational institutions to take steps towards equality in universities by introducing and applying culturally responsive teaching and learner-centred teaching as fully established methods in higher education and by providing relevant educational support to immigrant students.

#### **1.4 Phases of the study and publication of the papers**

The research project started in 2016 and took three years. The project included four overlapping phases. The first phase focused on reviewing literature and preparing for data collection. During the first phase, two pilot interviews were conducted to test the interview questions and adjust the interview guide. During the second phase, the data was collected through focus-group and individual interviews. The third phase, or the analytical process, started after the first interview was transcribed, and the whole analytical process was carried simultaneously with the data collection phase. The data was constantly coded and compared. The final phase focused on writing academic papers and publishing the findings.

Five academic papers were written during the final phase. The first paper was written in Icelandic with three co-authors who are also involved in the umbrella project *Educational Aspirations, Opportunities and Challenges for Immigrants in University Education in Iceland* (2016-2018). It was published in *Netla – Online Journal on Pedagogy and Education*. The second paper was written in English with three co-authors who are involved in the aforementioned project. It was published in *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education*. The third, fourth and fifth papers were written in English in collaboration with the supervisor of the research project Hanna Ragnarsdóttir. The third paper was published in the *European Journal of Educational Research*. The fourth paper was published in *Tímarit um uppeldi og menntun – Icelandic Journal of Education*. The fifth paper was

published in *Multicultural Education Review*. The author of the dissertation is the first author on all five papers.

## **1.5 The structure of the dissertation**

The dissertation includes six chapters. The first chapter is an introduction that presents the study, the research questions and the study's relevance in international and Icelandic contexts. The second chapter is the theoretical framework of the research project. The theoretical framework includes constructivist theory, multicultural education theory and second-language teaching and learning theories. The third chapter presents the research design and methodology. Data collection and analysis are described in detail. The fourth chapter presents the main findings of the research. In the fifth chapter, the findings are discussed and related to the theories and previous research. The research questions are answered, and some conclusions are reached. The most surprising findings are highlighted, and potential limitations of the project are discussed. The sixth chapter is a conclusion, that includes several final remarks. The dissertation also includes the five academic papers in their original forms and five appendices where readers can find the participant information sheet, focus group and individual interview guides and code networks that were used in the analytical process.



## **2 Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of the study is made up of constructivist theory, multicultural education theory and second-language teaching and learning theories. The constructivist theory provides a basis for a learner-centred approach to education, which equips students with tools that help them to develop their skills, construct their own knowledge and become critical thinkers. Multicultural education takes learner centredness to the next level and adds the dimension of culture to the constructivist theory.

While there are considerable similarities between these theories, multicultural education theory highlights the importance of motivating students to view their languages and cultural heritage as strengths. Multicultural education theory aims to provide equal opportunities to all students regardless of their status and makes education an empowering and enriching experience of knowledge and culture exchange. Language-related issues are among the most frequently discussed issues in the field of multicultural education. Hence, language support and language teaching are important elements of education for culturally diverse student bodies, including immigrants. When it comes to second-language teaching and learning theories, special attention is given to those teaching methods that are learner centred and focus on students' active participation in the language learning process. This chapter explores these theories and results of relevant previous research.

### **2.1 Constructivist theory**

Constructivism is an umbrella term that is applied in different contexts. However, the underlying principle of constructivism that is common to all perspectives are the concepts of active discovery and construction of knowledge (Birenbaum, 2003). Constructivist theory is an old tradition. It has been used since the Classical period in Ancient Greece and has slowly developed throughout the centuries (Hawkins, 1994).

In education, constructivism is opposed to the traditional approach to teaching that views education as a knowledge transmission to students from teachers and teaching materials such as books (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). According to constructivist theory, the role of teachers transforms from merely being a source of knowledge to becoming a mentor and advisor who

makes the learning process multidimensional by both transmitting new knowledge to the students and encouraging students to think critically and challenge the presented knowledge in order to create their own knowledge base (Schiller, 2009). The constructivist theory places students in the centre of the learning process and emphasises the development of each student's skills. Additionally, special attention is given to students' backgrounds and previous experiences and how they may impact the knowledge constructed during the learning process (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002; Wright, 2011).

The constructivist theory emphasises discovery as an essential element of the learning process and learning is considered to be active knowledge construction performed by students themselves (Birenbaum, 2003; Cornelius-White, 2007). According to Birenbaum (2003), reflection is an important component of knowledge construction, and "for learning to occur, the learner has to activate prior knowledge, to relate new information/experience to it and restructure it accordingly" (p. 18). Furthermore, constructivist theory highlights the importance of applying a learner-centred approach to teaching because it promotes interaction in the classroom, activates students and encourages them to think critically (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Henson, 2003). The role of teachers is to generate topics for discussion and maintain an encouraging learning environment that motivates students and promotes active learning (Henson, 2003; Karpouza & Emvalotis, 2019). Previous research conducted at different school levels shows that those students who experienced learner-centred approaches developed positive relations to peers and teachers, became more innovative and learned how to use a wider range of instructional resources, such as online, multimedia, human, and printed resources (e.g. Cornelius-White, 2007; Gerdy, 2002; Schiller, 2009; Webber, 2012).

### **2.1.1 Learner-centred vs. lecture-based teaching**

Learner-centred approaches to teaching derive from the constructivist theory and define teaching strategies that focus on students' interests and experiences and allow students to take an active part in the learning process (Henson, 2003). Learner-centred teaching is in contrast to conventional lecture-based teaching, often called a teacher-centred approach, where students passively acquire knowledge from a teacher (Cornelius-White, 2007). In this dissertation the term lecture-based teaching is chosen, although teacher-centred approach is also often used in the reviewed literature. Lecture-based teaching is a more neutral term, that emphasises that the teaching is led by teachers, whose primary goal is still to educate

students (Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2010). Although lecture-based teaching has been used throughout the centuries, it has some significant weak points, making it less relevant in modern society (Grant & Hill, 2006; Smart, Witt, & Scott, 2012). The lecture-based approach is a non-participatory passive model, where students are dependent on a teacher who is the primary source of knowledge to be transmitted to students, who have little chance to criticize it or construct their own knowledge (Grant & Hill, 2006; Smart, Witt, & Scott, 2012). In contrast to lecture-based teaching, learner-centred approaches provide students with an opportunity to become critical thinkers and create their own knowledge during active discussions with teachers and peers (Brown, 2003).

A European research group that conducted extensive research on students' experiences of learner-centred approaches to teaching highlighted some main features of learner-centred teaching. These include the importance of understanding students' different background knowledge, learning styles, needs and interests and acknowledging that it is not possible to find a universal teaching method that fits everyone (Todorovski et al., 2015).

Teachers are encouraged to carefully select learning materials, adapt them to students' goals and look for ways to increase student engagement in the learning process (Misseyanni, Papadopoulou, Marouli, & Lytras, 2018). Furthermore, the implementation of learner-centred teaching helps to create an empowering culture where students are given real choices and their feedback is valued by teachers and policymakers (Brown, 2003; Todorovski et al., 2015). Learner-centred approaches to teaching give students more power to control their educational processes and develop their responsibility. Power is no longer exclusively in teachers' hands; students are also allowed to decide what they learn and how (Brown, 2003). This is very relevant in higher education, where teacher-student relations are reported to play an important role in education process (Karpouza & Emvalotis, 2019). A recent report published by the European University Association also highlights the relevance of learner-centred teaching to higher education institutions in Europe and points out that learner-centred teaching fosters critical and independent thinking, has a positive impact on the students' sense of responsibility and attitudes towards the learning process (Gaebel & Zhang, 2018).

### **2.1.2 Formative and sustainable assessment**

Appropriate assessment methods play an important role in the learning process. Historically, assessment was regarded as a measuring tool for students' achievement based on standardized criteria (Schiller, 2009; Yorke, 2011). This type of assessment is usually referred to as summative assessment and involves high-stakes examinations and assignments in the form of written exams and final essays (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Yorke, 2011).

The main critique of summative assessment methods is that these do little to promote active learning. They also separate assessment from the learning process and do not provide narrative feedback that students could use to improve their performance. Finally, they do not assess the depth of the acquired knowledge (Boud, 2000; Falchikov, 2005; Medland, 2016). Another weakness of summative assessment, especially in the form of final examinations, is the possibility that some students will develop exam anxiety. According to Struyven, Dochy and Janssens (2003), "the anxious person's negative self-appraisals are not only unpleasant to experience, they also have undesirable effects on performance because they are self-preoccupying and detract from task concentration" (p. 210). The extensive critique of summative assessment has led to developing more appropriate assessment methods, such as formative, sustainable and, later, culturally responsive assessment.

In contrast to summative assessment, formative assessment focuses on students' development. It aims to determine what students still need to learn, and it produces feedback on their performance that is likely to motivate further learning (Medland, 2012; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Webber, 2012; Wright, 2011). Formative assessment strongly emphasises the importance of integration of assessment in the learning process, as these are inseparable parts of education (Birenbaum, 2003; Medland, 2016). Formative assessment is considered to be a constructivist approach that reflects on the quality of learning outcomes rather than measuring an achievement (Birenbaum, 2003; Schiller, 2009).

Formative assessment is normally associated with low-stakes tests and assignments that are applied evenly throughout the learning process (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Padilla & Borsato, 2008). Low-stakes assignments involve observations, weekly quizzes, interviews, journaling, writing samples, breaking down larger projects in parts and providing feedback on drafts (Falchikov, 2005; Gielen, Dochy, & Dierick, 2003; Padilla & Borsato, 2008). Constructive feedback is considered to be a central feature of formative

assessment because it motivates students, promotes critical thinking and gives them opportunities for further development (Carless, 2007; Birenbaum, 2003; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Schiller, 2009; Yang & Carless, 2013). Teachers are encouraged to provide narrative feedback on the current assignment before starting the new one (Shull, 2005).

Despite the positive elements of formative assessment methods, some theorists question their empowering value because power still lies in the teachers' hands. It is difficult to see how students can be empowered if they depend on their teachers' evaluation and follow feedback solely provided by teachers (Boud, 2000; Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Gielen et al., 2003). The concept of sustainable assessment was presented in several works by David Boud and Nancy Falchikov. They claim that the purpose of assessment is to empower students and encourage them to undertake their own assessment to develop a sense of responsibility that will be beneficial in the future (Boud, 2000; Boud & Falchikov, 2006). According to Boud and Falchikov (2006), "neither teachers nor a curriculum drive learning after graduation; it is the desires of learners, the initiatives they take and the context in which learning takes place that are powerful influences" (p. 402). The main principles of sustainable assessment are grounded in constructivist theory because it also emphasises critical thinking and active participation in the learning process (Boud, 2000). Sustainable assessment involves activities such as peer assessment, self-assessment and collaborative assessment (Boud, 2000; Falchikov, 2005; Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000).

Peer assessment aims to increase students' involvement in the learning process and to promote knowledge exchange between peers (Carless, 2007; Falchikov, 2005; Yang & Carless, 2013). Previous research has revealed that peer assessment also had a positive impact on students' knowledge levels, reduced the impact of power-relations and led to better classroom attendance (Carless & Boud, 2018; Topping, 2003; Yang & Carless, 2013). Earlier studies also reported that peer assessment stimulated critical and deep-level thinking (Struyven et al., 2003). However, several studies pointed out that students' degree of involvement varied greatly and that students had mixed feelings about peer assessment primarily because they questioned their ability to provide fair grades and were reluctant to fail peers (Falchikov, 2005; Struyven et al., 2003).

Boud (2000) considers self-assessment to be an essential element in promoting lifelong learning and encouraging students to become effective lifelong assessors, i.e. to be able to assess their own work and professional development in the future. Despite positive elements of self-assessment,

Falchikov (2005) points out that, in some cases, students assess themselves based on overall performance and take less notice of individual assessment criteria. This may result in some students overestimating their performance. Additionally, Falchikov (2005) introduces the idea of collaborative assessment that involves both students and teachers in the assessment process by sharing the responsibility for selecting the assessment criteria and performing the assessment itself.

When it comes to assessment, several theorists point out that taking students' perspectives on assessment methods into consideration and allowing them to discuss and/or select the assessment criteria is a more reliable way of motivating them (Carless, 2007; Falchikov, 2005; Struyven et al., 2003). An extensive review of the literature on assessment methods revealed a clear preference for formative and sustainable assessment methods, especially in higher education (e.g. Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Medland, 2016; Struyven et al., 2003). However, theorists agree that the implementation of new assessment methods is a challenging process because new methods can only be beneficial when students are well informed of the purposes of the assessment and understand the assessment criteria (Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000; Struyven et al., 2003, 2005; Webber, 2012).

Carefully chosen teaching methods in combination with appropriate assessment establish a motivating learning environment where every student can become an independent learner. Furthermore, it is important to take into consideration students' cultural backgrounds and previous experiences when working with a diverse group of students.

## **2.2 Multicultural education**

The term multicultural education can be defined as education for diversity since its goal is to cultivate equitable education for all students regardless of language, race, ability, cultural background, socioeconomic status or any other status. Multicultural education was established to counteract the hegemony which caused the marginalization of certain groups of students (Parekh, 2006). The multicultural education tradition endeavours to eliminate the predominant power structures that place students from minority groups, including immigrants, in a discriminatory position from university curricula (Banks, 2016).

Although the term multicultural education is often used interchangeably with intercultural education by both theorists and researchers (e.g. Gorski, 2006; Hill, 2007; Rego & Nieto, 2000), there is an awareness of some

differences between these terms. Holm and Zilliacus (2009) point out that the differences are often unclear, highly depend on context and in many cases the researchers refer to the same thing when using these terms. Furthermore, the differences in use are in many cases geographical. For example, in Australia, Finland and Great Britain multicultural education is commonly used term, while in Netherlands and Sweden the researchers prefer the term intercultural education (Holm & Zilliacus, 2009). In Iceland the term multicultural education (*fjölmennningarleg menntun*) is normally used (e.g. Gunnþórsdóttir, Barillé, & Meckl, 2017; Ólafsdóttir, Ragnarsdóttir, & Hansen, 2012; Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2014). Despite geographical preferences, the term intercultural is in some cases perceived as excessively emphasising the negotiations and interactions between different cultural groups in culturally diverse societies (Gundara, 2000). Additionally, the term antiracist education is used by critically oriented researchers, who look specifically at discriminatory power structures and prejudices existing in culturally diverse learning environments (Kailin, 2002; E. Lee, 2009). In this dissertation, the term multicultural education is chosen, and the current chapter mainly includes references to the theory and studies where the term multicultural education is consistently used.

The goals of multicultural education are to provide students with current knowledge, to encourage them to preserve their commitment to their cultures and to value their previous experiences and backgrounds (Banks, 2009; Nieto, 2010). Multicultural education plays an important role in developing positive attitudes towards diverse students, including immigrants within educational institutions (Banks, 2016; Parekh, 2006). Further, it creates a framework for teachers and policymakers who are willing to adjust their practices to ensure social equality, particularly equal rights to education by, for instance, developing teaching methods suited to diverse students and offering better support for all students regardless of cultural background or any other status.

This chapter highlights the principal features of multicultural education that are common for both compulsory and higher education. Multicultural education theorists, including James Banks and Geneva Gay, usually do not explicitly differ between the different levels of education when describing the features of multicultural education, including culturally responsive teaching.

In the book *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, Parekh (2006) criticises monocultural education by pointing out that “[m]onocultural education stunts the growth of the critical faculty [...] Monocultural education also

tends to breed arrogance, insensitivity and racism" (p. 226). In contrast to monocultural education, multicultural education stimulates dialogue between cultures, promotes critical and independent thinking and motivates students to look at the world from different and broad perspectives (Banks, 2009; Parekh, 2006).

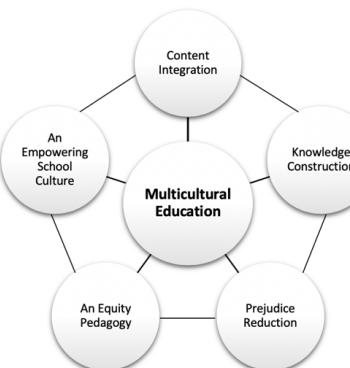
Nieto (2010) pointed out the problem of under-representation in educational institutions in her work *The Light in Their Eyes: Creating Multicultural Learning Communities*. Although she primarily focuses on compulsory education, some of her findings are relevant for all educational levels, including higher education. Nieto (2010) explains that the aspirations of members of minority groups, including immigrants, about education are lower than members of dominant groups. This under-representation leads to the maintenance of prejudices within institutions. However, the theorists highlight the fact that it is not enough to be culturally inclusive in a multicultural educational environment (Guy, 1999; Parekh, 2006). Instead of simple inclusion, educational norms and goals should be re-evaluated and changed to address the needs of students with diverse backgrounds, including immigrants.

Teachers are very important in multicultural education as they have to be aware of diversity in the classroom, try to connect to every student, make the teaching process more personal and allow students to apply previous knowledge in their learning (Nieto, 2010). Both Nieto (2010) and Banks (2016) criticized school personnel for implementing teaching methods based on the needs of the majority of society while ignoring the background, experiences, culture and languages of minority groups. Holmen (2014) analysed the patterns of labelling students according to their language abilities in universities in Denmark. Her study reveals that Danish universities very seldom motivate students with diverse backgrounds to take a full advantage of their linguistic capacity during the educational process (Holmen, 2014). The main emphasis is put on Danish and English, followed by the Scandinavian languages, while the immigrant languages are hardly ever mentioned (Holmen, 2014).

Multicultural education theory promotes a learner-centred approach to teaching (Banks, 2009), conceptualised by Gay (2018) as culturally responsive teaching, that encourages students to use their cultural background, including languages during the education process. Culturally responsive teaching will be discussed in detail in the following section. Furthermore, theorists claim that, in many cases, teachers have to reflect on questions of power-sharing in a classroom because power issues have a great impact on

the success of students with culturally diverse backgrounds, including immigrants (Guy, 1999; Parekh, 2006). Classroom interactions, including teacher-student and student-student are complex processes, that are often based on different power relations. According to Cummins (2012), there are two types of power relations: coercive relations of power and collaborative relations of power. The former refers to the classical image of power exercised by a dominant group or individual, while the collaborative relations of power refer to the notion of empowerment, i.e. being encouraged to achieve more (Cummins, 2012). Furthermore, Cummins (2012) highlights that “[w]ithin collaborative relations of power, power is not a fixed quantity but is generated through interaction with others. The more empowered one individual or group becomes, the more is generated for others to share” (p. 4). The notion of empowerment is central in multicultural education which underlines the importance of equality and power sharing in the classroom (Banks, 2016). The learning process is often regarded as a knowledge exchange where teachers and students share their knowledge on a specific topic (Banks, 2016; Gay, 2018).

Banks (2009) developed and described five distinctive dimensions to visualise the framework and highlight the features of multicultural education that could potentially help teachers and policymakers who are implementing multicultural education principles in practice.



**Figure 1. The dimensions of multicultural education**  
**(Banks, 2009, p. 15).**

Banks (2009) explains that all five dimensions of multicultural education are equally important; they are interrelated and overlap in some cases.

Content integration emphasises the importance of using a variety of teaching materials from various cultures and introducing key concepts and theories developed in different cultures. According to Banks, knowledge construction “describes teaching activities that help students to understand, investigate, and determine how the implicit cultural assumptions, frames of reference, perspectives, and biases of researchers and textbook writers influence the ways in which knowledge is constructed” (p. 16). In other words, knowledge construction encourages critical thinking and triggers active participation and discussions in the classrooms. Prejudice reduction highlights the importance of developing more democratic and positive cultural attitudes. Equity pedagogy’s main goal is to assure that all students have equal opportunities and access to education and receive appropriate educational support. The fifth dimension is an empowering school culture. This focuses on educational institutions as a whole and their obligations to create an environment where every student will experience educational equality and cultural empowerment regardless of ethnic, social or any other status.

Although understanding of the dimensions of multicultural education and its goals is important for all academic personal, policymakers and administrators, a great responsibility is put on teachers, who are encouraged to apply culturally responsive teaching methods suitable for diverse student populations, look for different ways of communicating knowledge, and understand the need for individual support for students.

### **2.2.1 Culturally responsive teaching**

Culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) is a learner-centred approach within multicultural education theory and a framework for understanding many of the complex instruments that underlie the specifics of teaching diverse students. This approach was also conceptualised by Ladson-Billings (1995) as culturally relevant pedagogy and further developed by Paris (2012) into culturally sustaining pedagogy. These approaches focus, first and foremost, on incorporating students’ previous knowledge, experiences, cultures and languages into the educational process to create a rich multicultural learning environment where every opinion and all experience is valued, and students are encouraged to relate their newly acquired knowledge to their previous experiences (Gay, 2018; Paris, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). It is important to mention that culturally responsive teaching is not exclusively relevant to minority group students, it is beneficial to everyone regardless of cultural background or any other status (Gay, 2018;

Nieto, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The concept of culturally responsive teaching has been primarily used in literature and research in compulsory education. However, the underlying features of culturally responsive teaching are relevant to higher education as well.

The aforementioned concepts include a significant common element, the idea of culture. Although the meaning of the word culture seems obvious, it is actually multidimensional and can be explained in different ways. A significant feature of culture is that it is acquired, learned and socially constructed, and it is not in any way a genetically inherited phenomenon (Valdiviezo & Nieto, 2015). Nieto (2010) addresses the challenge of defining culture. Initially, Nieto (2010) provides a primary definition of culture as “the ever-changing values, traditions, social and political relationships, and worldview created, shared, and transformed by a group of people bound together by a combination of factors that can include a common history, geographic location, language, social class, and religion” (p. 78). Later, Nieto (2010) points out that culture is a multifaceted, dynamic and non-linear phenomenon where new cultural values can be adapted and later rejected depending on various factors. Furthermore, culture is seen as a context-dependent phenomenon that can be influenced by social, political, economic and other factors (Nieto, 2010).

Culturally diverse student bodies, including those with immigrants, bear different cultural characteristics. The role of culturally responsive teachers is to explore students' cultures through dialogue and to create a multicultural environment based on active knowledge exchange, which enriches and empowers students (Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2010; Quaye & Harper, 2007). According to Gay (2018), culturally responsive teachers celebrate diversity in the classroom by allowing students to relate newly acquired knowledge to their culture and previous personal experience. Culturally responsive teaching methods create a link between school and the outside world. Students are no longer balancing between two cultures but incorporating one culture into the other (Gay, 2018).

Marchesani and Adams (1992) presented a model that creates a framework for teachers who work with diverse students. The model includes four essential steps of 1) understanding the teacher's cultural identity; 2) understanding students' cultural identities; 3) composing an inclusive curriculum based on the students' experiences and cultures, especially on their strong points; and 4) applying relevant teaching methods (Marchesani & Adams, 1992). This model is very similar to a model presented by Gay (2001). However, Gay (2001) combines Marchesani and Adams' (1992) first

two steps into one and calls it “developing a cultural diversity knowledge base” (p. 106).

A cultural diversity knowledge base should be acquired through active dialogue between teachers and students. Especially in the early stages, it is important for teachers to be welcoming and open and not to project their own worldviews and opinions onto the students (Gay, 2001; Nieto, 2010). The next step described by Gay (2001) is identical to the third step described by Marchesani and Adams (1992). It is the teacher’s ability to provide a curriculum grounded in the cultural diversity knowledge base. Creating a multicultural curriculum is regarded as a significant and challenging step. It is important for teachers not to include something from every culture in the world, which is impossible and ends with a trivial and superficial curriculum (Parekh, 2006). Instead, teachers are encouraged to “familiarize students with the major representative forms of the subject in question, concentrate on some of them, and so stimulate them that they follow up the rest on their own” (Parekh, 2006, p. 227).

The next step, according to Gay (2001), is the teacher’s demonstration of cultural caring and building up a learning environment based on trust and cooperation, where students and teachers become partners who work together to solve problems and construct knowledge. Furthermore, it is essential to promote cross-cultural communication in the classroom through comparing knowledge and transmitting ideas. Gay’s (2001) final step is somewhat identical to Marchesani and Adams’ (1992) and emphasises putting relevant teaching methods into practice and creating cultural harmony in the classroom.

The concepts of culturally responsive teaching and culturally relevant pedagogy have been re-evaluated and have evolved into the concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy through a critique of the concepts discussed above (Paris, 2012). The critique derives from questioning whether the terms relevant and responsive really reflect the teaching and research based on them. According to Paris (2012), “the term culturally sustaining requires that our pedagogies be more than responsive or relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people—it requires that they support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence” (p. 95). In other words, the aim of culturally sustaining pedagogy is to move from the static notions of relevance and responsiveness, that focus on pedagogy which is appropriate in a particular period of time,

and to emphasise an idea of sustainability that will support students in the future (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014).

Ladson-Billings, who introduced the term culturally relevant pedagogy supports the concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Furthermore, Ladson-Billings criticises some teachers who claim to apply teaching methods which focus on cultural diversity, for being one-dimensional and not fully translating research into practice. The critique is based on the notion that teachers are often focused on content integration and ignore other important dimensions of culturally relevant pedagogy, including encouraging students to think critically about policies and practices that may have an influence on their lives inside and outside educational institutions (Ladson-Billings, 2014). The concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy can also be related to the concept of sustainable assessment that empowers students, encourages them to perform their own assessment and develops a sense of responsibility that will be valuable in the future life (Boud, 2000; Boud & Falchikov, 2006).

Overall, culturally responsive/relevant/sustaining teaching is about caring for every student, allowing everyone to actively participate in the learning process and bringing in personal experiences and knowledge. Previous research in higher education shows that culturally responsive teaching plays an important role in supporting students with diverse backgrounds in universities and ensuring that all students have equal access to education (Books et al., 2011; Jabbar & Hardaker, 2013; Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2014). Students and teachers are encouraged to work together, exchange information and learn from each other. The learning environment becomes rich and productive when it reflects the cultures and experiences of all participants (Banks, 2009; Nieto, 2010). According to one of the pioneers of culturally responsive teaching, “culturally responsive teaching benefits everyone! It improves the educational achievement of ethnically, culturally, racially, linguistically, and socially diverse students” (Gay, 2015, p. 136).

### **2.2.2 Multicultural group work**

Establishing positive and productive peer-to-peer interactions are as important as maintaining positive relations between teachers and students (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002; Smart et al., 2012). Group work can serve the purpose of activating students and promoting interactions within the groups. Overall, it plays an important role in students’ integration into the university environment (Hassanien, 2006; Popov et al., 2012).

When it comes to multicultural classrooms, several researchers suggest that group work has a positive effect on students' academic performance, promotes cross-cultural knowledge exchange and empowers students (e.g. De Vita, 2002, 2005; Kimmel & Volet, 2010; Sweeney, Weaven, & Herington, 2008). Multicultural group work is also reported to be successful in the elimination of cultural stereotypes, misconceptions and prejudices that may exist in multicultural classrooms (De Vita, 2002, 2005).

Although the main goals of multicultural group work are highly positive and highlight the importance of collaborative work and active knowledge exchange, some students still hold negative preconceptions about multicultural group work and try to avoid it by asking teachers to allow them to choose group members (De Vita, 2002, 2005; Popov et al., 2012). The results of previous research suggest that teachers should assign group members in order to create more balanced groups and prevent the marginalization of some students (De Vita, 2002, 2005). Additionally, students occasionally see cultural differences as barriers instead of advantages and worry about free-riding that may occur during the work process (Maiden & Perry, 2011; Popov et al., 2012; Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2007; Sweeney et al., 2008).

Popov et al. (2012) studied students' attitudes towards multicultural group work in a university in the Netherlands. The study highlighted some issues. The participants pointed out that difficulties occurred because of some group members' insufficient language skills and general communication problems within the groups, likely related to students' different learning styles (Popov et al., 2012). Furthermore, Holmen (2014) highlighted that language-related issues can result in students being less active during class discussions and even withdrawing from group work.

De Vita (2002) conducted a study at a British university to find out whether assessed multicultural group work would really pull British students' grades down. The findings disproved this misconception and emphasised the positive effects multicultural group work has on all members' academic performance (De Vita, 2002). On the other hand, a study conducted by Moore and Hampton (2015) at an Australian university with diverse a student population revealed that students classified as high-performing with respect to individual assignments received lower grades for group assignments, while mid-performing students received higher grades. However, the researchers found no correlation between students' backgrounds and the differences in grades received for the group and individual assignments,

which suggests “that individual ability rather than background may be implicated in these differences” (Moore & Hampton, 2015, p. 403).

Teachers can significantly help students to eliminate negative preconceptions and improve their attitudes towards multicultural group work (De Vita, 2005; Forehand, Leigh, Farrell, & Spurlock, 2016; Hassanien, 2006) by focussing their students’ attention on the opportunity to explore new cultures, to learn about group members’ different cultural backgrounds and to view their own culture from different perspectives (Kimmel & Volet, 2010; Sweeney et al., 2008). Furthermore, group work can be more beneficial if it involves more holistic assessment approaches that are regarded as formative and sustainable. This includes teachers allowing students to take some control of the assessment process and to provide continuous peer feedback during the work process (Almond, 2009; Falchikov, 2005; Topping, 2003). A combination of the aforementioned practices can create a positive learning environment where group work will be seen as a unique opportunity to exchange knowledge and work together to achieve better results.

### **2.2.3 Culturally responsive assessment**

The theorists and researchers in the field of multicultural education emphasise how assessment that is not done with equity in mind can have a negative impact on some students’ learning outcomes and well-being. Eventually, it can be a reason behind students’ negative experiences of the learning process (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2007; Nieto, 2010; Slee, 2010). Culturally responsive assessment is a form of learner-centred assessment that is applied in educational institutions with diverse student populations. Culturally responsive assessment takes students’ cultures, previous experiences and individual learning styles into consideration and assesses learning rather than measuring achievement based on standardised criteria (Slee, 2010). Teachers are encouraged to discuss the assessment criteria with the students, involve them in the assessment process, develop students’ autonomy and apply formative and sustainable assessment methods such as peer- and self-assessment (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2007; Sambell, McDowell, & Sambell, 2006). Additionally, previous studies suggest that teachers should take extra time to explain all assessment criteria and introduce the local assessment culture to the students with diverse cultural backgrounds because some seemingly well-known assessment methods for domestic students may be unclear for students of immigrant backgrounds, as they may not have experienced them before (Boesch, 2014; Moore & Hampton, 2015).

According to Padilla and Borsato (2008), high-stakes examinations and assignments are not fair towards students from culturally diverse backgrounds, including immigrants, because evaluation guidelines are still normed on dominant population and do not reflect student diversity. The students may find themselves in the situation of being unfairly assessed and, because of this, denied access to educational opportunities (Padilla & Borsato, 2008).

Nevertheless, culturally responsive assessment does not mean lowering requirements based on a student's language skills, ethnicity or any other status. Instead, teachers should maintain equally high academic expectations towards all students (Gay, 2018; Swaminathan & Alfred, 2001). Assessment must be non-biased and include a variety of methods, such as oral and written low-stakes assignments such as portfolios, capstone projects, journals, group work, and interviews (Lloyd, Lewthwaite, Osborne, & Boon, 2015; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2007; Slee, 2010). In addition to culturally responsive assessment, relevant support should be provided to students from diverse backgrounds, including immigrants, to ensure more equitable access to education (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Padilla & Borsato, 2008; Slee, 2010).

#### **2.2.4 Relevant educational support**

Relevant educational support is one of the key elements of multicultural education and has a great influence on student experiences of the education process (Altbach et al., 2009; Arredondo et al., 1996; Engle & Tinto, 2008). In most cases, educational support is provided by academic counsellors, teachers and other staff members who work directly with students. Teachers and academic counsellors play an important role in helping students to integrate into a new school environment, which could have a positive influence on the students' academic performance and their well-being (Stebleton & Soria, 2012).

Several theorists and previous research emphasise how support should be tailored to fit different students' needs and interests (Boesch, 2014; Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Sinacore & Lerner, 2013). According to C.C. Lee (2008), those who provide support to culturally diverse student bodies must adopt a broader perspective on culture and understand all the specifics of cultural identity that go far beyond simply belonging to a racial or ethnic group. Engstrom and Tinto (2008) concluded that access to education without relevant support is not a real opportunity for students who are not from the dominant culture, including immigrants. Furthermore, they suggest that educational institutions offer both formal educational support and peer

support through promoting social activities and encouraging students to participate in them (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008).

In many cases, students not from the dominant linguistic group experience language-related issues and need language support during their studies (Ecklon & Rønn, 2007; Erisman & Looney, 2007; Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2007; Sinacore & Lerner, 2013). Language support can include allowing students to bring dictionaries to exams, providing translations of examinations and assignment descriptions, allowing students to use different languages when they answer examination questions and write assignments, and encouraging students to ask for definitions of words that they do not fully understand (Keith-Spiegel, Whitley Jr, Balogh, Perkins, & Wittig, 2002). However, Hambleton and Patsula (1999) dispel the prevailing myth that anyone who knows two languages can provide a sufficiently good translation of assignments or exam questions. To produce an acceptable translation, a teacher should possess a deep understanding of the source and target languages and cultures and should be knowledgeable about designing examinations and assignments, something quite challenging for teachers (Hambleton & Patsula, 1999).

Previous studies have indicated that immigrant students make an effort to improve their language skills and learn the local languages while studying (Ecklon & Rønn, 2007; Sinacore & Lerner, 2013). Hence, providing relevant language courses, where suitable teaching methods are applied, is very important in universities with diverse student populations.

## **2.3 Second-language teaching and learning theories**

Limited language skills, a lack of support and insufficient language teaching for immigrant students can have a great impact on the students' learning outcomes. This could also explain why the percentage of immigrants pursuing higher education is low (Erisman & Looney, 2007; Sinacore & Lerner, 2013; Thorud, 2019). Furthermore, knowledge of the dominant cultures' languages is an important element in the integration process as languages are inseparable parts of cultures. This is particularly relevant in European settings, where high-level skills in the local language(s) are required to enter higher education and this could be hard to achieve for many immigrants (Geiger & Lund, 2010; Holmen, 2014; Kulbrandstad, 2017; Thorud, 2019; Thång & Larson, 2010).

Language teaching and learning theories have been continuously developing, starting with Lado's theories about contrastive analysis (Lado, 1957). Chomsky's universal grammar theory followed (Chomsky, 1957), with

the natural approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983), input hypothesis (Krashen, 1985) and output hypothesis (Swain, 1993) coming later. Subsequently, several other approaches to language teaching have been introduced, such as cognitive theories (Skehan, 1998), the multilingual turn (May, 2014), and usage-based theories (N. C. Ellis & Wulff, 2015). There are dozens of other theories and approaches that developed through decades of research in the field.

Some approaches emphasise explicit language teaching, while others focus on implicit teaching. The terms explicit teaching and implicit teaching are antonyms, where the former implies intentional teaching approach, during which students are instructed to learn language rules and practice them through pattern drills and similar exercises (N. C. Ellis, 2015, pp. 3-4). Implicit teaching refers to teaching approaches based on the notion that students should acquire language skills, including linguistic competence, naturally through different classroom activities, such as group work and class discussion (N. C. Ellis, 2015, pp. 3-4). This chapter highlights four approaches: focus-on-forms, focus-on-form, communicative language teaching and task-based instruction. These approaches have been chosen, because, according to the data collected, they are relevant to understanding the students' views on the teaching of Icelandic as a second language at the universities.

### **2.3.1 Focus-on-forms**

Early theorists of explicit teaching methods of grammar concluded that intensive exercises of grammar rules were an essential element in the language acquisition process (Harmer, 1987; Lado, 1964). Based on this belief, a special approach to language teaching has evolved. This approach was conceptualised by Long (1991) as focus-on-forms to describe explicit language teaching where the syllabus includes a predetermined list of linguistic forms of syntax and morphology that students are supposed to practice through a set of exercises (Long, 2011). Student involvement in the learning process is very limited. Thus, this approach is considered to be less motivating and not learner-centred (N. C. Ellis, 2015; Long, 1991, 2011).

Norris (2011) concludes that focus-on-forms separates linguistic elements from their communicative functions and produces disappointing outcomes and dissatisfied students. Currently, focus-on-forms and other explicit teaching methods are considered to be less relevant (Long, 2011; Norris, 2011). Still, some theorists of second language teaching do not deny the importance of applying such teaching methods and even point out how explicit teaching of grammar rules can speed the process of language

learning if explicit teaching methods are applied correctly (N. C. Ellis, 2015; Loewen, 2005). Focus-on-forms is usually opposed to the teaching approach called focus-on-form, which claims to produce better learning outcomes and motivates students to actively practice the target language (R. Ellis, 2012; Long, 2011).

### **2.3.2 Focus-on-form**

The term focus-on-form was introduced by Long (1991) to describe a learner-centred approach to language teaching where students' attention is occasionally drawn to linguistic elements, including morphology and syntax, during lessons that are primarily focused on communication or meaning. Theorists argue that traditional grammar teaching has different negative side-effects that can be avoided by rejecting teaching full of grammar rules and pattern drills and by incorporating grammar teaching into communicative activities, that activate students (R. Ellis, 2012; Long, 2011). As stated by Doughty (2001), "the factor that distinguishes focus-on-form from other pedagogical approaches is the requirement that focus-on-form involves learners' briefly and perhaps simultaneously attending to form, meaning and use during one cognitive event" (p. 211).

According to Long (1991) and R. Ellis (2012), the focus-on-form approach serves two different purposes. It develops students' communicative skills through applying meaning-focused communicative tasks, and it improves students' linguistic accuracy. Furthermore, focus on linguistic elements is considered to be necessary during a communicative activity, because students "have limited capacity to process the second language and have difficulty in simultaneously attending to meaning and form. They are likely to prioritize meaning over form when performing a communicative activity" (R. Ellis, 2012, p. 227).

There are different ways to implement focus-on-form. Students might be asked to have class discussions, role-play or perform information- or opinion-gap tasks. In the course of doing these tasks, the students' attention is occasionally focused on linguistic elements predetermined by a teacher or those that are causing the students problems (R. Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2002). Focus-on-form can be divided into two types, incidental focus-on-form and planned focus-on-form. R. Ellis (2012) describes planned focus-on-form as the use of predetermined tasks with a focus on specific linguistic elements. On the other hand, the distinctive feature of incidental focus-on-form is that teaching of grammar is applied "spontaneously without prior planning in meaning-focused interaction" (Loewen, 2005, p. 361).

Incidental focus-on-form is supported by Swain's (1993) output hypothesis that claims that second-language acquisition is more effective when students become aware of their knowledge gaps and learn something new about the target language by making an effort to modify their output. Furthermore, incidental focus-on-form is divided into reactive focus-on-form and pre-emptive focus-on-form, where the former is regarded as a treatment of students' errors arising during classroom activities, and the latter is described as teachers' or students' attempt "to make a particular form the topic of the conversation even though no error in the use of that form has occurred" (R. Ellis et al., 2002, p. 427). However, pre-emptive focus-on-form is considered to be less favourable because it could interrupt the communicative flow in the classroom (R. Ellis, 2001; R. Ellis et al., 2002).

Despite differences between the types of focus-on-form, there is one distinctive element that is common to all types. Focus-on-form is applied while students perform communicative tasks in the classroom where the priorities are communication and meaning. Thus, it is important for teachers to create a communicative learning environment and apply tasks that activate students to take part in discussions. This can provide teachers and students with opportunities to focus on relevant linguistic elements that are either considered interesting or cause problems.

### **2.3.3 Communicative language teaching**

Communicative language teaching emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. Originally, it was a reaction to traditional language teaching that emphasised explicit teaching of grammar (Richards, 2006). During its first years, communicative language teaching created enthusiasm and excitement. It was further developed by different theorist in the 1990s and became one of the most known approaches to second-language teaching (J. F. Lee & VanPatten, 1995; Lund, 1999; Richards, 2006; Tarone, 1981). Despite a relatively long tradition of communicative language teaching, many theorists agree that the whole concept and the term itself is vague and poorly defined (e.g. Hiep, 2007; Skehan, 2003; Wesche & Skehan, 2002).

The main focus of communicative language teaching is on students' involvement in the learning process and acquiring knowledge through active communication, discussions and collaborative work all using the target language (Lund, 1999; Tarone, 1981). Different classroom activities are suggested, such as group work, interviews, opinion sharing and role-play. These activities encourage students to participate in the learning process and develop all of the language skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing

(Ambjørn, 2012; Richards, 2006). Communicative language teaching has been criticised for lacking insight into linguistic elements of the target language, which leads to students' level of grammatical accuracy being relatively low because "even very long periods of exposure to rich input in the target language, as in immersion settings, were insufficient for achievement nativelike ultimate attainment" (Norris, 2011, p. 580).

Jacobs and Farrell (2003) discuss a paradigm shift in communicative language teaching and present several main changes. The teaching is constantly moving towards learner-centredness by granting students more control over their own learning, both in terms of content and managing the learning process. Furthermore, critical and creative thinking are more frequently promoted and new forms of assessment, such as formative assessment, are implemented in the curriculum. The social dimension of learning is highlighted, and the teacher acts as more of a facilitator. Last, but not least, understanding diversity and different learning styles has become an important element of communicative language teaching that encourages viewing "differences not as impediments to learning but as resources to be recognized, catered to and appreciated" (Jacobs & Farrell, 2003, p. 8). This paradigm shift presents clear parallels to both constructivist theory and multicultural education theory.

R. Ellis (2012) provides definitions of two different versions of communicative language teaching, the weak and strong version. The characteristic element of the weak version is that "teaching content was defined in terms of the linguistic realizations of notions and functions but the methodology remained essentially the same as in the Audiolingual Method (i.e. it involved controlled production practice and was accuracy-oriented)" (R. Ellis, 2012, p. 60). On the other hand, the strong version does not specify content linguistically. Instead, it defines the tasks that students have to perform using whatever resources are available to achieve fluency (R. Ellis, 2012). Furthermore, R. Ellis (2012) claims, that "[o]ver time, the strong version morphed into 'task-based language teaching'" (p. 60), also conceptualised as task-based instruction.

### **2.3.4 Task-based instruction**

Task-based instruction is a communicative, learner-centred approach to language teaching that claims to develop all language skills, listening, reading, speaking, and writing, as well as creating a productive learning environment by motivating students to participate in the learning process (R. Ellis, 2009; Norris, 2011; Pedersen, 2007). Task-based instruction emerged

from the strong version of communicative language teaching (R. Ellis, 2012). Furthermore, task-based instruction is related to focus-on-form approach to teaching in the way that task-based instruction triggers interactions in the classroom, it produces language content and forces students to focus on both linguistic elements and meaning (Loewen, 2005; Long, 2011; Pedersen, 2007; Wesche & Skehan, 2002).

There is no agreement on the definition of task-based instruction, and many theorists point out that the criteria and features are loosely formulated. In some cases, it is difficult to find characteristics that clearly distinguish tasks from other activities (R. Ellis, 2009; Richards, 2006; Robinson, 2001; Widdowson, 2003). Several key characteristics of a task are introduced by Richards (2006), who claims that a task requires students to use their existing language resources. Tasks focus on meaning and have “an outcome which is not simply linked to learning language, though language acquisition may occur as the learner carries out the task” (Richards, 2006, p. 31). Additionally, Richards (2006) highlights how tasks that require pair or group work develop students’ interactional skills. According to these key characteristics, it is clear that task-based instruction shares some features with culturally responsive teaching, which also emphasises the importance of using of students’ previous knowledge and pays attention to communication and interaction in the classrooms (Gay, 2018). The role of the teacher is also widely discussed. It is claimed that the teacher plays the role of a manager or facilitator of a task-based activity rather than a source of knowledge, which creates an atmosphere of power-sharing and develops trust relationships between teachers and students (R. Ellis, 2009; Swain, 2005). The dimensions of mutual trust and power-sharing are also regarded as significant features of the learner-centred approach to teaching and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2010; Wright, 2011).

Overall, task-based instruction is not a fixed teaching method but a set of principles that may be applied and adapted to different learning environments, aims and students. There are different design variables for tasks and these variables have different purposes and suit different groups of students. Tasks can be pedagogical, or focused, which means that the tasks are designed to require the use of some specific linguistic elements or types of language (Richards, 2006). Pedagogical tasks are opposed to real-world, or unfocused, tasks that are designed to trigger communication through classroom activities that are similar to real-world communication (Richards, 2006).

Tasks can be also divided into input-providing tasks that develop students' listening or reading skills and output-prompting tasks that engage students in speaking or writing (R. Ellis, 2012). Furthermore, tasks can be closed in that they require one or a limited number of outcomes or open by having a potentially unlimited number of outcomes, such as in an opinion sharing task (R. Ellis, 2012). Regardless of the design variables of a task, formative and continuous assessment should be provided throughout courses that involve task-based instruction (Norris, 2011). Formative and corrective feedback are crucial elements, as they trigger language modification and improvement in the learning outcome (Robinson, 2011; Russell & Spada, 2006).

Theodorsdóttir and Friðriksdóttir (2013) studied Icelandic as a second language students' experiences of a task-based assignment called *Íslenskuborpið* (The Icelandic Village). Their theoretical framework was based on a paper by Wagner (2004), who suggests that adding a social dimension into task-based instruction by sending students out of the classroom and encouraging them to use their language resources could have benefits and develop students' communicative competences. The task, *Íslenskuborpið*, aimed to promote daily interaction in Icelandic to improve the students' language skills by speaking Icelandic to Icelanders, recording and analysing the conversations. The findings presented by the researchers are highly positive and they report overwhelming satisfaction with the task (Theodórsdóttir & Friðriksdóttir, 2013). The task is described as an almost universal approach that could fit all students. Nevertheless, previous research shows that there is no single way of doing task-based instruction, so tasks must be thoroughly evaluated and tailored to particular students' proficiency levels, interests and other circumstances before a task is applied (R. Ellis, 2009; Pedersen, 2007; Richards, 2006). Different theorists conclude, that task-based instruction is a promising approach to language teaching that can be useful in combining communicative teaching with teaching of linguistic elements of the target language. However, the teachers should always bear in mind that different tasks are designed for different purposes and relevant for different groups of students (R. Ellis, 2009; Norris, 2011; Swain, 2005).

## 2.4 Summary

The literature review showed the importance of paying particular attention to different students' learning styles, personalities, cultures and other aspects of diversity. It is essential to provide everyone with equal opportunities and create an empowering learning environment where every

student feels welcomed and valued regardless of race, nationality, socioeconomic status or any other status. Researchers and theorists highlight educational shifts from mere knowledge acquisition to empowering experiences of knowledge exchange and knowledge construction (Banks, 2016; Gay, 2015; Jabbar & Hardaker, 2013; Popov et al., 2012). Constructivist theory and multicultural education theory embrace learner-centredness and underscore how sharing power with students and improving their accessibility to managing the learning process can increase the equality in a classroom and make every student feel valued (Banks, 2016; Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Schiller, 2009).

Research in the field of second-language teaching and learning corresponds with research conducted in the field of multicultural education and emphasises the benefits of applying learner-centred approaches to language teaching that grant students more control over their own learning (Jacobs & Farrell, 2003; Norris, 2011; Richards, 2006; Russell & Spada, 2006; Wesche & Skehan, 2002). Despite the advantages of learner-centred approaches to language teaching, such as communicative language teaching and task-based instruction, researchers underline the importance of tailoring specific tasks and communicative activities to different classrooms (R. Ellis, 2009; Pedersen, 2007; Richards, 2006).

A recent report titled *Trends 2018: Learning and Teaching in the European Higher Education Area* (Gaebel & Zhang, 2018) was published by European University Association. It emphasises the importance of adopting learner-centred approaches as a mindset and a culture within institutions. Furthermore, previous research suggests that teachers should consider applying teaching and assessment methods suitable for diverse student populations, look for different ways of sharing knowledge and understand the need for individual support of students (e.g. R. Ellis, 2012; Gay, 2018; Todorovski et al., 2015; Webber, 2012). Students are encouraged to use their existing knowledge. They are expected to participate actively in classroom activities and discussions, while the role of teacher shifts from being a source of knowledge to being a facilitator and advisor (e.g. Banks, 2009; Brown, 2003; Jacobs & Farrell, 2003). Among other teaching methods, group work is considered to be useful in the multicultural educational environment because it promotes interaction between students and might help to reduce existing prejudices (De Vita, 2005; Hassanien, 2006; Popov et al., 2012). Relevant assessment methods with clear criteria are claimed to be among the most significant elements that ensure fairness and equal opportunity (Medland, 2016; Padilla & Borsato, 2008). Earlier research highlights how formative and sustainable assessment, involving low-stakes examinations

and assignments, are fair and relevant in contemporary educational environments with diverse student populations because these assessment methods provide valuable feedback that motivates students and encourages further learning (e.g. Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Russell & Spada, 2006; Slee, 2010).

The literature review creates a solid base for the current research study and will help to analyse the findings from different perspectives. In the discussion chapter, the findings will be related to previous studies and discussed in light of the theories. In the next chapter, research design and methods will be presented in detail.



### **3 Research Design and Methods**

The data for this research comes from the umbrella project *Educational Aspirations, Opportunities and Challenges for Immigrants in University Education in Iceland (2016-2018)*. The data for the umbrella project was collected by seven researchers, and each researcher had access to the data throughout the research period. The research group had regular meetings through the whole project period, where all essential steps of the research project were discussed and planned.

The data was collected using qualitative techniques, such as focus group interviews and individual interviews. Qualitative techniques were chosen because the main goal of the research is to understand and analyse the participants' personal experiences. The aim was not to generalize the results but to present the complexity of the phenomenon (Lichtman, 2013). According to Valdiviezo and Nieto (2015), "qualitative inquiry continues to serve the purpose of uncovering the obvious and making it explicit" (p. 104). Furthermore, qualitative research is often regarded as a culturally responsive methodology, especially when the researcher fosters holistic practices and considers research to be a knowledge sharing process that values diversity and respects different views and opinions (Nodelman, 2013). While preparing for the interviews, the research group reflected on both the participants' and researchers' cultural backgrounds and how these could affect communication during the interviews, as "both sides bring their collective resources and well-being together to construct a process of relevant and significant meaning making" (Berryman, Soohoo, & Nevin, 2013, p. 5). The researchers paid special attention to power issues during the research because there could be different complexities and contradictions involved in interviewing participants from diverse cultures.

Previous experiences in the field revealed that misunderstanding the participants' backgrounds or cultures could create a gap between the researcher and a participant (Gunaratnam, 2003). During the interviews, the researchers tried to create a friendly atmosphere and always treated the participants with respect. Before the interviews, the researchers introduced themselves, told about their cultural backgrounds and informally chatted with the participants. Further, the researchers offered the participants drinks and fruits before and during the interviews. The participants were always

given the choice to stop the interviews at any point or to skip answering any questions.

The data collection was split into three phases:

1. Seven focus group interviews (Sept. 2016 – Jan. 2017)
2. Thirty-five individual, in-depth interviews (Sept. 2016 – May 2017)
3. Three focus group interviews repeated (Feb. 2018 – April 2018)

The author of this dissertation (Artëm Ingmar Benediktsson) kept contact with all participants personally, primarily via e-mail, scheduled all interviews, and booked interview locations for the focus groups and individual interviews. He conducted five of seven group interviews in the project's first phase together with a colleague, 24 out of 35 individual interviews in the second phase, and all three group interviews in the third phase together with a colleague. Additionally, he transcribed seven individual interviews verbatim and, during the analysis phase of the research, read and re-read all interview transcripts. In total, approximately 37 hours of group and individual interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed during the analytical process.

The data collection process of the umbrella project also included a fourth phase, which was 16 interviews with university staff members, such as student counsellors and staff at international offices or service desks. However, these interviews are not used in the present study because the main focus of this study is to explore students' experiences.

Before the first interview was conducted, the research group developed an interview guide (Lichtman, 2013) and conducted two individual pilot interviews to test the interview questions and estimate the length of the interviews. Piloting was a useful step during the data collection because, based on the results of the pilot interviews, the research group reviewed and corrected the interview guide to improve the flow of the interviews and to address research questions in a better way (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The participants of the pilot interviews were informed that the interviews were conducted to test the interview guide.

### **3.1 Participants**

Several criteria for the selection of participants were determined in the grant application to Rannís before the project started. The participants should be first-generation immigrants in Iceland, who were pursuing full-time undergraduate studies (i.e. they were not exchange students) at one of the

three target universities: The University of Iceland, the University of Akureyri or Reykjavík University, for at least one year. The participants were recruited through maximal variation sampling. Creswell (2008) explains maximal variation sampling as “a purposeful sampling strategy in which the researcher samples individuals that differ on some characteristic or trait (e.g., different age groups)” (pp. 207-8). The predetermined characteristics for maximal variation sampling were age, gender, nationality, field of study, socioeconomic status, number of years in Iceland and language skills in Icelandic, English and any native language(s). The main goal of the maximal variation sampling was to present multiple perspectives of different participants on the learning environments and teaching methods used in the aforementioned universities.

During the first stage of recruitment, the registrars of the universities were asked to provide contact information for students of foreign origin. The potential participants were contacted via e-mail; however, few responded. Later, snowball sampling (Flick, 2009) was used to recruit participants. Snowball sampling, or chain sampling, is a method used to identify potential participants by asking those already contacted or interviewed to name others who might meet the selection criteria for participants (Lichtman, 2013). This method is the most widely applied method of finding participants in qualitative research, and it has proven to be effective when researchers need to recruit hidden or hard to reach participants (Flick, 2009; Lichtman, 2013).

Forty-one students agreed to participate in the project, twelve male and twenty-nine female students. This gender difference reflects gender proportions in the Icelandic Universities. According to Statistics Iceland (2018c), women comprise approximately 63% of undergraduate students. Their ages ranged from twenty to fifty-two. The participants have twenty-one different native languages. They come from twenty-three different countries in Europe, Asia and North and South America and have lived in Iceland from two to eighteen years. Twenty-nine participants were students at the University of Iceland, nine participants at the University of Akureyri, and three participants studied at Reykjavík University. This reflects somehow the different sizes of the universities. The University of Iceland is Iceland's biggest university and has approximately two times more students than the other two universities combined (Reykjavik University, 2017; University of Akureyri, 2018; University of Iceland, 2018). The participants studied different subjects, such as biomedical science, business administration, computer science, geology, languages, law, pedagogy, sociology etc. They had very different experiences of being university students. Some

participants had been studying for one year before the start of the project while others had been registered and active students for more than five years, simultaneously studying several different subjects. All participants were taught in Icelandic at some point. The majority of the participants had taken at least one course in Icelandic as a second language at the university level. Table 1 lists the participants' countries of origin and in which of the three target universities they were pursuing their studies. Additionally, Table 1 provides information on the participants' level of engagement in the presented research study in the last three columns. The participants' fields of study are not revealed in order to keep their identity secret.

**Table 1. Participants. Background and the level of engagement in the research study**

Nr.	Participant (pseudonym)	Gender	Country of origin	Focus groups	Individual interview	Focus groups repeated
1	Kamilla	F	Russia	X X	X X	X X
2	Adriana	F	Germany		X X	
3	Christian	M	Denmark		X X	X X
4	Aðallín	F	Faroe Islands		X X	X X
5	Samuelle	F	Philippines		X X	
6	Andrzej	M	Poland		X X	
7	Vladimir	M	Russia	X X	X X	
8	Gisele	F	Brazil		X X	
9	Bojana	F	Serbia	X X	X X	X X
10	Linh	F	Vietnam		X X	
11	Nikolaj	M	Ukraine	X X	X X	X X
12	Mohsen	M	Iran		X X	
13	Laima	F	Lithuania		X X	
14	Sabrina	F	Russia	X X	X X	X X
15	Marsanna	F	Faroe Islands		X X	
16	Polina	F	Russia	X X	X X	X X
17	Ahmed	M	Turkey		X X	
18	Jean	M	France	X X	X X	X X
19	Jamala	F	Ukraine	X X	X X	
20	Zinaida	F	Russia	X X	X X	
21	Patricia	F	Canada	X X	X X	

**Table 1 (continued). Participants. Background and the level of engagement in the research study**

Nr.	Participant (pseudonym)	Gender	Country of origin	Focus groups	Individual interview	Focus groups repeated
22	Péter	M	Hungary	X	X	
23	Svjatoslav	M	Lithuania	X	X	X
24	Hanh	F	Vietnam	X	X	X
25	Martina	F	Slovakia	X	X	X
26	Britney	F	USA	X	X	X
27	Suriya	F	Afghanistan	X	X	X
28	Long	F	Vietnam	X	X	X
29	Virginia	F	Peru	X	X	X
30	Carina	F	Philippines	X	X	X
31	Lijun	F	China	X	X	X
32	Isabel	F	Philippines	X	X	X
33	Denis	M	Ukraine	X	X	X
34	Nooh	F	Thailand	X	X	X
35	Dong	F	Vietnam	X	X	X
36	Eva	F	Philippines	X	X	X
37	Cindy	F	Vietnam	X	X	X
38	Monika	F	Lithuania	X	X	X
39	Gérard	M	France	X	X	X
40	Elina	F	Latvia	X	X	X
41	Marcin	M	Poland	X	X	X
Total:				27	35	14

The sample size of forty-one participants is enough to qualify this as a large-scale qualitative study (Johannessen, Tufte, & Christoffersen, 2016; Lichtman, 2013). Although the goal of qualitative research is to describe and understand individual participants' experiences, the large scale of the study allows for the presentation of as many independent views and opinions as possible.

For their participation in the research, all the participants received gift cards to university bookshops or gift cards with an equivalent money deposit valid for use in any store accepting the cards. Those students who participated in all three phases of the study received two gift cards.

### **3.2 Ethics**

Qualitative research is not a neutral practice as it involves personal experiences and, in some cases, very sensitive information is shared with the researchers during the hours of the interviewing process. According to Sikes (2006), “all research endeavours have, at least potential, implications for anyone touched in any way by them. These implications can reach far beyond those who are immediately and intimately involved in the research” (p. 105). These are the reasons why ethical decisions about research need to be taken seriously and any implications should be carefully considered before the first interview.

This is especially relevant in Iceland, which has a relatively small population of approximately 350,000 people. Revealing even seemingly insignificant background information could result disclosing a participant’s identity. In universities, such as the University of Akureyri and Reykjavík University, the number of immigrant students is very low, and they can potentially be identified by simply revealing their fields of study. That is why special precautions need to be taken. While referring to the participants in the articles, conference presentations or any other publications, very little identifying information is given. Normally, their fields of study are identified without revealing the name of the university. In the cases where their nationality is revealed, neither field of study nor affiliation is identified. The participants’ real names are never used, and contact information is never shared. Pseudonyms are used to refer to the participants. The pseudonyms were chosen randomly out of the names common to the participants’ countries or areas of origin.

The Icelandic Data Protection Authority was informed of the research and the Ethics Committee of the University of Iceland gave it a positive review. Before the project started, the administration of each of the three target universities was contacted and written permission for data collection was acquired. All privacy considerations were in compliance with Icelandic law nr. 77/2000 about data protection.

The participants were informed about the project and received participant information sheets that were available in both Icelandic and English with all important information about the project, the contact details for the researchers and the scope of their involvement in the research. Informed consent was received from all participants. Participants were notified that they could skip answering any question or could stop participating at any time and without having to explain (Appendix A). Such procedures served several purposes. They attended to ethics, improved the

credibility of the research and led to richer data, as “weak consent usually leads to poorer data: Respondents will try to protect themselves in a mistrusted relationship” (Tracy, 2010, p. 847). All interviews were recorded using an audio recording device after the participants gave permission to record the interviews and were notified of the recording starting.

### **3.3 Focus group interviews**

The data collection started with seven focus group interviews. The focus group interviews were used to initiate a discussion around the main topics of the research study. The main advantage of focus groups was the opportunity to observe a large amount of interaction on a topic in a limited time frame (Creswell, 2008; Flick, 2009). The discussions triggered the participants’ thoughts; they could relate to each other’s experiences and highlighted the issues for the majority of them (Lichtman, 2013).

The focus group interview phase was logistically difficult, as the majority of the participants had part-time jobs alongside their studies, and it was challenging to find a time and location that could fit all the participants of a particular focus group. Following Lichtman’s (2013) advice for preparing for focus group interviews, there were more participants scheduled for every interview to achieve minimum participation. This turned out to be useful because one to three participants dropped out every time for different reasons. Two to five students participated in each interview. The average duration of the focus group interviews was approximately one hour (Table 2). The research group created an interview guide which included topics of the discussion (Appendix B).

**Table 2. Focus group interviews. Number of participants, dates and durations**

	Interview date	Number of participants booked	Number of participants showed up	Duration (min)
Focus group 1	12 <sup>th</sup> October 2016	6	5	78
Focus group 2	31 <sup>st</sup> October 2016	6	4	52
Focus group 3	7 <sup>th</sup> November 2016	5	4	60
Focus group 4	9 <sup>th</sup> November 2016	7	5	56
Focus group 5	23 <sup>rd</sup> November 2016	6	4	54
Focus group 6	25 <sup>th</sup> November 2016	5	2	54
Focus group 7	26 <sup>th</sup> January 2017	6	3	67
<b>Total</b>		<b>41</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>7h01m</b>

The directive interviewing approach was applied to the focus group interviews (Lichtman, 2013). Two researchers conducted each interview. One researcher was a moderator, who played a directive role, asked questions and led the groups towards specific topics. However, the researcher avoided leading the participants towards particular answers and tried to encourage all participants to become involved in the discussions. The second researcher noted the participants' interactions and became involved in discussions only when needed.

The groups were artificial (Flick, 2009), meaning that they were put together by the researchers for the research only. The participants, in many cases, were strangers. In some cases, they had taken the same courses during their studies. The groups were heterogeneous (Flick, 2009) in that the participants were different in characteristics such as age, sex, socioeconomic status, family status, field of study and Icelandic language proficiency. All participants were given the choice to speak Icelandic or English during the focus group interviews, and in most cases, both languages were actively used in the groups

Although focus group interviewing has several advantages, it does not allow in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, as focus groups can easily get off-topic and some participants' experiences could be overlooked (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This is one reason that individual interviews with the same participants were conducted to elicit their views and unique experiences.

### **3.4 Individual interviews**

The next phase of data collection was individual, in-depth interviews with the participants where their experiences were further explored. The in-depth interviewing technique allows the participants to share their experiences in their own words, which can add a unique dimension to the understanding of their situation (Lichtman, 2013).

The findings from the focus group interviews were analysed and used to create an extended interview guide (Appendix C) for individual interviews with the same participants who participated in focus groups plus additional participants who did not take part in focus groups for various reasons. The interviews were semi-structured (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The interview guide included different types of questions, such as grand tour questions, i.e., introductory usually very broad questions that open the discussion; background questions; questions directly related to research topics; and

comparison/contrast questions (Lichtman, 2013). The participants were also asked to provide concrete examples to illustrate their experiences.

Although the researcher had a list of questions, it was used as supporting material and not as an obligatory list of questions that every participant had to answer. The questions were, in most cases, altered to a particular participant during the course of the interview. Irrelevant questions were skipped, and additional questions were added depending on the situation. In all interviews, the participants' opinions and views were valued, and the participants were welcome to discuss issues not covered by the interview guide.

The participants could choose whether they wanted to be interviewed in Icelandic or English. A little less than half of the participants chose to be interviewed in Icelandic, while most of the rest chose English. A few participants used both Icelandic and English during the individual interviews. In total, 35 participants agreed to engage in individual interviews. The duration of each interview varied from approximately 30 to 70 minutes. Table 3 lists the exact durations of all individual interviews, the dates they were conducted and whether they were conducted and/or transcribed by Artém Ingmar Benediktsson.

**Table 3. Individual interviews. Participants, dates and durations**

Nr.	Participant (pseudonym)	Interview date	Duration (min)	Interview conducted by Artém Ingmar Benediktsson	Interview transcribed by Artém Ingmar Benediktsson
1	Kamilla	13 <sup>th</sup> September 2016	40	X X X X	X X X
2	Adriana	18 <sup>th</sup> November 2016	41	X X X X	
3	Christian	25 <sup>th</sup> November 2016	48	X X X X	
4	Aðallín	25 <sup>th</sup> November 2016	54		
5	Samuelle	25 <sup>th</sup> November 2016	51		
6	Andrzej	25 <sup>th</sup> November 2016	32		X X X X
7	Vladimir	29 <sup>th</sup> November 2016	61	X X X X	
8	Gisele	30 <sup>th</sup> November 2016	51	X X X X	
9	Bojana	30 <sup>th</sup> November 2016	51	X X X X	
10	Linh	30 <sup>th</sup> November 2016	28	X X X X	
11	Nikolaj	2 <sup>nd</sup> December 2016	69	X X X X	
12	Mohsen	8 <sup>th</sup> December 2016	60		

**Table 3 (continued). Individual interviews. Participants, dates and durations**

Nr.	Participant (pseudonym)	Interview date	Duration (min)	Interview conducted by Artém Ingmar Benediktsson	Interview transcribed by Artém Ingmar Benediktsson
13	Laima	12 <sup>th</sup> December 2016	51	XX	
14	Sabrina	17 <sup>th</sup> December 2016	46	XX	
15	Marsanna	28 <sup>th</sup> December 2016	31	XX	
16	Polina	14 <sup>th</sup> January 2017	28	XX	
17	Ahmed	30 <sup>th</sup> January 2017	59	XX	
18	Jean	1 <sup>st</sup> February 2017	42	XX	XX
19	Jamala	1 <sup>st</sup> February 2017	40	XX	XX
20	Zinaida	1 <sup>st</sup> February 2017	43		
21	Patricia	1 <sup>st</sup> February 2017	59		
22	Péter	2 <sup>nd</sup> February 2014	48	XX	XX
23	Svjatoslav	4 <sup>th</sup> February 2017	33	XX	XX
24	Hanh	8 <sup>th</sup> February 2017	41		
25	Martina	8 <sup>th</sup> February 2017	60	XX	
26	Britney	10 <sup>th</sup> February 2017	62	XX	
27	Suriya	10 <sup>th</sup> February 2017	53		
28	Long	13 <sup>th</sup> February 2017	43		
29	Virginia	15 <sup>th</sup> February 2017	48	XX	
30	Carina	15 <sup>th</sup> February 2017	35		
31	Lijun	28 <sup>th</sup> February 2017	30	XX	XX
32	Isabel	21 <sup>st</sup> March 2017	37	XX	
33	Denis	24 <sup>th</sup> April 2017	55	XX	
34	Nooh	28 <sup>th</sup> April 2017	33	XX	
35	Dong	12 <sup>th</sup> May 2017	35	XX	
<b>Total</b>			<b>26h38m</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>7</b>

The organization of individual interviews was less challenging than the focus groups. The participants, in most cases, came to the interview locations on-time. The participants could choose the location for their interviews. Available options were to meet at libraries, in one of the university buildings or in the participants' homes. The majority of the interviews were conducted at the National and University Library of Iceland, where the researchers booked private meeting rooms. Several interviews were conducted at the School of Education, University of Iceland. In a few cases, the participants invited the researcher home to conduct the interview.

### **3.5 Focus group interviews repeated**

The third phase of data collection took place after the data collected from the focus group interviews and individual interviews were analysed, and the main themes were derived and discussed during research group meetings. Before the project started, it was decided that the researchers would conduct a third phase to meet the participants again to analyse their educational progress and find out if any changes had occurred in their experiences of being university students in Iceland since the previous interviews were conducted.

During the third phase, data was collected through focus group interviews. The logistics were exceptionally difficult during this phase of the research. The confirmed group interview dates were cancelled and rescheduled several times due to several participants' illnesses or schedule changes. Only 14 of the original 41 participants agreed to meet the researchers again. They were split into three groups. See Table 4 for the number of participants, interview dates and the duration of each focus group interview. A new interview guide (Appendix D) was created based on the results from the analysis of the data from the first two phases of the research.

**Table 4. Focus group interviews repeated. Number of participants, dates and durations**

	Interview date	Number of participants booked	Number of participants showed up	Duration (min)
Focus group 1	28 <sup>th</sup> February 2018	7	6	69
Focus group 2	2 <sup>nd</sup> March 2018	5	4	62
Focus group 3	25 <sup>th</sup> April 2018	6	4	52
<b>Total</b>		<b>18</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>3h03m</b>

Despite the expectations for the repeated focus groups interviews, the data obtained from the last phase of the research did not add any completely new dimensions to the research findings. The participants' experiences of the education process remained more or less the same, and the previous findings were confirmed. The corpus of the data produced after the three phases of the research study exceeds 1,500 pages of interview transcripts and researcher notes.

### **3.6 Processing of the data**

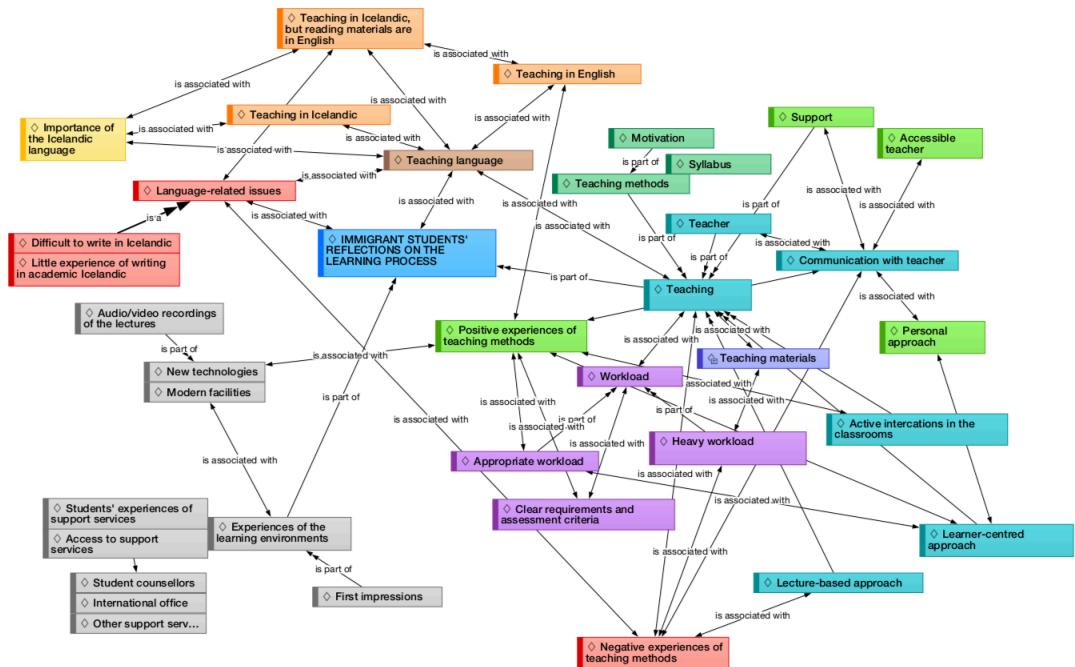
Analysis of the collected data began immediately after the first group interview was transcribed (Creswell, 2008). The data was analysed using a thematic analysis approach, which is a flexible method that fits well with analysing interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Lichtman, 2013). Braun and Clarke (2013) describe this method as “a method for identifying themes and patterns of meaning across a dataset in relation to a research question; possibly the most widely used qualitative method of data analysis” (p. 175).

At the beginning of the analytical process, members of the research group familiarised themselves with the data through reading and discussing preliminary findings. Later, all interviews were coded using the complete coding approach with researcher-derived codes being applied to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The complete coding approach aims to identify everything that is relevant for answering the research questions within the entire dataset. The data is systematically coded in the initial stage and selection and categorisation is applied later in the analytical process (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The initial codes were evaluated and refined by adding new codes, subtracting irrelevant ones, and splitting and merging some of them. Thematically similar codes were assembled in several categories that were constantly compared and discussed during research group meetings. In the final stage of the analysis, the most relevant categories were developed into themes.

To analyse the vast amount of data and keep codes and categories clearly registered, special analytical software was used. ATLAS.ti proved to be beneficial software for analysing the qualitative data (Franzosi, Doyle, McClelland, Putnam Rankin, & Vicari, 2013). The software was provided by the Division of Information Technology at the University of Iceland. It is especially advantageous for handling vast amounts of qualitative data and recommended for using in long-term-projects (Paulus & Lester, 2016). ATLAS.ti includes many useful tools, such as classic coding, quick coding and coding in vivo. The software facilitated the author’s collaboration by arranging and reassembling the quotations and codes within the themes. It also helped to visualise the findings by mapping them. Artém Ingmar Benediktsson and Susan Rafik Hama had access to the software. During the research process, all data, including the ATLAS.ti dataset, was kept on a special cloud drive that was only accessible to the research group.

Later in the analytical process, Artém Ingmar Benediktsson created memos and code-networks to visualise the themes which later developed into the academic papers presented in this dissertation. The themes were

developed in relation to the research questions in each paper in this dissertation. The code networks (Appendix E) visualise the analytical process and present five different themes that emerged from the complete coding, categorizing codes and establishing links between the codes. Figure 2 shows the code network behind the first theme of the immigrant students' reflections on the learning process.



**Figure 2. Code network. Immigrant students' reflections on the learning process**

During the analytical process, the participants' reflections on the learning process were coded and the codes were divided into four code clusters. The reader should start exploring the code network from the blue square towards the middle of Figure 2. Following that, the reader should look into the four clusters, starting from the largest labelled Teaching (highlighted with green and violet colours and consisting of the participants' perspectives on teaching methods, communication with teachers, teaching materials and the workload). The next cluster is Learning environment (highlighted with grey colour and consist of the participants' perspectives on the facilities within the universities, support services and the first impressions at the beginning of the studies). The third cluster is Teaching language (highlighted with brown, orange and yellow and consist of the participants' positive and negative

experiences of usage of Icelandic and/or English during the education process). The third code cluster is associated with the first code cluster that reveals the participants' experiences of teaching. However, this is presented independently because the language of teaching had a direct impact on the participants' experiences of the learning process, while other codes included in the first cluster impacted their experiences indirectly by influencing their perspectives on teaching methods. Language-related issues form the smallest cluster that had a direct impact on the experiences of the learning process. They are highlighted in red and represent the issues and language barriers that the participants described during the interviews. These codes are associated with the third cluster, representing the issues that impacted the experiences of usage of different languages during the education process.

The arrows and lines within the network represent the relations between the codes and show whether the specific codes are part of other codes, are associated with them or are a cause for particular experiences represented by codes. Additionally, the network has two boxes that are positive experiences of teaching methods (bright green) and negative experiences of teaching methods (red). Those boxes are connected to the codes that are associated with the participants positive or negative experiences of the learning process.

All five code-networks can be found in Appendix E. They have a similar structure and also should be explored starting from the blue square in the middle. The red colour represents negative experiences, while different shades of green highlight positive experiences of teaching methods and/or communication with teachers. Together, the code networks provide a coherent picture of the patterns in the collected data and reveal different dimensions of the participants' experiences of the learning environments and teaching methods in Icelandic universities.

### **3.7 Main themes**

After the analytical process was complete, a final report of the findings was created which included the five main themes of immigrant students' reflections on the learning process, culturally responsive teaching in Icelandic universities, immigrant students' experiences of group work during the learning process, the students' perspectives on the teaching methods of Icelandic as a second language, and the students' perspectives on assessment methods. The number of each paper corresponds to the number of a theme, and each theme is central to one of the five papers. Additionally,

some themes, such as culturally responsive teaching, reappear in several papers, but they are presented and discussed from different perspectives depending on a particular paper's focus.

The first theme presents the participants general reflections on the learning process in Icelandic universities. This was one of the main topics of discussions during the focus groups and individual interviews. This theme is central in Paper I and appears in all the papers where immigrant students' experiences of different teaching methods are explored from different perspectives. These perspectives are the participants' experiences of learner-centred approach to teaching as opposed to the conventional lecture-based approach; the participants' perspectives on workload and learning materials; and the participants' experiences of class discussions and knowledge exchange between students and teachers.

The second theme focuses specifically on culturally responsive teaching in Icelandic universities and presents arguments for why this teaching approach is relevant. The theme is widely discussed in Paper II, which has the term culturally responsive teaching in its title. Other papers reveal some findings related to immigrant students' experiences of culturally responsive teaching, such as Paper III, where one section is dedicated to culturally responsive teaching and Paper IV, which, among other topics, explores how communicative language teaching corresponds to culturally responsive teaching. Paper V includes a discussion about culturally responsive assessment, which is an assessment approach derived from the theory of culturally responsive teaching.

The third theme includes findings related to immigrant students' experiences of group work during the learning process. This theme is central to Paper III, where the participants' perspectives on communication with teachers and peers during multicultural group work are analysed. Additionally, Paper IV focuses specifically on several issues related to the group work applied in the Icelandic language courses, and Paper V includes a section that reveals immigrant students' reflections on group assessment.

The fourth theme reveals how immigrant students experience the teaching methods of Icelandic as a second language. In the initial stage of the analytical process, this theme was regarded as a sub-category of the first theme, which explores the participants' experiences of the learning process. Due to its specific features, the sub-category developed into a full theme. The findings related to this theme are exclusively discussed in Paper IV. It analyses the participants' perspectives on communicative language teaching, task-based instruction, group work and explicit grammar teaching. Special

attention is given to Icelandic language teaching because the majority of the participants took some courses in Icelandic as a second language, and their experiences of these programmes varied significantly.

The fifth theme presents immigrant students' perspectives on assessment, including summative, formative and group assessment. This theme is central to the Paper V. Besides the analysis of the participants' experiences of assessment methods, Paper V brings to the discussion a question about standardisation of the rules and policies regarding language support and language usage in written assignments and during the examination periods.

### **3.8 Summary**

The data collection and the analytical process produced an extensive dataset that became the basis of the five academic papers included in this dissertation. The papers explore immigrant students' experiences of teaching methods and learning environments in the three target universities. The main findings have also been presented in conferences in Iceland and internationally. The five academic papers have been written for publication in different peer-reviewed journals. The papers present a coherent overview of the main findings and contribute significantly to the discussion about immigrant students' experiences of university education in Iceland.

## **4 Main Findings**

This chapter gives an overview of the main findings from the interviews. The chapter is divided into sections that represent the five main themes and five papers. A comprehensive presentation of the findings is to be found in the papers that are part of this dissertation.

### **4.1 Immigrant students' reflections on the learning process**

This section answers the research questions that appear in Paper I: What are immigrant students' experiences of the learning process in Icelandic universities? What are immigrant students' perspectives on teaching methods and educational support? What challenges do immigrant students encounter during the learning process in Icelandic universities? The findings point out that the majority of the participants have positive experiences of the learning process and the teaching methods applied in Icelandic universities. They consider the learning environments and facilities to be modern.

The participants were satisfied overall with the teachers and mentioned that the majority of the teachers were easily accessible, knowledgeable and that they came well prepared for the lectures and seminars. The participants emphasised the importance of teachers promoting active interaction in the classroom. They revealed that this had a positive impact on their sense of belonging in the classroom and created a productive learning environment based on communication and knowledge sharing. Furthermore, the participants highly valued those teachers who provided the necessary tools and guidelines to pursue education and allowed students to work independently. According to the participants' experiences, the teacher's role sometimes shifts from being merely a source of knowledge to becoming contributors to students' development. These experiences were mainly reported by the students who were enrolled in the School of Education at the University of Iceland.

In some cases, the students reported that the teachers applied a conventional, lecture-based approach to teaching, allowing little to no student involvement in the learning process. The students who experienced this did not find this approach motivating, and they felt like it did not encourage active knowledge construction in the classroom. In those cases,

the participants' experiences were mostly negative, and they even concluded that this kind of approach has little to do with teaching.

Language-related issues were among the most frequently discussed challenges. Those participants who took courses that were taught in English were appreciative of being able to take courses in English and wished that there were more such courses available. When it came to courses that were taught in Icelandic, the participants experienced several challenges. Many participants (though not everyone) revealed that it usually took more time to prepare for these courses and that they needed to have good language skills in academic English because the majority of the learning material was in English. Additionally, some participants used their native languages daily to translate academic terms and understand the learning material.

New technologies are increasingly used in Icelandic universities. According to the participants, teachers often audio and/or video recorded the lectures and/or seminars and uploaded them to the intranet, so the students could access the recordings any time. Although this practice was originally intended for distance students, the participants highlighted how the recordings were very useful to them during exam preparation because they could listen to the lectures several times and stop the recordings when they needed time to translate some sentences or ask peers for the definition of academic terms.

When it comes to educational support during the learning process, the Icelandic universities offer different support services, including service desks, international offices, student counselling, writing centres and orientation days for new students. In spite of the variety of the available support services, the participants reported finding it difficult to navigate through the services and find general information on what services are available to them. Many participants were neither aware of the existence of some services nor used them.

The participants from the University of Akureyri, however, were better informed because the academic counsellors had short presentations of the support services during the first classes of the academic terms. The participants from the other two universities were poorly informed about the services. In some cases, they commented that it would have been helpful for them if they knew that they could receive professional help in resolving issues related to the learning process and examinations. Those participants who used some support services were highly positive towards service desks, writing centres and other services provided by the libraries.

Experiences of communication with the international offices were diverse. When the support sought was related to exchange studies, the international offices' answers were accurate and relevant. However, when the students tried to seek help or advice regarding adaptation to the Icelandic educational system, their experiences were mostly negative because the international offices replied that they were only assisting exchange students or those who intended to enrol in an exchange programme. Experiences of the support provided by academic counsellors were also varied. Some participants highly appreciated the counselling services, while others considered them to be useless. Several participants connected their experiences to the counsellors' differing levels of cultural responsiveness. The participants revealed that they even had favourite counsellors that they considered to be more open and aware of immigrant students' challenges.

Regardless of the lack of information on available support services and several other issues highlighted in this section, the participants' overall experiences of the learning process in Icelandic universities were positive. The majority of the participants revealed that the university became a place where they had an opportunity to develop their strengths and acquire and exchange knowledge.

## **4.2 Culturally responsive teaching in Icelandic universities**

This section covers immigrant students' perspectives on culturally responsive teaching in Icelandic universities. This theme is central to Paper II, which argues that culturally responsive teaching matters based on the findings from the interviews with the immigrant students. The research questions, that are addressed in Paper II are: What are immigrant students' experiences of culturally responsive teaching, applied to some extent by several teachers? What are immigrant students' perspectives on the workload and language-related issues? What are immigrant students' perspectives on the relations with teachers and why power-sharing and equality in the classroom are important for immigrant students?

During the interviews and the analytical process, it became clear that teaching that would be categorised as being culturally responsive is still rare at the Icelandic universities. The participants reported that they were rarely encouraged to use their cultural background during the educational process and hardly ever used their native languages to read academic texts that are relevant to the subjects they studied.

A pattern was discovered during analysis. The majority of the participants who experienced culturally responsive teaching were students at the School

of Education at the University of Iceland. More specifically, they either were students at the International Studies in Education programme or had taken courses included in this programme. This pattern could be explained by the programme's focus on international students and students whose native language is not Icelandic. Further, the developers of the programme highlighted the importance of multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching methods (Books et al., 2011). The participants expressed positive attitudes about the courses where the teachers encouraged the students to relate new knowledge to their previous experiences.

A single story shared by a student who was studying to become a primary school teacher showed how a supervisory teacher supported and motivated her during the teaching practice at a primary school. The student was insecure about her pronunciation of Icelandic and worried that the children would not understand her. The teacher understood the student' concerns, but instead of criticising her and asking her to improve her language skills, the teacher encouraged her to overcome the fears and be open about her background and the challenges she experienced.

The participants who studied business administration valued teachers who shared their own personal and professional experiences. By providing examples from personal experience, the teacher was not merely making the teaching more interesting for the students, but he or she encouraged the students to do the same.

When it comes to negative experiences, several participants who were students in the humanities were clearly not satisfied with the teachers who did not pay attention to the principal elements of culturally responsive teaching, such as the importance of a personal approach to every student and constructive dialogue between students and teachers. In some cases, the participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the curriculum, workload and learning materials. They felt that the workload was too heavy and, according to their experiences, the number of ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) granted did not always reflect the amount of work required, especially those that included an extensive amount of the reading material in Icelandic.

Despite several negative experiences, many participants from different departments and universities pointed out that they often enjoyed equality in the classroom and dialogue between teachers and students. Several students mentioned that it was unusual for them to call their teachers by their first names without adding titles. These kinds of relations between teachers and students were new to them because they had not experienced them in their

countries of origin. Developing a personal connection with immigrant students that is built on mutual respect, genuine concern for students, enjoyment of and commitment to teaching, and willingness to improve practice are the characteristics that the participants said were important. The participants revealed that encouragement to think critically and increased access to managing the learning process improved their sense of responsibility and empowered them.

The findings revealed that, although culturally responsive teaching is still uncommon in Icelandic universities, it has a positive impact on the participants' experiences of the learning process, even when culturally responsive teaching is applied unsystematically by some teachers. The participants revealed that they would appreciate more teachers making an effort to create a connection between the students' cultures and previous experiences and newly acquired knowledge and encouraging students to use their cultural backgrounds. According to the participants, this way of teaching motivates them and improves their integration in the Icelandic learning environment.

### **4.3 Immigrant students' experiences of group work**

Group work was one of the most discussed teaching methods during the interviews. This section presents findings that reveal the participants' experiences of group work, communication with peers during the work process and the challenges that participants had. This theme is central to Paper III. The main research question that Paper III addresses is: What are immigrant students' perspectives on multicultural group work and what challenges do immigrant students encounter during the group work process?

The participants' experiences of group work varied from being positive to negative. The participants who were students in the social sciences and engineering were the most satisfied with the group work because they felt that the group work was a good preparation for their future carriers. They described the group work as an enriching and beneficial experience that expanded their horizons and provided an opportunity to enter into direct dialogue with their peers and participate in discussions.

Language barriers were repeatedly reported as one of the main obstacles hindering active participation in group work and class discussions. During one of the group interviews, a participant described a case of code switching. A teacher noticed that several immigrant students were not participating in the class discussions with their peers. The teacher found out that this was due to the students' limited Icelandic skills. In order to activate those students, the

teacher suggested carrying out the discussion in English instead of Icelandic. The student who shared this story reported increased engagement, and according to his observation, everybody took part in the discussion.

Several participants highlighted a positive aspect of working in groups with local Icelandic students. Their Icelandic peers, they said, provided language support. They helped the immigrant students to understand the assignments and write final reports. The immigrant students wanted to compensate for this extra support and often tried their best to be active in group discussions and contribute verbally as much as they could. On the other hand, some participants expressed their concerns when the groups included several immigrant students, especially when the groups consisted of more than five members. They felt like this may put pressure on the few Icelandic peers that had to write and proofread the final reports.

In a few cases, the participants worried about free-riding that might occur in the groups, especially if the groups were formed by the students themselves and the choice of group members was based on personal relations. In these cases, the students wanted to maintain friendship and turn a blind eye to a free-riding peer. Another issue related to the groups formed by the students is that occasionally the group work turned into time for the friends to chat. These are the reasons why some participants saw an advantage of groups being assigned by teachers, who could create more balanced groups. However, it is important to point out that these cases were very few, and the majority of the participants would still prefer to choose group members themselves.

While many participants valued group work, some participants held negative attitudes toward this teaching method. Those who held negative attitudes towards group work were mostly students in the humanities. They explained that they had never or very seldom used group work in their countries of origin and that the concept and the aim of group work as a teaching method were unclear for them. Those students were clearly focussed on achievement and final grades and did not take account of the working process, which can be beneficial itself. This lack of understanding of the main advantages of group work was probably the reason behind their negative experiences.

The findings related to the participants' experiences of multicultural group work in the three Icelandic universities revealed some issues, mainly caused by the lack of clear explanations about its purpose, assessment criteria and the main advantages. In some cases, the issues appeared due to group members' different learning styles, language skills and levels of

motivation. Despite the challenges, many participants were satisfied with group work and emphasised that the group work has a sustainable quality in that it will benefit in their future careers.

#### **4.4 Learning Icelandic as a second language**

According to language policies of Icelandic universities, Icelandic is the main language of instructions, especially on the undergraduate level. Exams and assignments are provided only in Icelandic in most cases. Having good Icelandic language skills is normally required to successfully complete university education at the undergraduate level, except for the International Studies in Education BA program that is taught in English and language degrees that are taught in the target languages.

The University of Iceland and the University of Akureyri offer different courses in Icelandic as a second language. The University of Akureyri offers single courses in Icelandic both fall and spring terms. At the University of Iceland, there are two programmes available. One of them is a full bachelor's programme called Icelandic as a Second Language (180 ECTS). The other is a one-year programme in Icelandic as a second language for practical purposes (60 ECTS). The existing knowledge on the students' experiences of the learning environments in those two programmes is relatively low. It is important to highlight that the goal of this study is not to compare the Icelandic as a Second Language Practical Diploma Program (60 ECTS) with the Icelandic as a Second Language BA Program (180 ECTS). The main goal is to provide insight into students' perspectives on the Icelandic language teaching methods used in different courses and analyse the students' experiences of the learning environment.

This section explores findings related to the students' experiences of learning Icelandic as a second language. Paper IV presents an extensive overview and analysis of the students' reflections on the teaching methods used in the program and communication with teachers during the learning process. The main research questions that are addressed in the Paper IV are: How do immigrant students experience the teaching methods of Icelandic as a second language? What are the participants' reactions to and reflections on implicit teaching methods that focus on developing communicative skills? What are the participants' experiences of courses where explicit teaching of grammar is applied? What are the participants' experiences of communication with teachers during the learning process?

Although all participants of the study, excepting the three participants who were students at Reykjavík University, have taken courses in Icelandic

as a second language, only a few of them have Icelandic as their major. The majority of participants studied Icelandic alongside their major studies because they viewed it as an essential element for improving their language skills and ensuring better integration into the Icelandic learning environment and better access to social activities and education as a whole. In some cases, the participants pointed out that the courses are often too general and more focused on the linguistic elements, while some of the students were more interested in improving skills in academic Icelandic that might be relevant for those who write assignments and reports in Icelandic. Additionally, the participants revealed that Icelandic language courses are often scheduled at times that conflict with the schedule of their major programmes, so the students had to make a choice that was usually not in favour of Icelandic language courses. They wished that some Icelandic language courses were available in the afternoons or evening that would be more convenient.

The participants expressed generally positive attitudes towards the courses where focus-on-form approaches and communicative language teaching were applied. They felt encouragement from teachers and enjoyed practising Icelandic in the classroom. Overall, communicative language teaching created a dynamic atmosphere that the participants enjoyed. According to the participants, many teachers were attentive facilitators. According to the participants' observations, the teachers applied a reactive focus-on-form approach. They corrected students' errors and focused on the linguistic elements that caused the problems during communicative classroom activities. However, one student shared that the teacher was not always aware of one particular problem during the classroom activities. The student pointed out that sometimes students switched into English during the discussions, especially when the group included native English speakers. According to the participant, it created a challenge and hindered her from practising Icelandic.

Several participants specifically mentioned a task-based assignment that was applied as a part of one course for beginner students. The task was a real-world open task called *Íslenskuborpið* (The Icelandic Village). The students were asked to work in pairs to practice Icelandic in their communities. They had to go together to a coffee shop or a bookstore and order a coffee or ask for assistance in Icelandic. Additionally, they had to audio-record the conversation of them speaking Icelandic with a shop assistant and then analyse the conversation together. Although the students understood that the task was meant to improve their communicative skills, the attitudes towards the task were mainly negative. The participants mentioned that they were poorly prepared for this particular task and did

not have the confidence to go out and start speaking Icelandic. They felt often uncomfortable and sometimes anxious while performing the task. They considered the idea behind the task to be good, but they wished that this particular task was applied later in the learning process.

Additionally, the participants mentioned that they appreciated teachers supporting and facilitating language learning outside of the universities by setting up the Facebook groups and opening discussions to train students communicative and writing skills. Some teachers also promoted Café Lingua, a social language exchange event that is facilitated by the School of Humanities at the University of Iceland and highly valued by the immigrant students who participated in this study.

During the interviews, the participants widely discussed their experiences of courses where explicit teaching of grammar was applied. Although the participants understood the positive benefits of focusing on linguistic forms, their experiences of this teaching method were mostly negative. The participants explained that the main reason behind their dissatisfaction was that they did not feel involved in the learning process and the learning process became a routine review of grammatical exercises and homework assignments. Further, some participants concluded that the workload in the courses where explicit teaching of grammar was applied was heavier than in other courses. The findings revealed that the participants would rather have the teachers more often incorporate the teaching of grammar rules in communicative teaching by applying incidental focus-on-form.

Even though the study revealed several important issues related to the teaching methods used in Icelandic language courses, the participants generally held positive attitudes toward the learning environment. The teachers were often described as accessible and caring for their students. Further, the participants observed a tendency to increasing learner-centred approaches, such as communicative language teaching.

#### **4.5 Immigrant students' perspectives on assessment methods**

Assessment is an inseparable part of the learning process, and the participants discussed their perspectives on assessment methods along with the teaching methods. The participants' experiences of assessment methods are presented in Paper V. The goal of Paper V is to explore immigrant students' experiences of summative, formative and group assessment and to analyse the students' perspectives on special support offered during the examination periods. The research questions that Paper V addresses are: What are immigrant students' experiences of assessment methods, including

summative, formative and group assessment, used in three different universities in Iceland? What are immigrant students' perspectives on special support offered by the Icelandic universities during the examination periods?

The majority of the participants revealed that summative assessment methods that involve high-stakes examinations or final projects dominate at the three target universities. The students' attitudes towards summative assessment were mostly negative. They commented that these assessment methods did not encourage further learning. Instead, they were merely a measurement tool that, in some cases, were unfair towards the students. According to the participants, in most cases, the texts of the final examination papers were in Icelandic and usually teachers allowed students to answer in English if they felt more comfortable with that. However, the decisions about the usage of English completely lay in the hands of the teachers, and the students had to negotiate the usage of English with each teacher before examinations. Many participants from different departments generally considered summative assessment to be outdated, especially when students were expected to learn facts without reflecting on the learning material.

The psychological aspects of high-stakes exams were also frequently mentioned by the participants. Two particular groups of participants experienced stress more often than others during the examination periods. The first group were participants who came from the countries outside the European Economic Area whose residence permits depend on the number of ECTS credits granted during every school term. The second group were participants who received student loans that require them to successfully finish a certain number of ECTS every school term. These participants revealed that they typically experience extensive stress during the examination periods. In one case, a participant's health was affected by exam anxiety, which resulted in the participant being admitted to the hospital for treatment.

When it comes to formative assessment methods that involved low-stakes examinations and assignments, the students' experiences were predominantly positive. The participants highlighted that these assessment methods motivated them and encouraged active learning. Furthermore, they stated that formative assessment helped them to identify knowledge gaps, and feedback provided by the teachers played an important role in their development. The students valued teachers who provided organised course syllabi that included assignments evenly divided throughout the academic term and transparent assessment criteria. Further, the participants

appreciated narrative feedback from their teachers, especially when it was received before the next assignment was due.

The analysis of the interviews revealed that sustainable assessment to develop students' sense of responsibility and empowerment, such as peer and self-evaluation, was rarely used, so the participants could not comment on their experiences of these. When it comes to the assessment of group assignments, the participants mentioned that they scarcely ever got a chance to formally assess each other's performance in group work. The grades were, in most cases, assigned by teachers. Furthermore, several participants lacked information about assessment criteria. This made them feel like grades were assigned unsystematically and were solely based on the teachers' subjective opinions.

Participants also revealed that a few teachers applied some dimensions of culturally responsive assessment by identifying students' personal strengths, encouraging them to develop them, pointing out knowledge gaps and motivating students to close these. This approach to assessment was valued by those few participants who experienced it. They commented that this type of assessment promoted independent studying habits and a sense of responsibility for their own learning.

Several participants revealed that sometimes they felt like some teachers had lower academic expectations toward immigrant students and approached immigrant students as if they were children. This teaching approach contributed to the participants' further alienation from the group and created negative attitudes towards these particular teachers. The participants revealed that the teachers should have offered relevant educational support that would help students to fill up the knowledge gaps.

When it comes to available support, in order to reduce the inequalities associated with language-related issues, immigrant students can apply for special support during examination periods, usually in the form of extended examination time, translation of examination questions, allowing students to use dictionaries and/or allowing them to answer questions in English. The main issue is that special support for students whose native language is not Icelandic is not clearly regulated and required students to undergo rounds of negotiation with teachers, academic counsellors or departmental offices. Some participants have applied for such support and described the application and negotiation process as confusing.

In many cases, the easiest support to obtain is permission to use a dictionary during the exams. However, this type of support is not regarded as very useful by those participants who received it because it takes time to

find and translate academic terms using printed dictionaries. Extended examination time is currently possible at the University of Akureyri and several departments at the University of Iceland. The students who received extra time during the examination highly valued this type of support and considered it to be fair, since they reported spending a relatively long time on understanding the questions and, in some cases, translating them for themselves.

Translating examination questions and using English or other languages to answer questions are the least regulated forms of special support and always requires negotiations with particular teachers. Many participants repeatedly noted that, in most cases, they did not need full translations of the examinations, but they always appreciated when they were given the choice of answering exam questions in English. They considered it the most effective form of support to compensate for a lack of language skills in academic Icelandic. Although the participants were generally very grateful for any type of support that could help them to overcome language-related issues, they wished that the universities would develop clear policies and regulations regarding special support during examination periods for students whose native language is not Icelandic.

## **4.6 Summary**

Despite all the challenges that the participants faced during the learning process at the Icelandic universities, when there were asked to summarize their experiences, they were invariably positive and said that overall, they are satisfied with the learning environments and teaching methods. In most cases, language-related issues negatively impacted their experiences. This included practical difficulties related to reading and writing in academic Icelandic and difficulties in communicating with teachers and peers. Additionally, the inherited learning styles from the participants' cultures occasionally created challenges that the students had to deal with, such as adapting to unfamiliar teaching methods especially group work and understanding different assessment criteria.

The participants always valued the teachers who encouraged them to use their cultural backgrounds and previous experiences during the learning process. This approach motivated and empowered the immigrant students and had a positive influence on their sense of belonging. The participants appreciated the opportunity to be able to participate in this research study. They were very optimistic that the teachers, policymakers, academic counsellors and other staff members will reflect on the described issues and

challenges and take steps towards improving the learning environment and making university education accessible to everyone.



## **5 Discussion**

This is the first extensive study on immigrant students' experiences of the learning environments and teaching methods used in Icelandic universities. As such, it will possibly have high value for teachers, policymakers, units of service and support and other university staff members. This research is also important for the participating immigrant students because they had the opportunity to share their experiences and make an important contribution to the discussion about immigrant students' status in higher education in Iceland. The results of the study revealed that, although the participants have encountered several issues during the learning process, they remained positive about the education process. This study goes along with several trends in European higher education. Findings from a report on learning and teaching in the European Higher Education Area emphasised the significance of further research on diverse groups of students' experiences of the learning process and generally call on teachers and university staff members to focus their attention on providing relevant support and to shift toward learner-centred approaches to teaching and assessment (Gaebel & Zhang, 2018).

This dissertation explores and analyses the participating immigrant students' experiences of the learning environments and teaching methods used in Icelandic universities. This chapter starts with a discussion of the participants' experiences of culturally responsive teaching and argues that it is important to implement culturally responsive teaching in Icelandic universities where student diversity is gradually increasing. Later, the participants' perspectives on group work are discussed and related to previous research in the field. The participants' perspectives on group work are highlighted because it was one of the most frequently discussed teaching methods. According to the participants, it is being applied by the majority of teachers in Icelandic universities. The discussion continues with a section on the participants' experiences of learning Icelandic as a second language and their reflections on the teaching methods, including explicit and implicit language teaching. This is relevant because all, but three participating students took courses in Icelandic at some stage of their studies, and a few of them even majored in Icelandic. The section after that discusses the importance of the relevant educational support for immigrant students, based on the participants' experiences and challenges. Following sections

explore the question of why it is important to create an empowering university culture where all students feel valued and respected regardless of their origin. Additionally, this chapter includes sections that reveal and discuss the surprises and limitations of the presented study as well as ideas for further research.

## **5.1 Bridging cultures in universities**

Student populations are becoming more diverse in universities around the globe. According to previous research, the most important characteristic of teachers who are working with diverse student populations is being open and caring towards their students regardless of the students' origin or any other status (Boesch, 2014; Gaebel & Zhang, 2018; Parekh, 2006). The question that one might ask is: Why does culturally responsive teaching matter and in which ways do the Icelandic immigrant students' views correspond with findings from other research projects about culturally responsive teaching? This question is very relevant in Icelandic universities, where the diversity of the student body is growing along with the increasing diversity in Icelandic society (Statistics Iceland, 2018a, 2018b).

Culturally responsive teaching contributes to the students' sense of belonging in the learning environment (Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The findings of the current study reveal that culturally responsive teaching as a fully established approach to teaching is a rare phenomenon in Icelandic universities. The participants felt like the teachers may start dialogues with immigrant students out of curiosity, thus exploring their cultures, which is an element of culturally responsive teaching. Several theorists within multicultural education have repeatedly emphasised the importance of exploring students' cultures and introducing the school culture through dialogue and knowledge exchange (Gay, 2001; Nieto, 2010). In this way, students feel valued and welcomed into their new environments. The participants in the current study who experienced this dimension of culturally responsive teaching mentioned that it was challenging and unusual to share previous experiences, cultural backgrounds and knowledge and to be involved in the discussions in the beginning. Once they got used to it, they saw the benefits of this approach.

Culturally responsive teaching aims to eliminate cultural prejudices existing within the dominant culture and prejudices that immigrant student hold towards themselves (Banks, 2016; Gay, 2001, 2015). The participants of this study mentioned that sharing cultural backgrounds and previous experiences improved their communication with both teachers and peers,

who became more open to working with them regardless of language barriers and cultural differences. However, some participants shared that they often felt stressed about their language skills, especially Icelandic pronunciation. These negative attitudes towards themselves impacted the participants' well-being and made them less active in the learning process. A clear example of this was a participant who was insecure about her pronunciation of Icelandic during practical training. A caring teacher offered relevant support to help eliminate the internal worries. Once the participant overcame the anxiety, the practical training at a primary school became an enjoyable and enriching experience for both the participant and her pupils.

Creating an inclusive and multicultural curriculum is not merely an attempt to integrate students with diverse backgrounds into the learning environment. It also creates a unique learning experience for local students, who will have the opportunity to learn about different cultures and discuss them with their peers (Gay, 2001, 2018; Parekh, 2006). A multicultural curriculum is, according to the findings, a rare phenomenon in Icelandic universities. The participating students who were enrolled in the International Studies in Education programme were acquainted with a multicultural curriculum. These students shared how the curriculum was positive for them, and they learned a lot about their own and their peers' cultures.

On the other hand, several other participants tried to contact their teachers and suggest some changes in the curriculum. Their suggestions were rejected. This created negative attitudes towards those teachers and general dissatisfaction with the courses. Earlier research points out that it takes time for teachers to adjust to new teaching methods, and “[i]t takes honesty and self-reflection to admit that one's courses do not currently incorporate non-mainstream perspectives” (Quaye & Harper, 2007, p. 38). Only after self-reflection and re-evaluation of his or her own teaching can a teacher see the benefits of the extra work that he or she would need to do while adjusting the curriculum to the needs of a diverse group of students. Furthermore, creating a learning environment that activates all students is beneficial to everyone. For example, a teacher deciding to temporarily change the language of instruction into English made a difference according to the participant who experienced it. The dynamics in the classroom changed and the previously mute students started to participate in discussions that also activated local students.

Besides Icelandic and English, the participants very seldom used their native languages during the education process. They revealed that the

teachers hardly ever encouraged them to look for supporting learning materials in the students' native languages. These findings correspond to the findings presented by Holmen (2014), who revealed similar patterns at Danish universities, where students' linguistic competences in other languages than Danish and English "are not put actively into use in their academic life at Danish universities" (p.22). According to Cummins (2012), encouraging students to use their native languages during the education process empowers the students and affirms their identities i.e. cultural, linguistic and student identities.

Culturally responsive teaching aims to establish a link between school and the outside world (Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2010). According to the theory, teaching how to apply existing knowledge in the learning process and later how to relate the acquired knowledge to the real world are the goals of education (Banks, 2016; Boud & Falchikov, 2006). Some theorists suggest adding sustainability to the theory of culturally responsive teaching (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014). In other words, the focus is gradually shifting towards teaching the students how to sustain cultural competence and use it to their advantage in the future. Although the notion of culturally sustaining pedagogy has many benefits, it is even more uncommon than culturally responsive teaching in the Icelandic universities. Some evidence of experiences of culturally sustaining teaching were only found in two interviews with the students enrolled in the International Studies in Education programme.

Culturally responsive teaching builds an atmosphere of trust in the classroom and promotes critical thinking (Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2010). The ideas of promoting critical thinking and changing the traditional role of teachers are central to the constructivist theory, which emphasises learner-centredness in education (Brown, 2003; Cornelius-White, 2007). Several participants mentioned that teacher-student relationships built on trust had a positive impact on their well-being and allowed them to be more open and critical during the learning process. According to the participants, the best teachers are those who act as facilitators to guide the students through the learning process and encourage them to examine theories and previous research critically.

When it comes to the assessment methods, the analysis of the interviews revealed that many participants were concerned that the majority of the assessment methods that they experienced were summative assessments. These often included final examinations or final assignments essays or final reports that counted for their full grade in the course. The majority of the

participants felt like summative assessment did very little to promote further learning. Instead, it caused high amounts of stress during examination periods, resulting in some people developing exam anxiety. Culturally responsive teaching promotes holistic assessment methods that are non-biased and applied with equity in mind (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2007; Slee, 2010). Those participants who experienced formative assessment, based on low-stakes examinations and assignments, were very positive towards them. The participants mentioned that formative assessment facilitated learning by pointing out knowledge gaps and that narrative feedback was much more useful than a single grade assigned after a final exam. These experiences go along with previous research in the field that highlights the importance of applying non-biased assessment methods that involve both oral and written low-stakes assignments and examinations with narrative feedback that encourages further learning (Lloyd et al., 2015; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2007; Padilla & Borsato, 2008; Struyven et al., 2003).

According to the interviews, the participants were hardly ever given the chance to discuss and/or adjust assessment criteria, and in some cases, they even lacked a clear explanation of the assessment methods. These factors contributed to the participants' negative experiences and, in a few cases, resulted in failing exams. Earlier research emphasises the fact that teachers should take time to explain all the assessment criteria in detail, even those that are seemingly known, and allow students to discuss and/or select the assessment criteria (Boesch, 2014; Carless, 2007; Falchikov, 2005; Moore & Hampton, 2015; Struyven et al., 2003). In some cases, teachers should adjust the assessment if students provide an argument for the adjustment (Boesch, 2014; Moore & Hampton, 2015).

The analysis of the findings of the current study revealed a clear pattern in the participants' answers. Although they seldom experienced culturally responsive teaching, their experiences of it were so positive that they were the highlights of their learning process. The participants shared that it was enjoyable to be active contributors to the learning process, share previous experiences and cultural backgrounds and exchange knowledge with teachers and peers.

## **5.2 Group work: An opportunity or a challenge?**

During the interviewing process, it became obvious that the experiences of the group work were going to evolve into a separate theme. Group work is a teaching method that requires collaboration and active communication

between peers. All participants understood why group work is amongst the most frequently used teaching methods in the Icelandic universities, since it is both contemporary and relevant. Although the benefits of group work are widely discussed in both constructivist and multicultural education theories, the reality is still rather ambiguous. While some students praised and genuinely enjoyed group work, others tried to avoid it and held highly negative attitudes towards it.

Overall, the findings are similar to the findings presented in earlier research in the field that revealed students' contradictory experiences of group work (e.g. De Vita, 2002; Moore & Hampton, 2015; Popov et al., 2012). There is, however, a detail that makes the current study unique. During the analytical process, a clear pattern was discovered. It became apparent that the students in the humanities held negative attitudes towards group work, while students in social sciences and engineering held positive attitudes.

During further analysis, it became evident that the majority of the participants who studied social sciences and engineering were immigrants who had resided in Iceland for relatively long periods, and many of them had finished their primary and/or secondary education in Icelandic schools. Thus, they had better Icelandic skills, in some cases close to native proficiency, and they were familiar with the majority of teaching methods, including group work. On the other hand, the participants who studied the humanities were often newcomers who had finished primary, secondary and, in some cases, higher education in their countries of origin. Many of them were unfamiliar with group work and had not experienced it earlier. Previous research suggests that teachers can prevent negative attitudes towards group work by properly introducing it as a teaching method, clearly explaining the assessment criteria and highlighting the benefits of group work (De Vita, 2002, 2005; Forehand et al., 2016; Hassanien, 2006; Popov et al., 2012). The participants whose experiences were negative revealed that they were not introduced to group work and, in some cases, were not even informed about the assessment methods and criteria. This created several negative preconceptions and made the whole process difficult and stressful for them.

In some cases, the participants worried about the free-riding that might occur during group work, mainly because some group members might have lower language skills than others. Previous research suggests that free-riding can be eliminated or significantly reduced if teachers apply more advanced assessment methods, such as combining teachers' professional assessment with peer assessment, because this can activate students and stimulate learning (Carless, 2007; Forehand et al., 2016; Hassanien, 2006; Maiden &

Perry, 2011; Yang & Carless, 2013). This type of assessment has also been reported to have sustainable quality. According to the interviews, the participants scarcely ever got the chance to formally assess each other's performance in group work assignments to take an active part in the assessment. The grades were, in almost all cases, assigned by teachers, which contradicts one of the main principles of sustainable assessment, that of involving students in the assessment process as much as possible.

Despite several challenges described by the participants, approximately half of them regarded group work as a unique opportunity to exchange knowledge, learn about different cultures and learning styles and generally learn how to work in groups. Both empirical and theoretical literature state that group work, and especially multicultural group work, has many benefits for all students (De Vita, 2002; Falchikov, 2005; Forehand et al., 2016; Hassanien, 2006; Kimmel & Volet, 2010; Popov et al., 2012; Sweeney et al., 2008). However, group work should not be considered as a universal method that suits all students. Especially when it comes to communication between peers with the groups that is a significant part of group work, many other different aspects must be considered, such as personality conflicts, different learning styles and other personal and psychological issues (Almond, 2009; Popov et al., 2012).

The participants of this study admitted that group work plays a significant role in contemporary higher education in Iceland. They wished for teachers to bear in mind that this teaching method can be new and challenging for some immigrant students. That is why it is important to provide relevant support, particularly to those students whose attitudes towards group work are negative or those who are less familiar with this teaching method.

### **5.3 Icelandic: Breaking down the barriers**

Language is one of the most frequently discussed barriers that immigrants around the world need to break in order to be integrated into their new society. Many participants in the current study revealed that breaking down the language barrier took several years. In fact, they reported that they are still struggling when required to write essays or reports using academic Icelandic. Almost all participants took Icelandic language courses to improve their skills. In spite of mostly positive experiences, many of the participants revealed that they experienced some challenges and wished for improvements in the teaching methods and the structure of the courses.

The contrasting experiences of teaching of Icelandic were recently presented by Sölvason and Meckl (2019), who studied immigrants'

adaptation to Iceland. Their study involved approximately 2,200 immigrants residing in different parts of Iceland. The study revealed that only 25% of the participants were happy with the quality of teaching Icelandic in language schools and community centres in Iceland, while 59% were rather or very dissatisfied (Kyzer, 2019; Sölvason & Meckl, 2019). The results of this study suggest significant issues with the methods used to teach Icelandic in language schools that teachers and programme-makers should address. Although, that study did not focus on university students, the results may be applicable here. The issues related to the teaching methods of Icelandic described by Kyzer (2019) and Sölvason and Meckl (2019) are similar to those shared by the immigrant students in this study, including student dissatisfaction with teaching approaches that are not tailored to immigrant students and the teachers' lack of experience in second language teaching.

According to the findings from the current study, communication with teachers played a very important role in the participants' experiences of the learning process. When they felt a connection to their teachers and could clearly see that teachers are passionate about teaching and applying different teaching methods, the participants' experiences were highly positive. These practices and approaches go along with constructivist theory, multicultural education theory and communicative language teaching theories that emphasise the importance of establishing a productive learning environment that can trigger communication in the classrooms to develop students' language skills (Richards, 2006; Wesche & Skehan, 2002).

Explicit language teaching can be an essential element of second language teaching, especially when it comes to Icelandic. The language has a very complicated grammatical system, including complex verb conjugations and declensions of nouns, adjectives and articles. However, the participants' negative experiences were very often related to the courses explicitly training students' linguistical competence, i.e., grammar courses. The participants felt less involved in the learning process. They complained about workload, especially about the extensive amount of grammatical exercises and pattern drills. Previous research suggests that, in order to avoid these side-effects of explicit grammar teaching, teachers should consider applying incidental focus-on-form (R. Ellis et al., 2002; Loewen, 2005) supported by output hypothesis theory (Swain, 1993). Specifically, reactive incidental focus-on-form is regarded as very beneficial for developing both communicative and linguistic competences by focusing students' attention on linguistic elements when questions or errors naturally arise during communicative classroom activities (R. Ellis, 2001; R. Ellis et al., 2002).

During the interviewing process, several participants mentioned the real-world open task called *Íslenskuborpið* (The Icelandic Village) applied in one of the courses offered to the students at the University of Iceland. A pattern was discovered in the participants' answers. Their experiences were ambivalent in that they clearly understood the benefits of the idea behind the task but the experiences of doing the task were mostly negative. The participants felt that they were poorly prepared for the task and this resulted in extensive stress and generally negative attitudes towards the whole process. These experiences contradict the findings from Theodorsdóttir and Friðriksdóttir (2013), who studied students' experiences with *Íslenskuborpið*. The researchers reported that students had highly positive attitudes towards *Íslenskuborpið* and generally considered the task to be a success (Theodórsdóttir & Friðriksdóttir, 2013). According to the interview guide in their study and an extended interview guide found in an unpublished work by one of the students who conducted the survey, the students were specifically asked to describe the advantages of the task and its value (Theodórsdóttir & Friðriksdóttir, 2013). However, they were not specifically asked about disadvantages or failures. The differences between the students' experiences in Theodorsdóttir and Friðriksdóttir's (2013) study and the students' experiences in the current study could be explained by the different focuses of the studies. The earlier study specifically focused on this particular task and particularly looked for positive experiences (Theodórsdóttir & Friðriksdóttir, 2013). While the current study did not include any questions about this task, the participants revealed their experiences when they were asked to comment on teaching methods applied by the teachers of Icelandic as a second language. Additionally, the differences between these two studies could be explained by the students' different learning styles, personalities or levels of language proficiency. Further, the task probably was not adapted to new groups of students. The literature review shows that there is no single way of doing task-based instruction. This creates challenges for teachers, because the same task can be highly relevant for one particular group of students but absolutely irrelevant for another group. That is why tasks must be thoroughly evaluated and tailored to students' proficiency levels and interests and other circumstances (R. Ellis, 2009). The participants in the current study mentioned that some other assignments and tasks were applied too early in the learning process. They felt like they were not ready to complete such assignments. While the students' fears may be understandable, R. Ellis (2009) points out that low proficiency levels alone are not grounds for dismissing tasks or other communicative assignments as "engaging in such interaction

[context-bound, inexplicit] might in fact be beneficial, encouraging them to develop the capacity to make use of their limited resources and thus helping them to develop their strategic competence" (p. 229).

According to the findings, the participants wished to see improvements and changes mainly in courses where explicit teaching of grammar is applied. Further, the participants would appreciate the teachers considering tailoring tasks and assignments to every group of students and adjusting them to the students' interests, aspirations and language levels.

#### **5.4 The importance of relevant educational support**

Relevant support during the education process had repeatedly been shown to be one of the most important elements in multicultural education (e.g. Arredondo et al., 1996; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Jabbar & Hardaker, 2013; Sambell et al., 2006). A study conducted by Stebleton and Soria (2012) comparing experiences and challenges of first-generation and non-first-generation immigrant students revealed that first-generation immigrant students more frequently encounter obstacles during the learning process, thus requiring more attention and support. What is included in relevant support varies depending on the learning environment, student populations, university culture, etc.

The participants in the current study were often not aware of the support services available at the universities. Thus, they never or seldom used them. During the interviewing process, several participants realised that some of the issues that they encountered could potentially have been resolved by academic counsellors. The most frequently highlighted issues were language-related. This corresponds to the findings from earlier research, which, in most cases, emphasise language-related issues and ranked them as one of the primary obstacles that immigrant students encounter during the learning process (Ecklon & Rønn, 2007; Erisman & Looney, 2007; Sinacore & Lerner, 2013; Stebleton & Soria, 2012). Previous research has also shown that students not from the dominant culture often held a weaker position caused by the prevalence of written, high-stakes examinations that require an advanced level of academic language skills, making language support during the examination periods particularly relevant (Padilla & Borsato, 2008; Sinacore & Lerner, 2013; Slee, 2010).

The study participants described spending a lot of time on understanding examination and assignment questions and sometimes translating them. The universities tried to compensate for inequalities caused by differing levels of academic Icelandic by offering special support during examination periods,

usually in the form of extended examination time, translation of examination questions, allowing students to use dictionaries and/or allowing them to answer questions in English. As it is presented in the findings chapter and discussed in Paper V, the application process for the special support during the examination periods is very confusing and involves rounds of negotiations. Because of this, many participants hope that universities will develop clear policies and straightforward application guidelines that will eliminate confusion and save time for students and staff.

It is very important for university staff to work collaboratively to provide relevant and tailored support for immigrant students at Icelandic universities. After language-related issues, several participants mentioned family challenges and socioeconomic barriers standing in their way towards obtaining their degrees. In some cases, the students are even forced to make a choice between family and work and university studies. When it came to seeking support, some participants felt like they fell into a grey area between local students and exchange students. They often lacked relevant support tailored to immigrant students who are residing in Iceland and pursuing higher education.

## **5.5 Towards the empowering university culture**

Creating an empowering culture where every student feels valued and supported within educational institutions is one of the most important dimensions of multicultural education (Banks, 2009). Although every university staff member's efforts count, an educational institution should act as a whole in order to transform the existing culture and create a truly empowering learning environment that will make higher education an enjoyable and enriching experience of knowledge exchange and personal development (Banks, 2009, 2016; Guy, 1999; Quaye & Harper, 2007). During the interviews, several participants pointed out that they valued equality in the classroom and the dialogue between teachers and students. Some participants expressed how this democratic way of teaching, where the majority of teachers were easily accessible and the educational process was an exchange of knowledge between students and teachers, was totally new to them because they had not experienced it in their countries of origin. Equality and power sharing in educational institutions in Iceland go along with the democratic views and general equality that prevails in modern Icelandic society (Stjórnarskrá lýðveldisins Íslands [Constitution of the Republic of Iceland], 1944).

Developing a personal connection with immigrant students that is built on mutual respect, genuine concern for students, enjoyment of and commitment to teaching, and willingness to improve are the characteristics that participants highlighted as being important in their teachers. The participants wish that more teachers would use these approaches to teaching and communication as would be beneficial to everyone and create a positive atmosphere in the classroom. On the other hand, misguided empathy resulting in holding immigrant students to lower standards and expecting less from them was considered to be the least motivating method according to the participants. Several participants revealed that some teachers had lower expectations towards the immigrant students and generally approached them as if they were children. This approach resulted in negative attitudes and made the participants feel uncomfortable. These participants' experiences are supported by various studies that show that teachers should maintain equally high academic expectations for all students because lowering expectations based on students' backgrounds could lead to lower well-being for immigrant students, making them feel invisible and less valued (Banks & Banks, 2016; Boesch, 2014; Swaminathan & Alfred, 2001).

The findings of this study revealed many different challenges and issues that the participants shared during hours of interviews. Nevertheless, the majority of the participants were grateful for the opportunity to pursue higher education in Iceland, and they were generally optimistic about the future. The participants shared that they feel like university staff members are open to critique and are genuinely willing to work on resolving issues and creating an empowering learning environment that will celebrate diversity and support students throughout their journeys.

## **5.6 Surprises and limitations**

The study revealed 41 immigrant students' experiences of learning environments, education processes, teaching methods and communication with teachers and peers. The participants were surprisingly open and willing to share their experiences, opinions, challenges and suggestions. They were very grateful to have the opportunity to speak out and contribute to the development of the education system. In this section, several surprising findings and patterns discovered during data gathering and analysis are highlighted along with the limitations of the study.

Surprisingly, the majority of the participants were aware of the fact that there is very little research that has been done on immigrant students'

experiences of higher education in Iceland. Several participants shared that they found themselves in a grey zone in several respects. First, due to the relatively large amount of studies on immigrant children and teenagers, the findings from those studies were often used to describe and generalise immigrants' experiences of education and life in Iceland, sometimes taking little notice of the differences between compulsory and higher education. Second, the participants sometimes felt like they did not belong to any of the categories of the students in the universities. That is, they fell somewhere between local and exchange students. When they sought assistance, they were often provided with information intended for exchange students that was irrelevant to immigrant students, which demonstrates the lack of knowledge and understanding on behalf of the institutions.

Findings related to the experiences of the group work were rather unexpected too. The participants' perspectives were diametrically opposed, as was especially evident in the group interviews. Additionally, there were very apparent differences in students' experiences in different departments and schools within the universities.

When teaching methods were discussed during the interviews, it was interesting to observe the participants' physical reactions to some of the methods. For instance, when lecture-based teaching methods were discussed, many participants started to answer with an audible sigh, indicating that the following comments would be negative. On the other hand, their body postures and voice tones changed when they were talking about their experiences of culturally responsive teaching, indicating their positive attitudes towards these methods.

There are several limitations to the study. The fact that the presented study is included in a larger project can be considered to be both an advantage and a limitation. It was beneficial to learn about the participants' backgrounds, their aspirations, the details of their family lives and previous education, their experiences in Icelandic labour market and other things. This gave more insight into the participants' lives and provided the researcher with an opportunity to reflect on the findings from a broader perspective. Additionally, being able to meet many participants for both group and individual interviews was an advantage, as it created a better connection to the participants that made the interviewing process generally smoother. On the other hand, the interview guides (Appendices B, C and D) covered many different themes, limiting the time the researcher could spend discussing the participants' experiences of the learning environments and teaching methods.

The interviewing process included three phases: focus groups, individual interviews and repeated focus groups. The third phase was considerably less successful. Only 14 out of 41 participants agreed to participate in the third phase. The aim of the additional round of the focus group interviews was to explore the participants' educational progress and to find out if any changes had occurred since the earlier interviews. The three focus groups produced very little new data, as the participants gave almost the same answers regarding their experiences of the teaching methods and learning environments at the target universities. Still, the third phase was useful because it confirmed previous findings. The weakness of the repeated focus groups can be explained by the fact that there were only approximately nine months between the second and the third phase of the study. Had the interviews been taken after the participants' graduation, the data could have been richer. This was unfortunately not an option due to the time limitation of completing the project within three years.

One of the practical limitations of the present study could be that the interviews with participants were not conducted in the participants' native languages. Occasionally during interviews, the researchers became aware of certain language-related issues when participants could not explain their thoughts or experiences clearly. In some cases, it was obvious that the participants were saying what they could say but not what they wanted to say. In the early stages of the project, the research group considered the possibility of using interpreters during the interviews. Using an interpreter during the qualitative interviews has proven to be useful when conducting qualitative research with a homogeneous group of participants sharing the same native language that is different from the researcher's (Squires, 2009). In those cases, the researcher can introduce the research topic to an interpreter who will be engaged in the project and will be working with all the participants. In the present study, the participants had 21 different native languages. Thus, finding and working with professional interpreters of these languages would have been a challenge. Moreover, the researchers wanted to avoid the presence of a third person who was not related to the project in the interviews. After discussing the pros and cons of using an interpreter, the final decision was made to conduct the interviews without interpreters.

Another practical limitation of the study was the lack of representation of certain ethnic groups among the participants. The research group failed to find immigrant students of African origin to participate in the project. This may be because the percentage of students of African origin is very low in Icelandic universities. Those students who were contacted did not show interest in participating in the project.

The research presents the views of those immigrant students who shared their experiences with the researchers. Thus, the results cannot be generalised and applied to all immigrant students who pursue higher education in Iceland. The study revealed some patterns in the participants' answers that may indicate some common challenges that other students with similar characteristics might experience as well. However, generalisation was never the goal of the research because it aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of individuals.

## 5.7 Further studies

Despite the value of the current research study, it cannot explore all different aspects of the complexities of individual experiences of higher education. There is always a place for further research inspired by and building on the findings from this study. It could be highly relevant to explore immigrant students' experiences of the whole education process from the first day of university studies until graduation. This kind of project would require recruiting several students who would be willing to meet with researchers regularly and potentially keep a journal to be used for data and analysis. This would produce rich data in the form of individual narratives that could be explored and analysed using various approaches.

Further, it could be very advantageous to study teachers and other university staff members' experiences of working with students from a variety of cultures, including immigrants. Additionally, their experiences of implementing and applying culturally responsive teaching and culturally responsive assessment could be analysed. This would add an important perspective and make a significant contribution to the discussion about multicultural education in Iceland.

Potentially, it could be beneficial to conduct a quantitative study on immigrant students' experiences of higher education in Iceland. This would produce statistical data that could possibly be generalised. A mixed-method study could also be an option, including interviews with the students, who represent the most common groups according to the quantitative data, as well as interviews with the students whose answers significantly deviate from other participants. There are many possibilities for further research studies. Hopefully, the current study could serve as a source of knowledge and inspiration for other researchers and open the door into exploring immigrant students' experiences of higher education in Iceland.



## **6 Conclusion**

Working on this research project has been an interesting, exciting and empowering experience. The data collection process turned into a knowledge exchange between the researchers and the participants. During hours of interviews, the participants shared their experiences, challenges and perspectives. This became valuable information for this dissertation. Some participants learned about available support services within the universities from the researchers, and they were given some tips on how to better integrate into the Icelandic learning environment.

Although some clear patterns in the participants' answers were determined and discussed, it is impossible to argue that there is one universal approach that would solve all the issues and make the learning process an unimpeded journey towards a degree. This was never the goal. Some students prefer working alone; some enjoy group work. Some are outstanding writers while others are brilliant speakers. Some students encounter practical and economic challenges, while others confront personal and psychological issues. The challenges, preferences and learning styles are very diverse and reflect the diversity of the student population. The most important thing is to be able to provide reliable and relevant support that will help and guide the students through the education process. The goal of contemporary education should be to acknowledge the great diversity within the student population by applying relevant teaching methods, creating empowering learning environments and providing everyone with equal opportunities, access and support regardless of nationality or other status.



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# Paper I



**NETLA**  
VEFTIMABIT UM UPPELDI OG MENNTUN

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## Kennsla og stuðningur í íslenskum háskólum

### Reynsla innflytjenda

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► Abstract ► Um höfundana ► About the authors ► Heimildir

Í kjölfar aukinna fólkuslutninga síðustu áratugi hefur innflytjendum fjölgæð í háskólum á Íslandi. Þessi grein er byggð á niðurstöðum rannsóknarverkefnisins Væntingar og tækifæri innflytjenda á Íslandi til háskólamenntunar og áskoranir henni tengdar (2016-2018) sem styrkt er af Rannís. Meginmarkmið rannsóknarverkefnisins er að öðlast skilning á upplifunum, reynslu, áskorunum og stuðningi við innflytjendur í háskólanámi hérlandis. Í þessari grein eru kynntar helstu niðurstöður úr eigindegri rannsókn með innflytjendum sem eru núverandi og fyrrverandi háskólanemar á Íslandi. Gagna var aflað í rýnihópavíðtölum og einstaklingsvíðtölum við alls 41 nemanda í þrem háskólpá Íslandi. Markmið rannsóknarinnar sem greinin fjallar um er að öðlast skilning á reynslu og upplifun innflytjenda af kennsluaðferðum, áskorunum og stuðningi í þremur stærstu háskólanum á Íslandi, Háskóla Íslands, Háskólanum í Reykjavík og Háskólanum á Akureyri. Niðurstöðurnar benda til þess að flestir þáttakendur upplifi að kennsluaðferðir í háskólanum séu nútímalegar. Þeir nefna hag- nýtar kennsluaðferðir, svo sem umræðutíma og hópavinnu, og að byggt sé á þekkingu þeirra og reynslu. Skoðanir á þessum kennsluaðferðum eru þó mismunandi. Sumir þáttakendur telja hópavinnu vera góða, en aðrir upplifa hana sem tímasóun. Sumir sækjast eftir akademísku námi, á meðan aðrir vilja frekar læra eitthvað hagnýtt, sem þeir geti notað í framtíðarvinnu. Þá telja þáttakendur að jafnraði ríki milli nemenda og kennara í háskólanum, en það hafa þeir ekki alltaf upplifað í heimalöndum sínum. Niðurstöðurnar sýna einnig að nemendurnir eru langflestir jákvædir gagnvart kennslu og stuðningi í íslenskum háskólum en þeir glíma við ýmiss konar áskoranir. Fram kemur að þeir leita eftir mismunandi stuðningi, bæði formlegum og óformlegum, svo sem betra aðgengi að formlegum upplýsingum fyrir innflytjendur á innra neti og á vefsíðum háskóllanna. Óformlegur stuðningur, svo sem frá íslenskum samnemendum, t.d. við nemendur sem hafa lítið tengslanet hér á landi, virðist heldur ekki mikill. Þáttakendur glíma einnig við ýmiss konar vandamál, einkum tungumálaerfiðleika, en einnig samskiptavandamál og skort á upplýsingum. Þáttakendur frá löndum utan EES/ES glíma við erfiðleika tengda dvalarleyfi sem geta haft mikil áhrif á nám og líðan. Þessi rannsókn getur nýst háskólum við að bregðast við aukinni fjölbreytni meðal háskólanema.

**Efnisorð:** Kennsla, stuðningur, áskoranir, innflytjendur, íslenskir háskólar

## Inngangur

Í kjölfar aukinna fólksflutninga síðustu áratugi hefur innflytjendum fjölgæð í háskólum á Íslandi (sjá t.d. Háskóla Íslands, 2013). Ekki liggja þó fyrir nákvæmar upplýsingar um fjölda þessara nemenda eða uppruna þeirra. Til að tryggja farsæla háskólagöngu er mikilvægt að kennarar, námsrāðgjafar, háskólayfirvöld og háskólasamfélagið í heild starfi í samræmi við þessa þróun, svo sem með því að innleiða stefnur, nota hentugar kennsluaðferðir og veita stuðning sem hentar fjölbreyttum nemendahópum (Anderson, 2008; Anna Katarzyna Wozniczka og Hanna Ragnarsdóttir, 2016; Franke, 2015).

Ýmsar rannsóknir hafa verið gerðar sem tengjast innflytjendum og þáttöku þeirra í háskólamenntun á Norðurlöndum (sjá t.d. Kolodziejczyk og Hummelgaard, 2012; Tranæs o.fl., 2008). Norðurlandaráð hefur birt fjölda skýrslna um aðlögun innflytjenda að samfélögum á Norðurlöndum í gegnum menntun. Þessar skýrslur sýna að meðal þess sem fær innflytjendur til að sækja sér háskólamenntun er jákvæð afstaða þeirra til aðlögunar að samfélaginu og hvatning til slíks af hálfu yfirvalda og samfélagsins í heild (Geiger og Lund, 2010; Nordisk Ministerråd, 2004; Thång og Larson, 2010). Hins vegar er hlutfall innflytjenda sem skrá sig í háskólanám og ljúka því samkvæmt Bologna Process Implementation Report, mun lægra en innfæddra nemenda (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015).

Ekki hafa verið gerðar margar íslenskar rannsóknir á stöðu innflytjenda á háskólastigi, en í rannsókn Sue Books, Hönnu Ragnarsdóttur, Ólafs Páls Jónssonar og Allyson Macdonald (2011) þar sem könnuð var reynsla kennara og nemenda í alþjóðlegu námi í menntunarfræði á Menntavísindasviði Háskóla Íslands kom fram að með náminu er leitast við að opna aðgang fyrir nemendur með fremur litla íslenskukunnáttu að háskólamenntun og auka þannig ábyrgð háskóla, en jafnframt er leitast við að valdefla fjölbreytta nemendahópa og auka tækifæri þeirra til menntunar. Niðurstöður rannsóknar Hönnu Ragnarsdóttur og Hildar Blöndal (2014) sem snerist um erlendar konur í alþjóðlegu námi í menntunarfræði við HÍ bentu til þess að námið hefði styrkt konurnar og veitt þeim tækifæri til menntunar sem þær hefðu ekki haft áður. Einnig sýndu niðurstöður að kennsluhættir þar sem lögð er áhersla á fjölbreytileika nemenda gegna mikilvægu hlutverki í valdeflingu nemenda af erlendum uppruna. Niðurstöður rannsóknar Allyson Macdonald og Auðar Pálsdóttur (2011) með nemendum í alþjóðlegu námi í menntunarfræði við HÍ varpa m.a. ljósi á mikilvægi þess fyrir nemendur að þeir skapi í samstarfi við kennara aðstæður þar sem traust og öryggi ríkir.

Niðurstöður rannsóknar Boesch (2014) sýna að háskólkennarar hafa mikil áhrif á námsumhverfið í kennslustofunni og á viðhorf innflytjenda til náms. Nemendum finnst mikilvægt að tekið sé tillit til bakgrunns þeirra og hann nýttir í kennslu og að ekki sé slakað á kröfum til þeirra (Boesch, 2014; Swaminathan og Alfred, 2003). Rannsóknir sýna einnig að kennari verður að ná tengingu við nemendur sína til að fá þá til að taka þátt í kennslunni og gera kennsluna þannig persónulegri (Hill, 2014). Enn fremur bendir Parekh (2006) á að stuðningur við innflytjendur sé mikilvægur fyrir nám þeirra.

Markmið rannsóknarinnar sem greinin fjallar um er að öðlast skilning á reynslu og upplifun innflytjenda af kennsluaðferðum, áskorunum og stuðningi í þremur stærstu háskólunum á Íslandi, Háskóla Íslands, Háskólanum í Reykjavík og Háskólanum á Akureyri. Rannsóknarsþurningin er: Hver er upplifun og reynsla innflytjenda af kennsluaðferðum og stuðningi og hvers konar áskoranir glíma þeir við meðan á námi stendur?

## Fræðilegur rammi

Fræðilegur grunnur rannsóknarinnar er byggður á gagnrýnum fjölmennningarfræðum (e. critical multiculturalism), en samkvæmt þeim er áhersla lögð á réttindi minnihlutahópa í samfélögum og menntun (Parekh, 2006). Giroux (1993, 2001) segir að gagnrýnin fjölmennningarfræði sé ekki bara það að viðurkenna mismun og staðalímyndir sem séu til staðar í samfélögum heldur einnig

að reyna að skilja og líta gagnrýnum augum á það sem blasi við og taka virkan þátt í að umbreyta öllum birtingarmyndum fordóma og mismunar, einkum í menntastofnum. Að mati Parekh (2006) er menningarlegur fjölbreytileiki orðinn staðreynð í nútímasamfélögum og alþjóðlegt viðfangsefni og hann telur að stuðla verði að auknum jöfnuði í fjölmenningsarsamfélögum. Í hverju samfélagi fyrir sig þurfi að leita jafnvægis með virkri samræðu hópa og einstaklinga. Markmiðið sé að virkja alla einstaklinga í fjölmenningsarsamfélögum til að hægt sé að tryggja jafnt aðgengi og tækifæri fyrir alla.

Enn fremur var hugmyndafræði menningarmiðaðrar kennslu (e. culturally responsive pedagogy) notuð til að skoða kennslu- og námsumhverfi innflytjenda í háskólanámi, en sú hugmyndafræði gefur kennaranum kost á ramma til að ná markmiðum gagnrýninna fjölmenningsarfræða. Menningarmiðuð kennsla tekur tillit til þekkingar, reynslu og bakgrunns nemenda sem notuð er sem undirstaða fyrir nám (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Villegas og Lucas, 2002; Wlodkowski og Ginsberg, 1995). Gay (2010) segir að slík kennsla nýti fjölbreyttan bakgrunn og styrkleika nemenda. Guy (1999) fjallar sérstaklega um menningarmiðaðra kennslu fyrir fullorðna (e. culturally relevant adult education) og um mikilvægi þess að kennarar í fullorðinsfræðslu skoði og ígrundi hvort námsumhverfi og þar með samskiptatækni, kennsluaðferðir, reglur og væntingar til nem- enda sem og matstæki og matsviðmið endurspegli menningu nemenda þeirra. Marchesani og Adams (1992) hafa sett fram líkan sem getur aðstoðað kennara við að ígrunda námsumhverfi út frá menningarlegu sjónarhorni og pannig koma til móts við alla nemendur, en líkanið er byggt á eftirfarandi atriðum: 1) menningarlegri sjálfsmynd kennara (e. the instructor's cultural identity), 2) menningarlegri sjálfsmynd nemenda (e. the learners' cultural identity), 3) námskrá sem tekur tillit til þarfa og byggir á reynslu og styrkleikum allra (e. inclusive curriculum) og 4) kennsluaðferðum og -ferlum (e. instructional methods and processes).

Fullorðnir nemendur eru sagðir þurfa meira frelsi í kennslufyrirkomulaginu, þeir geta yfirleitt sjálfir stjórnað heimanámi og geta sett sér markmið og einblínt á þann hluta námsins sem er mest krefjandi og mikilvægastur fyrir þá (Brookfield, 1995). Þess vegna er mikilvægt í kennslu fullorðinna að deila valdi með nemendum og nota fjölbreyttar aðferðir til að tryggja þátttöku allra nemenda. Hafa þarf jafnframt í huga að fjölbreyttar nemendur, bakgrunnur þeirra, reynsla og menning getur haft áhrif á þátttöku þeirra í námi og á viðhorf þeirra til hlutverks og ábyrgðar kennarans og nemandans (Brookfield, 1995, 2013; Colin og Preciphs, 1991). Guy (1999) undirstrikkar mikilvægi jafnvægisins milli kennara og nemenda í háskólum, enda sé það lykilatriði til að skapa gott andrúmsloft í kennslu. Hins vegar bendir hann á að þó að jafnvægi og valddreifing séu áríðandi, hafi kennarinn áfram þá sérstöðu að stjórna kennslu og tryggja að allir nemendur taki virkan þátt í umræðum og hafi góðan skilning á kennsluefninu.

Það sem er einna erfðast innflytjendum í háskólanámi er tungumálið sem kennt er á og ólík kennslumennen, en fyrri rannsóknir sýna fram á mikilvægi tungumáls og kennsluefnis sem notað er við háskóla við að hjálpa innflytjendum að sigrast á tungumálaörðugleikum (Boesch, 2014; Erisman og Looney, 2007). Boesch (2014) heldur því fram að kennarar þurfi að kynna námsefnið á skipulegan hátt og það þurfi að vera skipulagt þannig að nemendur af erlendum uppruna geti auðveldlega greint mikilvægustu atriðin því að nemendur af erlendum uppruna sem læra á örðu tungumáli hafa margir ekki enn öðlast faðni í kennslutungumálinu og eiga því erfiðara með að aðgreina lykilatriði í náminu. Þar að auki þarf kennsluefnid að vera hagnýtt og er því mikilvægt að kennarar styðjist við raunveruleg dæmi og umræður í kennslu fjölbreyttra nemendahópa. Skilningur á hugsanlegum tungumálaörðugleikum og menningarmun er einnig mikilvægur þegar kemur að ýmsum kennsluaðferðum, svo sem hópavinnu, og mati á háskólanámi innflytjenda, en sum verkefni, kennsluaðferðir eða matstæki sem talin eru skýr og sanngjörn geta verið óljós nemendum af erlendum uppruna (Boesch, 2014). Það er þó mikilvægt að kennarar slaki ekki á kröfum til innflytjenda, því slíkt getur leitt til vanlífunar nemenda og jaðarsetningar (Swaminathan og Alfred, 2003). Jákvætt viðhorf kennara til bakgrunns, menningar og tungumáls nemenda virðist hins vegar vera veigamikill þáttur í því í því að efla velferð nemenda og skapa stuðning og traust í kennslustofunni (Boesch, 2014; Davidson, 1996; Swaminathan og Alfred, 2003).

Í rannsókninni var stuðst við hugmyndafræði menningarmiðaðrar ráðgjafar (e. culturally competent counseling) til að kanna reynslu þessara háskólanema af formlegum stuðningi, svo sem námsráðgið og öðrum stuðningi á vegum háskóla, og óformlegum stuðningi vina, samnemenda eða fjölskyldu sem þeir fá eða sækjast eftir. Rannsóknir hafa sýnt að innflytjendur hafa tilhneigingu til að sýna mikinn metnað og brautseigju í háskólanámi þrátt fyrir náms- og félagslegar hindranir (Gray, Rolph og Melamid, 1996; Owens og Lynch, 2012). Hins vegar vantar þá oft sérstakan stuðning til að takast á við andlegar, félagslegar og menningarlegar aðstæður (e. psychosociocultural issues) sem hafa áhrif á viðhorf, þekkingu og færni þeirra innan háskólaumhverfisins (Arredondo o.fl., 1996). Skilningur á þessum fjölbreyttu aðstæðum nemenda af erlendum uppruna er mikilvægur til að hægt sé að veita þeim viðeigandi og menningarmiðaða þjónustu og ráðgjöf (Gloria og Rodriguez, 2000; Hertzberg, 2017). Engstrom og Tinto (2008) halda því fram að fyrir háskólanema úr minnihlutahópum, og þar með fyrir innflytjendur, sé að- gangur að námi án stuðnings ekki tækifæri. Þeir benda á að það sé hlutverk háskóla að auðvelda háskólagöngu þessara nema, meðal annars með því að hvetja þá til þátttöku í ýmsum verkefnum á háskólasvæðinu og bjóða upp á markvissa ráðgjöf og jafningjastuðning, en fleiri rannsóknir sýna að slík úrræði virðast skila árangri hjá þessum nemendum og öðrum minnihlutahópum (Crisp og Cruz, 2009; Engle og Tinto 2008; Wilson og Arendale, 2011).

Stebleton og Soria (2012) leggja áherslu á að kennrarar, ráðgjafar og aðrir sem eiga samskipti við innflytjendur gegni mikilvægu hlutverki í að styðja þá við að ná, ekki aðeins akademískum, heldur líka persónulegum markmiðum og þurfi því að vera meðvitaðir um áskoranir sem tengjast námi þessara nemenda. Daddona (2011) bendir á að þeir sem eiga samskipti við nemendur, og þar með við nemendur af erlendum uppruna, þurfi að hafa mikla samskiptahæfileika og kynna sér vel þjónustu og úrræði sem standi öllum nemendum til boða. Þar að auki þurfi kennrarar og ráðgjafar að vera meðvitaðir um fjölmengunarleg mállefni sem tengjast háskólkennslu og ráðgjöf og þar með um hugsanlega tregðu innflytjenda til að leita aðstoðar (Daddona, 2011).

## Aðferð

Markmið rannsóknarinnar sem greinin fjallar um er að öðlast skilning á reynslu og upplifun innflytjenda af kennsluaðferðum, áskorunum og stuðningi í þremur stærstu íslensku háskólunum, Háskóla Íslands, Háskólanum í Reykjavík og Háskólanum á Akureyri. Stuðst var við eigindlega aðferðafræði í rannsókninni. Eigindleg aðferðafræði er notuð til að skilja betur þá merkingu sem þátttakendur rannsóknarinnar leggja í reynslu sína og aðstæður (Lichtman, 2009). Rannsóknin er viðtalarannsókn og rýnhópaviðtöl og hálfskipulögð einstaklingsviðtöl voru notuð til að fá fram skoðanir og reynslu þátttakenda.

## Þátttakendur

Allir þátttakendur eru innflytjendur af erlendum uppruna og eru búsettar á Íslandi. Þeir skiptust í two hópa, annars vegar núverandi háskólanema í grunnnámi og hins vegar nema sem höfðu hætt námi eftir eitt ár. Ekki er um skiptinema að ræða. Heildarfjöldi þátttakenda er 41 og eru þeir frá 23 mismunandi löndum Evrópu, Asíu, Norður- og Suður-Ameríku. Þátttakendur hafa 21 mismunandi tungumál að móðurmáli og hafa búið á Íslandi frá tveimur og upp í 18 ár. Þeir voru valdir með því að hafa samband við nemendaskrá háskólanna þriggja. Við val á þátttakendum var einnig stuðst við snjóboltaaðferð (Creswell, 2008; Flick, 2009), en leitast var við að hafa sem jafnasta dreifingu þátttakenda eftir upprunalandi, aldri, kyni, lengd búsetu á Íslandi, íslenskukunnáttu og námssviði.

## Gagnasöfnun

Gagnasöfnun fólst annars vegar í sjö rýnihópaviðtölum og voru þáttakendur brír til fimm í hverju viðtali. Tveir rannsakendur sáu um rýnihópaviðtölum og stjórnaði annar viðtalinu og hinn var ritari. Hins vegar voru tekin 35 einstaklingsviðtöl við sömu þáttakendur og tóku þátt í rýnihópaviðtölunum. Ekki vildu þó allir þáttakendur koma í einstaklingsviðtal, og þess vegna er misrämi milli fjölda einstaklingsviðtala og heildarfjölda þáttakenda. Viðtölum voru tekin á tímabilinu frá september 2016 til maí 2017. Markmiðið með rýnihópaviðtölum var að skapa rými fyrir fjölbreyta og óformlega umræðu innan lítils hóps háskólanema með svipaða reynslu um viðfangsefni rannsóknarinnar (Sóley S. Bender, 2003). Kostur rýnihópaviðtala er að umræða um sameiginlega reynslu getur hvatt viðmælendum til frekari þáttöku í viðtalinu (Morgan, 1997). Hálfskipulögð einstaklingsviðtöl voru því næst notuð til að fá fram skoðanir einstakra þáttakenda eins ítarlega og haegt var (Brinkmann og Kvale, 2015). Stuðst var við viðtalsramma til að tryggja að meginþurningum og markmiðum rannsóknarinnar væri fylgt, auk þess sem skoðuð voru afrít af rýnhópaviðtölum fyrir einstaklingsviðtölum til frekari undirbúnings fyrir samræður við hvern og einn viðmælanda (Flick, 2006; Kvale, 1996). Viðtölum voru tekin á íslensku eða ensku og tóku að meðaltali um eina klukkustund hvert. Þau voru hljóðrituð og afruituð orðrétt.

## Gagnagreining

Gagnagreining hófst strax eftir fyrstu afruitanir (Creswell, 2008). Gögnin voru marglesin. Fyrst lásu rannsakendur þau hver út af fyrir sig en síðan voru þau lesin í hópi sjö rannsakenda, og áhersla var lögð á að greina sem best fjölbreyta reynslu innflyttjenda af háskólanámi á Íslandi. Við úrvinnslu gagna var notuð þemagreining (Braun og Clarke, 2013), gögnin voru kóðuð og síðan bjó rannsóknarhópurinn til flokka sem þróuðust að lokum í þrjú aðalþemu sem kynnt eru í þessari grein og eru: kennsluaðferðir og námsumhverfi, stuðningur og áskoranir.

## Siðferðileg álitamál

Persónuvernd var tilkynnt um rannsóknina og vísindasiðaneftnd Háskóla Íslands gaf umsögn um hana sem brugðist var við. Rannsóknin er í samræmi við allar vísindasiðareglur Háskóla Íslands (2014). Aflað hefur verið leyfa til gagnaöflunar frá stjórnendum háskólanna. Óskað var eftir upplýstu samþykki frá öllum þáttakendum, auk þess sem persónuverndarsjónarmiða var gætt að fullu við meðferð, vinnslu og eyðingu frumgagna í samræmi við gildandi lög (Lög um persónuvernd og meðferð persónuupplýsinga nr.77/2000). Þáttakendur gátu fyrirvara laust og án útskýringa hafnað eða hætt þáttöku. Í rannsókninni eru eingöngu notuð gervinöfn og er þess gætt að ekki sé haegt að rekja svör til nemendanna.

## Niðurstöður

Þessum kafla er skipt í undirkafla, þar sem helstu niðurstöður úr viðtölum eru kynntar í þrem meginþemum og ræddar. Í fyrsta undirkafla er áhersla lögð á kennsluaðferðir og námsumhverfi og upplifanir nemenda af því. Næst er undirkafl um formlegan og óformlegan stuðning, þar sem því er lýst hvers konar stuðningur er í boði fyrir innflyttjendur í íslenskum háskólum, hvað þáttakendur vita um stuðninginn og hvernig þeir nota hann. Í þriðja undirkaflanum er fjallað um áskoranir og hindranir sem mæta þáttakendum og hafa áhrif á nám þeirra.

## Kennsluaðferðir og námsumhverfi

Niðurstöður benda til þess að flestir þáttakendur upplifi að kennsluaðferðir í háskólunum og námsumhverfi þeirra sé nútímalegt og í samræmi við markmið námskeiða. Þáttakendur telja kennara vera vel undirbúna fyrir kennslu og að yfirleitt sé einfalt að fylgjast með kennslu í kennslustofum. Eftirfarandi dæmi úr viðtolum lýsa þessum viðhorfum háskólanemanna:

[Þýðing úr ensku] Stundum er ég alveg dolfallinn yfir því hversu mikið þetta fólk veit. Það er ótrúlegt því það eru margir kennarar sem kenna 5–6 námskeið og þeir hafa mikla og djúpa þekkingu á efninu sem þeir kenna í hverju námskeiði fyrir sig og í líffræði er það mikið, þú veist, fimm mismunandi svíð innan líffræði og þeir eru sérfræðingar í þeim öllum svo með tilliti til menntunar þá eru þeir finir (Péter).

[Þýðing úr ensku] Í þessum háskóla eru aðföngin nokkuð góð, þú veist það er eins og, já, mér fannst skólinn vera frekar nútímalegur miðað við það sem ég er vön svo ég var spennt að læra, að byrja nám hér (Martina).

Þáttakendur eru ánægðir með það þegar kennarar hvetja þá til að nota þekkingu úr fyrra námi sínu eða fyrri reynslu frá upprunalandi þáttakenda. Þáttakendurnir telja það einnig vera góða leið til að tengjast fólk i kennslustofu að segja dálítið frá reynslu sinni og bakgrunni. Einn þáttakandi lýsti þessu með eftirfarandi hætti:

Mjög gott að fara í vettvangsnám [...] ég sagði við krakka að ég er frá erlendum uppruna og hérrna framburðurinn minn er ekki eins og Íslendingur en mig langar að lesa fyrir ykkur [...] og kennari minn var að styðja mig líka [...] umsjónarkennari minn sagði bara „Segðu það bara, vertu bara opin“ [...] Það er bara mjög svona jákvætt viðbrögð (Isabel).

Í nokkrum tilfellum eru þáttakendurnir óánaegðir með kennsluaðferðir einstakra kennara, sérstaklega þegar kennarar nota glærur of mikið og lesa einfaldlega glærutexta upp. Í slíkum tilfellum finna nemendur ekki persónulega tengingu við kennara og upplifa kennslustundirnar sem upplestur en ekki sem kennslu eins og eftirfarandi dæmi sýnir:

[Þýðing úr ensku] Svo, þau eru ekki beint að kenna hér svo að segja, þau hafa þýtt bók- ina, kafla úr bókinni sem við erum að lesa, þau hafa sett hann inn í power point-sýningu svo að það er samantekin þýðing á bókinni og stundum lesa kennararnir beint upp af glærunum, svo að það er ekki mikil kennsla (Gisele).

Þáttakendur eru sérstaklega jákvæðir gagnvart þeim námskeiðum sem kennd eru á ensku og óska þess að þau verði fleiri. Í námskeiðum sem eru kennd á íslensku þurfa flestir þáttakendur að leggja meira á sig til að fylgjast með kennslunni. Þeir benda einnig á að þeir þurfi að vinna meira heima og fara vel yfir lesefni til að fylgjast betur með kennslunni. Ný tækni kemur að gagni í heimavinnu og í undirbúningi fyrir próf og þáttakendur eru ánægðir með að sumir kennarar taka fyrirlestra upp og hlaða þeim á innra netið Moodle strax eftir tíma. Þetta gefur innflytjendum möguleika á að hlusta á fyrirlestra aftur, stoppa upptökur þegar þurfa tíma til að þýða hugtök sem kennarinn notar og tengja fyrirlestra við lesefni, eins og eftirfarandi dæmi lýsir:

Ég gat alltaf hlustað á upptöku, það var ekkert mál, og ég átti glærur frá kennurum sem ég gat líka alltaf horft á (Polina).

Margir þáttakendur benda á að meirihluti vinnu og náms fari fram heima og því þurfi kennarar að leiðbeina og hjálpa þeim, einnig að velja viðeigandi lesefni og koma með dæmi sem styðji kennslu.

Sumir þáttakendur komu með athugasemdir varðandi samskipti við kennara, sem þeim finnst hafa góð áhrif á kennslu. Þáttakendur segja að jafnræði ríki milli kennara og nemenda í íslenskum háskólum. Þáttakendum frá Austur-Evrópu og Asíu líkar sérstaklega vel að hafa tækifæri til að hafa samband beint við kennara og fá skjóta endurgjöf, enda hafa þeir ekki upplifað þess konar samskipti í sínum heimalöndum:

[Þýðing úr ensku] Mér líkaði mjög vel hversu óformlegir kennararnir eru, þú veist, og þeir veita manni það traust að maður getur líka lagt til málanna þannig að það eru ekki bara kennararnir sem tala, það eru samskipti (Virginia).

Hópavinnna er kennsluaðferð sem oft er notuð í íslenskum háskólum. Skoðanir nemenda á hugvísindasviði (sérstaklega nemenda í íslensku sem öðru mál) eru oftar neikvæðar á hópavinnu en annarra nemenda. Sumir þátttakendur telja hópavinnu þannig vera tímasóun og sjá lítið gagn í henni. Þeir nefna m.a. málí sínu til stuðnings að þegar nemendur fái að velja sjálfir hverjir verði saman í hópi myndist vinahópar frekar en vinnuhópar. Í þessum tilfellum fari mikill tími í almennt spjall (jafnvel á móðurmáli þátttakenda, ef þátttakendur í hópnum eru með sama móðurmáli), og það lengi vinnutíma og trufli verkefnavinnu. Einnig eru sömu þátttakendur óánægðir með einkunnir hópa og telja að þeir hefðu getað gert betur ef þeir hefðu unnið verkefnin upp á eigin spýtur.

Ég fékk bara sama einkunn eins og hinir í hópi! Og mér fannst þetta skrítíð vegna þess að ég ... við erum öll sammála að ég var bara bestur í hópi og mér fannst það skrítíð (Vladimir).

Hinsvegar hafa þátttakendur sem stunda nám við verkfræðideild og viðskiptafræðideild jákvæða reynslu af hópavinnu og telja hana vera gott taekifaði til að víkka sjóndeildarhringinn, læra að vinna í hópi og færa rök fyrir málí sínu. Þeir telja einnig að hópavinnan muni hjálpa þeim í framtíðarvinnu. Þátttakendur sem stunda fjarnám hafa einnig jákvæð viðhorf til hópavinnu, þó að hún fari oft fram í gegnum netið. Pessir þátttakendur segja að hópavinnna gefi þeim tækifaði til að upplifa kennsluaðferð sem virkar og lifandi umræður, þar sem þeir geti rætt námsefnið og leyst verkefni saman.

[Þýðing úr ensku] Það er miklu betra fyrir mig og gerir mér hlutina auðveldari því stundum myndi ég misskilja verkefni eða hvað ætti að gera eða eithvað í upplýsingunum um verkefnið. Svo ef það eru Íslendingar sem ég er að vinna með, þeir misskilja hlutina pottþétt ekki og geta leiðrétt mig. En það hefur líka gerst oft að ég þarf að leiðréttá þau af því ég var að fylgjast betur með í tíma, af því ég þarf að hafa athyglina í lagi til að skilja allt og það hefur oft gerst að það séu einhver smáatriði sem ég þarf að leiðréttá af því þau héldu að það ætti að vera örðruvísí. Fyrir mig er það þannig mjög hjálplegt að við þurfum að vinna verkefni og skýrslur í hópum og ég er dálítið hræddur um að fá einn dag verkefni sem ég þarf að gera sjálfur á íslensku því ég get í raun og veru ekki skrifad íslensku almennilega (Péter).

EKKI SÍST hefur kennslutungumálið veruleg áhrif á upplifanir innflyttjenda. Flest námskeið á grunnstigi í íslenskum háskólum eru kennd á íslensku, sem gerir það erfidiðara fyrir þátttakendur að fylgjast með kennslu. Einstakar námsleiðir eru kenndar á ensku (Alþjóðlegt nám í menntunarfræði BA og Ensku BA), einnig fer tungumálanám (eins og danska, sánska, franska o.fl.) yfirleitt fram á marktungumáli. Að öðru leyti þurfa nemendur að hafa góð tök á íslensku til að geta stundað nám í skólunum. Í flestum viðtölum kemur þessi þáttur skýrt fram, að nemendur þurfi að nota að minnsta kosti tvö tungumál – ensku og íslensku, enda er mestalt lesefni á ensku, á meðan kennsla fer fram á íslensku. Einnig eru glærur, tilkynningar frá kennurum og verkefnalyssingar oftast á íslensku. Þátttakendur hafa margir fullan skilning á því að íslenska sé notuð meira en enska enda eru þeir í námi á Íslandi og bjuggust við þessu. Hins vegar myndu sumir þeirra vilja að það væru aðeins fleiri námskeið í boði sem kennd væru á ensku.

[Þýðing úr ensku] Sum námskeið sem eru kennd eru t.d á íslensku en bækurnar eru á ensku en svo ... eru prófin á íslensku, ég bara skil það ekki og reynsla míni er að þegar maður biður um próf er ekki alltaf hægt að fá próf á ensku, svo að þetta er dálítið ruglingslegt af því að þegar maður þarf að venjast mismunandi námsefni á mismunandi tungumálum og ef að móðurmálið þitt er hvorki enska né íslenska gerir það þetta extra erfitt. Svo að ég held að það sé helst áhyggjuefnið sem ég hef varðandi próf (Svjatoslav).

Þátttakendur eru yfirleitt sáttir við námsmat og matsaðferðir, þeim finnst kröfur vera skýrar og einkunnagjöf sanngjörn. Í flestum tilfellum fá þátttakendur undanþágu og geta skilað verkefnum á ensku og svarað prófspurningum á ensku (einn þátttakandi, Ljun, fær stundum leyfi til að svara

þróf spurningum á kínversku). Það virðast þó ekki vera skýrar reglur varðandi notkun ensku (og annarra tungumála) í prófum og það er alltaf samningsatriði milli kennara og nemenda hvort nemendur fá að nota annað tungumál en íslensku. Í nokkrum tilfellum fá nemendur að nota orðabækur í prófi, en þeir viðurkenna að þetta hjálpi þeim ekki mikil og þeir taki orðabækur frekar með í próf til að róa sig en sem hjálpartæki.

[Þýðing úr ensku] Ég veit ekki hvort það fer eftir deildinni eða ekki, en samanborið við verkfræði- og náttúruvísindasvið, ef maður biður um lokapróf á ensku þá fær maður alltaf próf á ensku svo að það er ástæðan fyrir því að ég liðgi af fyrsta árið. Hingað til hefur allt verið á ensku fyrir mig, en vinkona míni sem er núna að læra í viðskiptafræðideild, hún hefur beðið um lokapróf á ensku og kennararnir segja bara „þú getur ekki fengið það“ (Long).

Stuðningur hefur líka verið mikilvægt umræðuefni í viðtölunum við nemendur og næst verður fjallað um formlegan og óformlegan stuðning sem nemendur fá í háskólum á Íslandi.

## Stuðningur

Við greiningu viðtalanna kom í ljós að páttakendur nýta sér bæði formlegan og óformlegan stuðning í námi sínu. Formlegur stuðningur er aðallega veittur af námsráðgjöfum, starfsfólkji þjónustuborðs og skrifstofu alþjóðasamskipta. Niðurstöður sýna þó að flestir páttakendur nota formlegan stuðning síður og reyna alltaf að fara óformlegar leiðir fyrst. Óformlegur stuðningur er veittur af samnemendum, vinum og fjölskyldumeðlimum þáttakenda.

## Formlegur stuðningur

Háskólarnir bjóða upp á mismunandi þjónustu og stuðning fyrir háskólanema. Allir páttakendur hafa sótt þjónustu þjónustuborðs háskólanna og eru langflestar umsagnir þeirra um þessu þjónustu jákvæðar. Þáttakendur fá afgreidd alls konar vottorð, fá aðstoð við tengingu við háskólanet og fá upplýsingar um frekari þjónustu. Samkvæmt þáttakendum er afgreiðsla þjónustuborðsins hröð og starfsfólk er alltaf opið og hjálpsamt.

[Þýðing úr ensku] Þegar ég bið um eitthvað sem var praktískt þá var svarið alltaf mjög nákvæmt og mjög hratt [...] Sérstaklega þegar, t.d. maður fer bara á þjónustuborðið eins og þegar mann vantar kortið sitt, stúdentakortið eða marga pappíra vegna dvalarleyfis á sex mánaða fresti [...] Það var alltaf mjög vinalegt og skilvirk og allt (Patricia).

Fáum þáttakendum var þó kunnugt um starfsemi náms- og starfsráðgjafanna og ýmsa þjónustu og úrræði fyrir háskólanema. Minnihluti þáttakenda tók þátt í háskólavíðburðum, svo sem kynningum fyrir nýnema, þar sem þeir fengu taekifæri til að kynnast háskólaumhverfinu. Hins vegar tóku flestir þáttakendanna yfirleitt lítinn þátt í slíkum víðburðum og þeir leituðu síður til náms- og starfsráðgjafa, einfaldlega vegna skorts á upplýsingum um hlutverk námsráðgjafa.

Rannsakandi: Ókei, en námsráðgjafar, hefurðu einhvern tímann farið í viðtal?

Þáttakandi: Ég? Nei, ég veit ekki hvað er í raun og veru þetta og ég veit ekki hvernig getur ráðgjafi hjálpað mér (Vladimir).

Einnig kom fram að þáttakendur byrjuðu á að leita að upplýsingum á vefsíðum háskólanna, og teldu ekki að þeir þyrftu að fá viðbótaraðstoð. Sumir þáttakendur hafa þó sótt sér aðstoð námsráðgjafa og er reynslan af því mismunandi. Í sumum tilfellum þurftu nemendurnir að undirbúa sig vel fyrir fund með ráðgjafa eða tala við aðra ráðgjafa svo að þeir gætu fengið viðeigandi aðstoð. Í einu viðtali kom fram að nemandinn fór til námsráðgjafa tvisvar og upplifanir voru gerolískar.

[Þýðing úr ensku] Þegar ég var að sækja um í HÍ, ég hef líka mismunandi reynslu af

námsráðgjöfunum því í fyrsta skipti sem ég fór spurði ég almennra spurninga og fékk almenn svör, „Ó, það er á netinu, þú getur fundið það þar, þetta er þetta og hitt“. Svo að mér fannst ég bara vera að eyða tímanum mínum og heirra í þetta af því það voru engar útskýringar [...] Þetta var eins og upplýsingaborð. En svo ýttu foreldrar míni á mig, „farðu og spryrðu fleiri spurninga“. Svo að ég undirbjó mig aðeins betur, skoðaði fleiri hluti sem ég vildi gera og sem betur fer lenti ég þá á annarri konu sem var mjög vinaleg [...] og mér fannst eins og ég væri í raun og veru velkominn þangað, svo að ég held að það skipti líka máli hvern maður talar við, af því þetta eru tvö mismunandi tilvik, eða tvö svipuð tilvik en mismunandi svör (Svjatoslav).

Í þessu tilfelli má greina upplifunina frá mismunandi sjónarhornum. Til dæmis viðurkennir þáttakandinn að hann hafi verið betur undirbúinn í seinna skiptið og hugsanlega fengið betri þjónustu vegna þess. Viðhorf námsráðgjafans var einnig vinalegra í seinna skiptið að sögn þáttakanda. Hugsanlega voru upplýsingarnar sem þáttakandinn fékk í bæði skiptin þær sömu en upplifun hans miklu jákvæðari vegna viðhorfs námsráðgjafans.

Skrifstofur alþjóðasamskipta í öllum háskólunum veita einnig þjónustu fyrir innflytjendur. Þó að áhersla þeirra sé fyrst og fremst að aðstoða skiptinema eða nemendur sem fara í skiptinám, skipuleggja þær einnig viðburði, sem eru opnir öllum nemendum af erlendum uppruna. Þar má m.a. telja nýnemadaga, örnmáskerið í íslensku og mentorakerfið, sem miðar að því að veita erlendum nemum praktískar upplýsingar um íslenskt samfélag og koma þeim í kynni við aðra stúdenta og daglegt líf þeirra. Í viðtolunum kom það samt fram að flestir þáttakendur vita lítið eða ekkert um þjónustu skrifstofu alþjóðasamskipta og mjög fáir hafa nýtt sér hana. Þeir sem hafa sótt stuðning þar gerðu það í sambandi við skiptinám, og eru ánægðir með þjónustu skrifstofunnar.

[Þýðing úr ensku] Mér líkar við alþjóðaskrifstofu, já. Þegar ég fór í Erasmus. Þau hjálp- uðu mér mikil þannig að ef ég hafði einhverjar spurningar þá hjálpuðu þau alltaf og ef ég sendi tölvupóst á \*\*\* svarar hún alltaf strax (Jamala).

\*\*\* Nafn starfsmanns skrifstofu alþjóðasamskipta.

Námstengdur vandi er ein helsta ástæða þess að þáttakendur leita sér viðbótaraðstoðar. Sem dæmi þiggja þáttakendur ráð og aðstoð við fræðileg skrifbæði á íslensku og ensku í háskólunum sem bjóða upp á slíka þjónustu, svo sem í ritverum. Sumir finna aðrar leiðir sem hjálpa til við námið, eins og að taka þátt í dæmatínum og viðbótarnámskeið. Þeir virðast einnig njóta góðs af aðstoð sem og stuðningi frá háskólkennurum sem eru sérstaklega fúsir til að veita þeim aðstoð. Sumir þáttakendur velja áfanga sem þessir kennarar kenna.

[Þýðing úr ensku] Ég treysti mjög mikil á suma uppáhalds kennarana mína í þessum námskeiðum. Ég man sérstaklega eftir tveim sem fengu fullt af tölvupóstum, ég talði við leiðbeinanda minn í ritgerðinni. Þegar maður fór á skrifstofu alþjóðasamskipta þá sögðu þau „Ó, nei, við erum fyrir fólk sem fer erlendis að læra, ekki fyrir fólk sem er hér að læra erlendis“, þá sagði ég bara „Ó, ég vissi það ekki“ (Britney).

Eitt mikilvægt atriði, sem var rætt í viðtolunum, var sérúrræði í námi. Í öllum háskólunum geta allir nemendur (íslenskir og erlendir) með námserfiðleika fengið sérúrræði í prófum, en þeir þurfa að sækja sérstaklega um það til námsráðgjafa. Að vera innflytjandi og hafa ekki íslensku sem móðurmál telst ekki vera hömlun. Þess vegna er sérúrræði fyrir innflytjendur alltaf samningsatriði og ekki eru til sérstakar reglur varðandi það. Í einum af háskólunum þrem voru allir þáttakendur upplýstir um að þeir gætu fengið viðbótartíma í prófum og notað orðabækur ef þeir þyrftu. Í hinum tveim háskólunum vissu nemendur ekki um nein sérúrræði og viðbótartími var yfirleitt ekki í boði fyrir innflytjendur. Orðabækur eru leyfðar ef kennari samþykkir það. Flestir þáttakendur sem hafa fengið að nota orðabækur eða lengri tíma í prófum viðurkenna þó að þeir hafi ekki endilega þurft þess en þeim finnst þægilegra að fara í próf með það í huga að þeir geti notað orðabók ef þeir rekast á orð sem þeir skilja ekki.

Flestir þáttakendur nefndu mikilvægi þess að fá óformlegan stuðning utan háskóla. Þess vegna er það áriðandi fyrir þáttakendur að mynda félagslegt tengslnet, sem getur veitt þeim stuðning og upplýsingar. Í næsta kafla verður rætt um óformlegan stuðning og hvernig þáttakendur nýta sér hann.

## Óformlegur stuðningur

Þáttakendur sem fá óformlegan stuðning frá tengslaneti sínu segja að hann sé yfirleitt jákvæður og nytsamlegur. Margir kjósa þennan stuðning fremur en formlega þjónustu sem háskólanir bjóða upp á, sérstaklega þegar kemur að óóryggi í námi og í tengslum við andlegan og félagslegan vanda.

Þáttakendur sögðu að tengslanet þeirra hefði stækkað við það að þeir stunduðu háskólanám. Í viðtölunum kom fram að þáttakendur vildu frekar hafa samband við vini og kunningja sem þekktu eða hefðu fyrri reynslu af háskólaþifinu til að fá hagnýtar upplýsingar. Það að hafa íslenskumælandi fólk í nærumhverfi sínu hjálpar þeim að fá gagnlegar ábendingar, ráð og aðstoð hratt og í afslöppuðu umhverfi. Petta á einnig við um þá sem taka virkan þátt í skipulögðum viðburðum stúdentaráðs og nemendafélaga.

[Þýðing úr ensku] Ég hef bara samband við einhvern af bekkjarfélögum mínum, þá íslensku því ég veit ekki, kannski var eitthvað sagt í tíma sem ég skildi ekki vegna tungumálaörðugleika og venjulega er það málið. Þannig að þau hjálpa mér að fylla inn í eyður eða þau láta mig bara vita að þau ætli að, þú veist, hittast og vinna í því og þá get ég hitt þau, en annan en þau, ég held að ég hafi aldrei notað neinn annan stuðning eða leitað til neins annars (Péter).

Enn fremur kom fram að nemendumir eiga auðvelt með að hitta og vingast við aðra nemendur af mismunandi uppruna og það stuðlar að þverþjóðlegri færni þeirra. Það virðist einnig ríkja samstaða og samkennd meðal nemenda.

[Þýðing úr ensku] Í fyrsta lagi þá höfum við alþjóðlega umhverfið, þegar maður kemur frá einsleitu umhverfi í alþjóðlegt þá er það fyrsta áskorunin að kynnast, það var tekið á því formlega með því að tala við fólk frá ýmsum löndum og ... við sögðum hinum frá, þú veist kostum og göllum og í hvert skipti urðum við, þú veist sálfraðingar fyrir hvert annað (Nikolaj).

Að auki nefndu þáttakendurnir að stuðningur frá fjölskyldu skipti miklu máli enda getur fjölskylda veitt þeim fjárhagslegan stuðning sem og hvatningu til menntunar. Þessi stuðningur er mjög mikilvægur, sérstaklega fyrir þáttakendur sem hafa ekki sterka fjárhagslega stöðu og þurfa að vinna með náminu til að framfleyta sér. Í einu viðtali segir þáttakandi að hún hafi þurft að hætta námi vegna þess að hún hafi ekki fengið stuðning frá manninum sínum.

Það var einmitt líka út af því að ég þurfti að vera þá í 100% vinnu og vinna einmitt og peningar höfðu þá meira forgang hjá mér en skóli. En eins og núna þá vil ég einmitt, ég vil fara aftur í skóla, mig langar að fara og ég myndi þá minnka við mig og fá meira kannski stuðning frá manninum mínum sem ég fékk ekki þá (Polina).

Hins vegar hafa margir þessara nemenda ekki stór tengslanet hér á landi og þess vegna er óformlegur stuðningur heldur ekki mikill, svo sem frá íslenskum samnemendum. Mismunandi ástæður voru nefndar fyrir því, til dæmis að íslenskukunnáttu þeirra væri ekki nóg góð, þeir ættu ekki marga vini, erfitt væri að kynnast nýju fólkí, þeir væru feimnir við að fara á kynningar og í vísindaferðir.

Af því ég bara kunni voða lítið á íslensku og, já. Mér fannst það bara svoltið vandræðalegt líka að biðja um hjálp. Og ef ég gerði það, enginn geti hjálpað mér í alvöru. Ég meina af því þau eru mjög upptekin líka á þessu námi. Þannig ég var svoltið hérna, hvað heitir það? Einangruð. Já (Carina).

Oft eru þessir nemendur með mikilvægar spurningar um námsumhverfi sitt sem þeir hafa ekki getað komið á framfæri. Þeir upplifa oft hindranir í félagslegum samskiptum og geta einangrast. Í næsta kafla eru ræddar áskoranir sem þáttakendur upplifa í námi sínu.

## Áskoranir

Niðurstöður rannsóknarinnar sýna að nemendur glíma við ýmiss konar áskoranir sem hafa oft áhrif á nám þeirra og líðan í háskólanum. Skipta má áskorunum í fjóra flokka: tungumálaerfiðleika, samskiptaerfiðleika, skort á upplýsingum, og erfiðleika tengda dvalar- og námsleyfi. Þó að flestir þáttakendur hafi upplifað erfiðleika í náminu eru þeir yfirleitt jákvæðir gagnvart því.

Tungumálaerfiðleikar eru algengasta áskorun nemenda. Langflestir þáttakendur hafa upplifað þá og reynsla þeirra er yfirleitt mjög svipuð. Í kaflanum um kennsluaðferðir hefur verið bent á það að kennslutungumálið hefur veruleg áhrif á nám þáttakenda. Í flestum tilfellum (þó ekki öllum) gengur þáttakendum betur þegar námskeið eru kennd á ensku. Hins vegar mynda þáttakendur sem læra íslensku sem annað mál sérhóp, þar sem markmið þeirra er að læra íslensku. Í þeirra tilfelli getur of mikil notkun ensku í kennslu verið vandamál. Annars eru sumir þáttakendur óöruggir þegar þeir fara að tala við starfsmenn og kennara, vegna skorts á íslenskukunnáttu. Í nokkrum tilfellum vekur óoryggi gremju og skort á sjálfstrausti, sumir þáttakendur segja að þeir séu ekki eins virkir í umræðum í kennslustofum og íslensku nemendurnir af því að þeir vilji ekki hljóma skringilega. Þetta vanraust á eigin íslenskukunnáttu leiðir til þess að þáttakendur nota minni íslensku í samskiptum og æfa sig þar af leiðandi minna, og það hindrar þróun íslenskunar enn meira.

Í fyrsta skipti, það var mjög erfitt fyrir mig vegna þess að ég talaði ekki íslensku og kann varla ensku og mér fannst að ég er svona ekki manneskja, vegna þess að allir tala ensku eða jafnvel íslensku (Vladimir).

[Þýðing úr ensku] Ég er ekki fullnuma í tungumálínum ennþá, ég á enn í vandræðum með umræður í tíma og ég bjóst við því að það væri einhver í sömu stöðu og ég en, nei ... Ég er sú eina sem er með ensku og öll prófin eru á íslensku (Eva).

Samskiptaerfiðleikar koma sterkt fram í langflestum viðtölum. Að hluta til tengjast þessir erfiðleikar skorti á tungumálakunnáttu, en að öðru leyti eru þeir menningartengdir. Þáttakendur frá löndum þar sem menningin er ólík eiga erfiðast með að mynda tengslanet og kynnast fólk. Í viðtali við nemendu frá Kína kom það fram að hana langaði að kynnast fólk og hún leitaði eftir aðstoð frá starfsmanni skrifstofu alþjóðasamskipta, sem sendi tölvupóst á nokkra nemendur í kínversku til að athuga hvort þeir vildu kynnast þáttakanda. Því miður kom ekkert út úr þessu enda svaraði enginn tölvupóstnum. Einnig segja sumir þáttakendur að það sé auðveldara að kynnast öðrum innflytjendum en íslendingum.

[Þýðing úr ensku] Ég á enga vini, jafnvel ekki núna, sem eru íslenskir, en ég á bara erlenda vini (Cindy, flutti til Íslands þegar hún var sjó ára).

Upplýsingaflæði er einn af þeim þáttum sem háskólanir geta bætt, samkvæmt þáttakendum. Flestir þeirra hafa upplifað skort á upplýsingum á einn eða annan hátt. Oftast vantar þá upplýsingar um skipulag námsins og fyrirkomulag kennslu. Skólakerfi í heimalöndum þáttakenda eru í sumum tilvikum gerólið skólakerfinu á Íslandi. Sumir þáttakendur vissu ekki hvernig aettu að skrá sig í námskeið, sumir lenda í vandræðum með notkun Uglu eða Moodle. Einn þáttakandi sagði frá því að hún hefði ekki getað fundið upplýsingar um brautskráningu á ensku á heimasíðu skólans, hún vissi ekki að það pyrfti að sækja sérstaklega um brautskráningu og þegar hún var búin að finna þær upplýsingar var umsóknarfresturinn runninn út, sem þýddi að hún þurfti að bíða til næstu brautskráningar.

var búin að finna þær upplýsingar var umsóknarfresturinn runninn út, sem þyddi að hún þurfti að bíða til næstu brautskráningar. Þegar vandamál tengd upplýsingaflæði koma upp vita margir þáttakendur heldur ekki hvert á að leita til að fá hjálp og þess vegna fara þeir oftast til vina og kunningja í staðinn fyrir að leita til skrifstofa háskólanna.

[Þýðing úr ensku] Ég var ekki alveg viss með Uglu. Ég var ekki alveg viss um hvaða námskeið ég átti að skrá mig í. Af því að ég hélt að maður skráðist einfaldlega sjálfkrafa í skyldunámskeið, svo að út af því missti ég af einu námskeiði í sögu (fyrsta námskeiðið), af því að ég verð að taka það ... Ég varð að setja það sjálfur inn, jafnvel þó að það væri skyldunámskeið á námsleiðinni minni ... Og ég var ekki viss um það og þegar ég áttáði mig á því, af því að hópurinn var nýr ... Fólk talaði ekki eins mikið hvort við annað þá eins og við gerum nú ... Þannig að ég vissi ekki að ég væri ekki í einum af þessum tímum og þegar ég áttáði mig á því var það orðið dálitið of seint að taka þátt (Svjatoslav).

Stór hópur þáttakenda er frá löndum sem eru ekki aðilar að Evrópusambandinu. Þessi hópur upplifir oft erfiðleika sem tengjast umsókn um dvalarleyfi á Íslandi. Þó að dvalarleyfi hafi ekki mikið að gera með nám þáttakenda getur það ferli haft áhrif á líðan þáttakenda, sem getur svo haft áhrif á námsárangur þeirra. Samkvæmt reglum Útlendingastofnunar um endurnýjun dvalarleyfis fyrir námsfólk, þurfa nemendur að ljúka að minnsta kosti 22 ECTS-einingum við fyrstu endurnýjun „en við síðari endurnýjanir þarf umsækjandi að hafa lokið viðunandi námsárangri, þar sem þess er krafist“ (Útlendingastofnun, 2017). Sumir þáttakendur upplifa mikla streitu tengda því að ef þeir ná ekki lágmarksárangri þurfi þeir að fara heim. Einn þáttakandi lýsti mjög erfiðri líðan tengdri dvalarleyfi. Á fyrsta ári var hún svo stressuð vegna námsárangurs að hún fékk magaverk sem líktist botnlangabólgu, hún var lögð inn á spítala og eftir nokkrar prufur kom í ljós að þessir verkir voru vegna streitu og mikils álagss. Hún gat ekki lært vegna þessa í nokkra daga og fékk slæmar einkunnir á þeiri önn:

Já, þú bara hugsar ekki um þú hvað þú ert búin að læra, þú bara hugsar um það – ókei kannski ef mig vantar að pakka og fara heim. Og hvað gerum við kisurnar? (Kamilla).

Annar nemandi lýsti einnig mikilli streitu tengdri dvalarleyfi:

[Þýðing úr ensku] Í byrjun var það mjög erfitt, sérstaklega fyrsta hálfá árið [...] Ef við gátum ekki staðist prófið urðum við að fara aftur til Kína, fara aftur heim, svo að ég var mjög stressuð [...] Ég talaði við foreldra mína og grét oft. Ég sagði af hverju velja hér, af hverju valda mér svona miklu stressi, en eftir að ég stóðst prófið þá varð ég svo ánægð. Ég er svo stolt af sjálfrí mér og eftir hálft ár finnst mér allt ganga betur og betur (Lijun).

Til þess að ná lágmarksárangri nota sumir þáttakendur svipaða aðferð; þeir taka fleiri námskeið en þeir þurfa, og oftast taka þeir eitt til tvö „einföld“ námskeið, sem þeir eru nokkuð vissir um að geta klárað til þess að ná nógum góðum námsárangri. Þeir eru oft skráðir í 40 ECTS á einni önn, en í nokkrum tilfellum fá þeir leyfi til að skrá sig í enn fleiri. Þó að þeir taki einföld námskeið eykur það samt vinnuálagið og þeir leggja þá minni áherslu á skyldunámskeið, sem eru mikilvæg fyrir námið, eins og eftirfarandi dæmi sýnir:

[Þýðing úr ensku] Og líka þar sem ég þarf að sýna Útlendingastofnun að ég sé nemi í fullu námi er ég líka að taka námskeiðið \*\*\*, tvö \*\*\* námskeið og líka eitt \*\* námskeið. Svo að af því að ég þarf að vera í fullu námi, það er ástæðan fyrir því að ég tek það. En annars myndi ég bara taka tvö námskeið og kannski vinna meira. Eða kannski myndi ég bara taka tvö námskeið og skrifa ritgerðina og klára í maí ef það væri ekki fyrir dvalarleyfi ... Ef það væru ekki takmarkanir varðandi dvalarleyfi [...] Sérstaklega á síðasta misseri var það of erfitt fyrir mig af því að ég var hrædd um að ég myndi falla á einhverjum prófum og ég tók 48 einingar (Jamala).

\*\*\* Nöfn námskeiða eru falin til þess að það sé ekki hægt að rekja svar til þáttakanda.

Annað vandamál sem nemendur utan Evrópusambandsins upplifa er takmarkaður aðgangur að vinnumarkaði. Flestir þáttakendur búa einir á landinu og þurfa að framfleyta sér sjálfir. Að finna vinnu og vinna með náminu er mjög mikilvægur þáttur í lífi þeirra en möguleikar nemenda utan Evrópusambandsins eru mjög takmarkaðir. Til þess að fá atvinnuleyfi á Íslandi sem námsmaður þurfa nemendur að fara í gegnum flókið ferli. Þeir mega ekki vinna meira en 15 klukkustundir á viku og þeir mega ekki skipta um vinnu án þess að saekja um nýtt leyfi, enda er leyfið tengt vinnuveitanda (Útlendingastofnun, 2017). Umsækjendur þurfa að vera búmir að finna vinnu áður en þeir senda inn umsókn en þeir mega ekki byrja að vinna á meðan á afgreiðslutíma stendur (Útlendingastofnun, 2017). Saman gera þessi atriði atvinnuleit nemenda mjög erfiða og sumir þáttakendur lýstu því að vegna erfiðleika við umsóknarferli væru þeir neyddir til að fara á svartan vinnumarkað, þó að þeir vildu það ekki:

[Þýðing úr ensku] Nemendum er í raun ýtt út í að brjóta lög eins og að vinna ólöglega og að borga ekki skatta. Af hverju? Af því að það er svo erfitt að finna vinnu fyrir stúdenta í hlutastarfi og vinna lítið og það geta ekki allir vinnuveitendur gert það. Í öðru lagi, þegar þú finnur vinnu þá getur þú ekki byrjað fyrr en þú ert búinn að fá leyfi frá Vinnumálastofnun [...] svo þú þarf að ganga aftur í gegnum þetta umsóknarferli og Vinnumálastofnun mun líklega samþykka og þú getur byrjað eftir tvö mánuði. Vinnuveitandinn, jafnvel þó að hann sé engill, mun ekki bíða svo lengi. Og jafnvel þó að þú sért engill munt þú samt deyja því þú átt ekki pening (Nikolaj).

Þó að langflestir þáttakendur hafi upplifað einhverja þeirra erfiðleika sem er lýst hér að framan eru þeir yfirleitt jákvæðir gagnvart peirri reynslu að vera háskólanemi á Íslandi. Þeir segja að háskólar á Íslandi bjóði upp á fjölbreytilegt og skemmtilegt nám og í flestum tilfellum reyni starfsfólk skólanna að hjálpa þeim að leysa vandamálin eftir bestu getu.

## Umræður og lokaorð

Með þessari rannsókn var leitast við að öðlast skilning á reynslu og upplifun innflytjenda af kennsluaðferðum, áskorunum og stuðningi í þremur stærstu háskólunum á Íslandi, Háskóla Íslands, Háskólanum í Reykjavík og Háskólanum á Akureyri.

Niðurstöður rannsóknarinnar sýna jákvæða reynslu innflytjenda af háskólanámi í þremur háskólam á Íslandi, þrátt fyrir ýmsar áskoranir sem þeir standa frammi fyrir í tengslum við tungumál, menningu og væntingar til náms. Það sem stendur helst upp úr er að nemendum finnst jafnræði vera mikil nemenda og kennara og það hefur góð áhrif á nám þeirra. Það sem kom á óvart í niðurstöðum eru skoðanir á hópavinnu þar sem sumum nemendum finnst hópavinnna vera tímasóun á meðan aðrin telja hana vera góða kennsluaðferð. Hvað varðar stuðning í háskólunum, þá nýta nemendur formlegan stuðning síður og reyna alltaf að fara óformlegar leiðir fyrst. Áskoranir þáttakenda skiptast í fjóra flokka: tungumálaerfiðleika, samskiptaerfiðleika, skort á upplýsingum, og erfiðleika tengda dvalar- og námsleyfi. Hér á eftir verða nokkur atriði úr niðurstöðum rædd nánar í fræðilegu ljósi.

Þáttakendur í rannsókninni sýna mikinn metnað í námi eins og fyrri rannsóknir benda til (Gray, Rolph og Melamid, 1996; Owens og Lynch, 2012). Þeir eru flestir ánægðir með kennara og kennsluaðferðir við íslenska háskóla. Þegar þeir bera þetta saman við reynslu sína í heimalandinu segja þeir gjarnan að kennsla á Íslandi henti þeim betur, enda séu aðferðir nútímalegri og kennrarar séu aðgengilegir og áhugasamir um kennslu sem og um nemendur. Fyrri rannsóknir hafa sýnt að jákvætt viðhorf kennara skapar gott andrúmsloft í kennslustofunni og stuðlar að vellíðan nemenda (Boesch, 2014; Davidson, 1996; Guy, 1999; Swaminathan og Alfred, 2003). Í nokkrum tilfellum hafa komið upp einhverjur örðugleikar, en flestir þeirra tengjast tungumáli, svo sem erfiðleikar við að fylgjast með kennslu á íslensku eða nauðsyn þess að nota fleiri en eitt tungumál í daglegu lífi í skólanum, en aðrar rannsóknir benda á mikilvægi þess að kennsluaðferðir og ferli séu skiljanleg og hagnýt og taki tillit til reynslu, bakgrunns og þarfa allra nemenda (Boesch, 2014; Erisman og Looney, 2007; Marchesani og Adams, 1992).

Það er því mikilvægt að háskólkennarar kynni námsefni á skipulegan hátt og að reglur um tungumálanotkun séu skýrar (Boesch, 2014). Þó að þáttakendur í rannsókninni nefni ýmsar hindranir sem tengjast náminu sjálfu viðurkenna þeir að í flestum tilfellum sé það lítið mál að yfirstíga þær og kennarar séu oftast tilbúnir að ræða málín og viljugar að koma til móts við þarfir innflytjenda í háskólanámi (Brookfield, 1995; Colin og Preciphs, 1991; Guy, 1999).

Sú kennsluaðferð sem flestir þáttakendur hafa sterkastar skoðanir á er hópavinna, en hún er sögð vera mikil notuð í íslenskum háskólum. Markviss hópavinna er í anda hugmyndafræði menningsarmiðaðrar kennslu (Wlodkowski og Ginsberg, 1995). Þessi aðferð gefur nemendum taekifaer til að æfa sig í að vinna saman við að leysa verkefni. Markmið aðferðarinnar er einnig að tryggja þáttöku nemenda í umræðum og skapa virka umræðu í kennslustofunni. Þó að hópavinna sem kennsluaðferð sé vel þekkt og viðurkennd eru skoðanir þáttakenda á aðferðinni gerólfkar. Leggja þarf áherslu á mikilvægi og markmið hópavinnu í háskólanámi og útskýra þessu kennsluaðferð vel, því eins og sumar rannsóknir hafa sýnt geta sumar kennslu- og matsaðferðir sem taldar eru skýrar orðið óljósar fyrir nemanda af erlendum uppruna, en oft hafa þeir enga reynslu af slíkum aðferðum (Boesch, 2014; Colin og Preciphs, 1991).

Skoðanir þáttakenda á þjónustu og úrræðum fyrir innflytjendur eru mismunandi og tengjast reynslu þeirra. Sumir þáttakendur segjast hafa góðan aðgang að upplýsingum og almennum þjónustu og eru ánaegðir með skipulag og skjót vinnubrögð starfsfólks háskólananna. Hinsvegar kjósa margir þáttakendur frekar óformlegan stuðning vina og kunningja þegar um andlegan og félagslegan vanda er að ræða. Þeim finnst þau yfirleitt geta fundið eigin bjargráð og þau sýna þrautseigju þegar þau upplifa áföll og streitu vegna námsins. Petta samræmist því sem kemur fram í öðrum rannsóknum um þrautseigju háskólanema í minnihlutahópum (Owens og Lynch, 2012). Það er einnig mikilvægt að hafa í huga að margir þessara nemenda hafa lítl eða engin tengslanet hér á landi og þess vegna er óformlegur stuðningur heldur ekki mikill, svo sem frá íslenskum samnemendum. Sem dæmi upplifa þáttakendur samskiptaerfiðleika, skort á upplýsingum, og í tilfelli nemenda utan Evrópusambandsins, erfiðleika sem tengjast dvalar- og námsleyfi sem eru mjög streituvaldandi. Einnig skynja þáttakendur mismunandi færni og þekkingu ráðgjafanna á málefnum innflytjenda í háskólanámi, en þetta samræmist niðurstöðum rannsókna í öðrum löndum um skort á viðeigandi stuðningi við þessa nemendur (Engstrom og Tinto, 2008; Hertzberg, 2017). Sinacore og Lerner (2013) komust að svipuðum niðurstöðum í rannsókn sinni á stóðu innflytjenda í háskólum í Kanada, en margir viðmælendur þeirra stóðu frammi fyrir félagslegum og stofnanalegum hindrunum sem gerðu þeim erfitt fyrir í aðlögun að háskólanámi, svo sem skorti á félagslegum stuðningi, slakri þekkingu á menntakerfi Kanada eða skorti á viðbrögðum frá starfsfólki háskólananna.

Menntastofnanir, og þar með háskólar gegna mikilvægu hlutverki við að tryggja greiðan aðgang fyrir alla og félagslegan jöfnuð (Anderson, 2008; Giroux, 1993, 2001; Parekh 2006; Rizvi og Lingard, 2010). Það er því mikilvægt að háskólayfirvöld, kennarar, ráðgjafar og aðrir sem koma að háskólanámi innflytjenda geri sér grein fyrir þórfum þeirra og áskorunum og að menningarmiðuð kennsla og ráðgjöf, markviss úrræði og skýrar reglur séu fyrir hendi (Stbleton og Soria, 2012).

Ljóst er að bæta mætti stuðning háskólananna við innflytjendur í háskólanámi. Upplýsingastreymi hvað varðar almenna kennslu, ráðgjöf og aðgang þeirra að ýmiss konar þjónustu og stuðningi við nám mætti bæta til að vinna gegn félagslegum ójöfnuði innan háskólananna.

## **Teaching and support in Icelandic Universities: Immigrant students' experiences**

As a result of increased migration in recent decades, the number of students of foreign origin has increased in universities in Iceland.

This paper derives from the research project Educational aspirations, opportunities and challenges for immigrants in university education in Iceland (2016-2018) funded by the Icelandic Research Fund.

The main goal of the research project is to study aspirations, opportunities and challenges of immigrants in university education in Iceland. The project also aims to identify the kind of support available in the universities for students of foreign origin and how the students use this support.

This paper is based on the results of group and individual interviews with 41 immigrant students, who are currently enrolled, or have been enrolled, in an undergraduate programme in one of the three targeted Icelandic universities; University of Iceland, Reykjavík University and University of Akureyri.

Data was analysed through the qualitative procedures of thematic analysis, coding and constant comparison of data.

This paper presents three key themes that appear in the analysis of most of the interviews: the participants' experiences of teaching methods, the educational support that they receive in the universities and challenges they face during their studies.

The findings of the interviews indicate that the majority of the participants think that the teaching methods in the Icelandic universities are modern. The participants enjoy a sense of the equality between teachers and students in the universities. They also acknowledge teachers' positive attitudes when students try to use their previous knowledge during class discussions or in projects. The participants also elaborated on practical teaching methods such as discussion sessions and group-work which the Icelandic teachers frequently use in their teaching.

The participants' experiences of and attitudes towards group work, however, vary considerably. Some participants feel group work is useful and educational, because it gives them an opportunity to discuss their thoughts with their group mates and share their knowledge. On the other hand, some participants are negative towards the group work, they think it is a waste of time and that they learn little or nothing during group work sessions. The divergent attitudes towards group work could probably be explained by looking into participants' different expectations of the study-programme itself: some participants want to gain knowledge and practical skills that they can use during their future work, while others are independent learners who seek academic knowledge of the subject that they study.

Language-related issues were widely discussed during the interviews. The majority of the participants point out that they encounter problems when courses are taught in Icelandic, because of lack of knowledge thereof.

Another language-related issue is the usage of two or more languages in teaching, usually Icelandic and English. Among the most common problems that the participants describe are those relating to translation of academic terms from Icelandic into English and their native language(s) and vice versa, which in some cases result in misunderstandings and substantially prolong the self-study time.

Other issues the participants face are communication problems and lack of information. Those participants that came from countries outside the EU/EEA also describe problems and stress related to the application process for resident permits.

When the participants face challenges or problems they use different ways to resolve the issues and they mention both formal and informal support sources that they seek help from. Formal support is usually provided by the Student Counselling and Career Centre, while the informal support is provided by co-students, friends and family. In this paper, the different sources for support will be discussed, as well as in what situations and how the participants usually use them.

This research project may prove useful to universities, helping them to better respond to growing diversity in their student populations.

**Key words:** Teaching – support – challenges – immigrant students in universities – Icelandic universities

## Um höfundana

Artém Ingmar Benediktsson (artem@hi.is) er doktorsnemi við Menntavísindasvið Háskóla Íslands. Hann lauk B.S.-prófi í jarðfræði frá Peoples' Friendship University of Russia árið 2008, B.A.-prófi í dönsku frá Háskóla Íslands árið 2013 og M.A.-prófi í norðurlandafræðum frá Háskóla Íslands árið 2015. Artém hóf doktorsnám árið 2016 og beinist rannsókn hans að upplifun og reynslu nemenda af erlendum uppruna af kennsluaðferðum í háskólamáli á Íslandi.

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## Paper II

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## Immigrant Students' Experiences of Higher Education in Iceland: Why Does Culturally Responsive Teaching Matter?

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### Abstract

The paper is based on the first, extensive, qualitative study on immigrant students' experiences of university education in Iceland. The theoretical framework is based on culturally responsive teaching that derives from multicultural education theory which focuses on analysing the position of minority groups, including immigrants in societies with special attention to their access to education. According to the theory, culturally responsive teaching methods and balanced workload based on the students' language abilities, previous experiences and background have positive effects on the immigrant students' well-being and generally contribute to their sense of belonging in the universities (e.g. Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2010). The participants of the study are 41 immigrant university students who participated in focus group and individual interviews. The findings show that despite the fact that culturally responsive teaching as an established teaching method is still an uncommon phenomenon in Icelandic universities, the students' experiences are highly positive, even when culturally responsive teaching is applied unsystematically by some teachers. Furthermore, the findings reveal that the students especially valued an atmosphere of care, trust and power-sharing in the classroom. The study makes a significant contribution to understanding immigrant students' experiences of the education process in Icelandic universities that currently emphasise the importance of multicultural education and pay special attention to providing equal rights to education to everyone regardless of their origin. Furthermore, the study is relevant from a comparative perspective and contributes to the general discussion about immigrant students in higher education in Europe.

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**Keywords:** immigrants; higher education; multicultural education; culturally responsive teaching; qualitative research

## Introduction

The increase in immigration around the world brings new opportunities and challenges to educational settings at all levels as they try to recognise immigrant students and address their needs in order to support them in their academic and social achievements. Educational institutions play an important role in ensuring societal equality. Playing this role ranges from noting the potentially low aspiration level and its social and educational causes, through ease of access to various programs, and to the ways the immigrants are responded to by the system. These responses need to be cognizant of various factors, such as potential language difficulties, cultural precepts and social marginalization. While this awareness has grown significantly in compulsory education, higher education institutions lag behind in their understanding of the immigrant student population (Boesch, 2014).

Different studies show that minority groups, including immigrants, are underrepresented in institutions of higher education (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015). The reasons behind this underrepresentation are varied but mostly relate to a weaker position in society, which could be explained by lower income, difficulties in integrating, and language-related issues (Banks & Banks, 2010; Parekh, 2005). Furthermore, underrepresentation leads to the continued presence of prejudices within these institutions. Theorists have criticized school personnel for designing teaching techniques and developing education based on the needs of the majority groups of society while the backgrounds, experiences, cultures and languages of the minority groups, including immigrants are often ignored (Banks & Banks, 2010; Nieto, 2010). When it comes to the specific issues of immigrant students who are already pursuing higher education, it is important to understand that they bring a variety of knowledge, cultural values, languages, and skills in particular areas, as well as different levels of curiosity, along with them into educational institutions (Alex, Miller, Platt, Rachal, & Gammill, 2007; Boesch, 2014). Theorists of the multicultural education as well as previous research in the field argue that implementing appropriate teaching methods, such as culturally responsive teaching could motivate minority groups students, including immigrants, improve their integration into the new educational environment and have positive influence on their performance (e.g. Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2010).

### Icelandic context

In this study, the term *immigrant student* is applied to immigrants pursuing higher education in Icelandic universities. In Iceland, the term immigrant is applied to a person born abroad with both parents and grandparents also born abroad (Statistics Iceland, 2016).

According to Statistics Iceland (2016), the Icelandic society is becoming increasingly diverse because of the constantly growing immigration to Iceland. In the Icelandic universities, the percentage of students with foreign background was approximately 19% of all newly registered students in 2017 (Statistics Iceland, 2018). The majority of the courses in Icelandic universities are taught in Icelandic (except a few courses specifically designed for international and exchange students) while the reading material is usually in English, which requires all students on the undergraduate level have good language skills in both languages.

The Icelandic higher education is constantly developing, teachers and academic personnel are looking for new ways to address diverse students' needs, including immigrant students, who besides language-related issues experience other challenges such as adapting to teaching methods applied in Icelandic universities. Despite growing interest, the Icelandic universities still lack insight into students' experiences of teaching methods, because very few studies have been conducted in the field (e.g. Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2007, 2014). This makes the current research highly relevant for university teachers, policymakers, and immigrant students pursuing higher education in Iceland. Furthermore, the presented research contributes to the discussion about social inclusion, access to education and equity in higher education in Europe, that according to the report *Learning and teaching in the European Higher Education Area* (Gaebel and Zhang, 2018) currently has high priority status in European-level higher education policy documents, but still has not been fully incorporated into practice.

This paper's main purpose is to explore immigrant students' experiences in the education process in Icelandic universities. The investigation of the students' experiences is carried out through analysing students' perspectives on language-related issues, workload, relations with teachers during the education process, and the teaching methods, including culturally responsive teaching and multicultural group work.

This paper derives from the qualitative research project *Educational Aspirations, Opportunities and Challenges for Immigrants in University Education in Iceland, 2016- 2018*, which is the first extensive study on immigrant students' experiences of teaching methods and their expectations, opportunities, and challenges, as well as formal and social support for their education in Iceland. The project is funded by the Icelandic Centre for Research (Rannís).

## Culturally responsive teaching

The theoretical background of the paper draws from the ideas of culturally responsive teaching. Culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) has also been conceptualised by theorist Ladson-Billings (1995) as culturally relevant pedagogy. The goal of culturally responsive teaching is cultivating an equitable education for all students regardless of language, race, abilities, cultural background, or any other status (Gay, 2018).

Culturally responsive teaching has its roots in multicultural education, that regarded as education for pluralism that was established to counteract the hegemony which caused the marginalization of certain groups of students (Parekh, 2005). Multicultural education theorists emphasise the importance of using a variety of teaching materials, theories and concepts from different cultures, as well as a need to introduce the history of thoughts and how they have been influenced by the dominant culture's education (Banks & Banks, 2015; Nieto, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The position of teachers is very important in multicultural education as they have to be aware of diversity in the classroom, try to connect to every student in the classroom and motivate students (Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2010). Power-sharing between teachers and students is regarded as a characteristic feature of multicultural education as the learning process should be transformed from the classic image where students are merely acquiring knowledge from a teacher to a new form of knowledge exchange where teachers and students share their knowledge on a specific topic (Banks & Banks, 2010).

Culturally responsive teaching focuses on incorporating students' strength, previous knowledge, experiences, cultures, and languages in the educational process to create a compelling multicultural learning environment for students of diverse background. Gay (2018) described culturally responsive teaching as "...using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frame of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and beneficial for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students" (p. 29). One of the central concepts in culturally responsive teaching is caring that was theorised by Gay (2018). Caring teachers' qualities are highlighted by their patience and persistence in facilitating their students' learning. Their students' background knowledge and experiences are validated, and they are empowered to succeed (Gay, 2018, Nieto, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Culturally responsive teaching methods create a link between school and the outside world. Students are no longer balancing two cultures. They incorporate one culture into another, and with inputs from other students and teachers, they create a rich, multicultural environment around themselves (Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2010).

In order to implement culturally responsive teaching methods, teachers should start with understanding both their own and the students' cultural identities. In the opinion of critical educators, teachers need to be conscious about their own worldview that is impacted by their social class, culture, language, religion and ethnicity with which they identify themselves. Teachers who fail to be critical with their own worldview risk causing a breakdown in communication and alienating students of diverse background (Gay, 2000, Nieto, 2000). Therefore, when first becoming acquainted with students, it is crucial that teachers do not project their own worldviews and opinions onto the students' cultures, but instead explore cultures through dialogue with the students (Gay, 2001, 2018; Nieto, 2010). The process of dialoguing provides opportunities for teachers to adapt their instructions to meet the needs of the students with multicultural backgrounds. The teachers recognize the students' cultural and academic assets that are the scaffolds on which the students successfully build their new knowledge.

The next step is to provide an inclusive curriculum and ensure that its content makes the diverse background of these students relevant. Their language, culture and prior knowledge are validated, and they are empowered to exercise their agency in their learning process. Later, a learning environment is built up based on cross-cultural communication, the transmission of ideas, trust, and power-sharing in the classroom (Gay, 2001, 2018). Amongst other methods that promote cross-cultural communication, multicultural group work is considered being especially useful (De Vita, 2005; Hassanien, 2006). Group work is considered multicultural when it involves a collaboration of two or more individual students from different cultural backgrounds, such as ethnic, linguistic, national or of any other kind (De Vita, 2005; Popov et.al, 2012). Previous research has revealed that multicultural group work helps to reduce existing prejudices, promotes interaction between students in the classroom and helps students to integrate into the learning environment (De Vita, 2005; Hassanien, 2006; Popov et.al, 2012).

Last, but not least, empowering school culture based on educational equity and accessibility plays an important role in creating an environment suitable for implementing culturally responsive teaching methods (Banks & Banks, 2010; Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2014).

Besides considering cultural issues, teachers must apply appropriate assessment methods and ensure that all students have equal opportunities (Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2018; Slee, 2010). While choosing assessment methods, teachers are required to reflect on the question how students learn and to utilize "culturally responsive ways of evaluating learning, rather than attempting to standardise outcomes" (Slee, 2010, p.258). Furthermore, earlier studies emphasised the importance of a balanced workload and teachers being open to suggestions regarding the workload coming from students (Banks & Banks, 2010; Slee, 2010).

Culturally responsive teaching methods have proven to be useful, especially in adult education, as adult students learn best by participation, and they appreciate their previous knowledge and experiences being respected and valued (Karge, Phillips, Jessee, & McCabe, 2011; Rubenson, 2011). On the other hand, the challenge with diverse classrooms is that different students have different levels of knowledge and curiosity, as well as different expectation towards education. This makes it challenging for teachers to provide a curriculum that accommodates the needs of every student (Karge et al., 2011) Ladson-Billings (2014) criticises some teachers who claim to apply teaching methods which focus on cultural diversity, for being one-dimensional and not fully translating research into practice. The critique is based on the notion that the teachers are often focused on the content integration and ignore other important dimensions of cultural responsibility in the classroom, including encouraging students to think critically about policies and practices that may have an influence on their lives inside and outside of educational institutions.

Recent studies in Norway have shown the importance of understanding cultural diversity in educational institutions and emphasized the significance of creating a discussion of goals of the multicultural education as well as the need to reflect on inclusion and exclusion in concept of diversity (Burner, Nodeland, & Aamaas, 2018; Fylkesnes, Mausethagen, & Nilsen, 2018).

Several research studies (Books, Ragnarsdóttir, Jónsson, & Macdonald, 2011; Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2007, 2014) have been conducted at the School of Education in the University of Iceland to investigate the positive outcomes of culturally responsive teaching methods and immigrant students' experiences of the learning environment. The results of the studies show the importance of implementing culturally responsive teaching methods and indicate that this approach serves the significant goal of making education accessible to everyone.

This paper explores immigrant students' experiences of higher education in three Icelandic universities. In times when social inclusion and equity enjoy high priority in universities all over Europe (Gaebel and Zhang, 2018), it is particularly relevant to implement culturally responsive teaching methods that value every student's experiences, background and cultures as well as promote equity through power-sharing between teachers and students in multicultural classrooms (Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2010).

## **Methodology**

The presented research is a qualitative study involving focus groups and individual interviews. The qualitative approach was chosen to elicit the views of the participants as clearly and accurately as possible and provide a deep understanding of the individual cases (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Flick, 2009). Moreover, qualitative research is considered being culturally responsive methodology as it focuses on communication with participants and values their personal experiences and perceptions (Nodelman, 2013).

The participants in the research study were immigrants living in Iceland. The main requirements were that the participants were first-generation immigrants, had studied at one of the three target universities (University of Iceland, University of Akureyri, Reykjavik University) for at least one year at the undergraduate level, and were not exchange students. Data on some immigrant students was obtained from the registrar offices in the universities. Additionally, the participants were recruited through applying a snowball sampling approach (Flick, 2009).

In order to obtain rich data, 41 immigrant students were recruited through maximal variation sampling based on characteristics such as gender, age, country of origin, socio-economic status, number of years in Iceland and in the Icelandic school system, proficiency in their native language(s), Icelandic and English. The participants' ages varied from 20 to 52 years old. They had 21 different native languages. They came from 23 different countries in Europe, Asia, and North and South America and have been living in Iceland for 2 to 18 years.

When it comes to the participants' fields of studies, the goal of recruiting diverse participants was reached successfully as the participant group consisted of immigrant students studying over 20 different subjects, including geology, languages, law, medicine, pedagogy etc. The participants experienced a variety of teaching and assessment methods in addition to making contact with different teachers and peers during their learning process.

The Icelandic Data Protection Authority was informed of the research and the Ethics Committee of the University of Iceland gave a positive review. All privacy considerations were in compliance with Icelandic law nr.77/2000 about data protection. The participants' identities were kept secret. The researchers took precautions against any possibility of disclosing the participants' identities.

The research group worked collaboratively throughout the whole research process, including preparing for the interviews, creating interview guides, conducting the interviews, coding and analysing the data.

Data collection started with seven focus group interviews with the participants. The duration of the focus group interviews ranged from 52 up to 78 minutes. The researchers applied directive approach (Lichtman, 2013) to conduct the focus group interviews and led the group discussions towards the specific topics, which included questions on the participants' experiences of the education process, teaching methods as well as their perspectives on the language-related issues. Later, the findings from the focus group interviews were used to create more advanced interview guides for individual interviews. The interview questions related to the purpose of this paper are presented below:

- What can you tell about your experiences of being an immigrant student at the university?
- What can you tell about your relations with the teachers?
- What can you tell about your experiences of communication with teachers?
- What teaching methods did the teachers apply?
- What do you think about these teaching methods?
- What challenges did you experience during the education process? And how did you deal with them?
- Could you use your previous knowledge and experiences in your study? If yes, please explain how.
- What is your experience with group work?
- Do you have anything else that you would like to share with us regarding your experiences at the university?

All interviews were conducted in Icelandic and/or English. The participants were notified that they could skip answering any question without having to explain. The duration of the individual interviews ranged from 28 to 69 minutes with an average of 47 minutes.

The total amount of data collected during the research study exceeded 1500 pages of interview transcriptions. In publications in English such as the presented paper, the quotations coming from the interviews conducted in Icelandic were translated from Icelandic into English by the research team.

The analytical process took place simultaneously throughout the research period (Creswell, 2008). The data was analysed using the thematic analysis approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2013). It consisted of several stages. During the first stage, each author of this article became familiarised with the data before coding in the second stage. In the next stage, the research group came together to discuss the codes and organised them into themes. The group clearly defined the themes, stating their focus, scope and purpose. Each theme was developed in relation to the research questions and to the other themes. Together, they provided a coherent picture of the patterns in the collected data. In the analysis, the research group avoided selectiveness of the data by making sure to provide extracts from across the data, in order to show the breadth of each theme (Sandelowski, 1994). In order to analyse the vast amount of data and keep codes and themes clearly registered, the Atlas.ti analytical software was used for the management of the data.

## **Findings and discussion**

Three main themes derived from the interviews in the final stage of the analysis. The analysis of the interviews showed that when talking about common challenges, the participants often discussed language-related issues together with the problems related to the extensive workload in some courses. It led the research group to the conclusion that these two issues should be combined in the first theme which explores the students' perspectives on the workload and language-related issues.

The second theme focuses on participants experiences of culturally responsive teaching, applied to some extent by several teachers, who mainly encouraged students to use their previous experiences and cultural background in the learning process. Furthermore, the theme includes the participants' perspectives on multicultural group work.

The third theme presents the students' perspectives on the relations with teachers through analysing the question of power-sharing and equality in the classroom, that are often highlighted as important dimensions in multicultural education (Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2018).

Due to the nature of qualitative research, it is not possible to generalize the findings and argue that all immigrant students experience the education process in the same way. The focus of the presented study is on understanding particular immigrant students' experiences and finding patterns in their answers, that may indicate some common challenges that other students with similar characteristics might experience as well.

### Students' perspectives on the workload and language-related issues

Different factors may impact how university students perceive their education. These include the clarity of the goals in a certain course or programme, the quality of teaching, the level of workload, and whether assessment builds on student ability to demonstrate understanding rather than recall certain facts (Ashwin et al., 2015; Slee, 2010).

Generally, the participants were satisfied with the workload in their studies. A participant who studied geology said, "It's a lot, but it's not like it comes in waves at a very wrong time". An appropriate workload is said to be one of the crucial factors strengthening the positive outcomes of student learning (Ashwin et al., 2015). However, students pointed out that the number of ECTS granted (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) did not reflect the amount of work required for some courses, especially those that included an extensive amount of reading material in the Icelandic language. A participant who studied languages and pedagogy stated that,

ECTS did not always represent the real situation in the course, that's for sure because I am really disappointed with that literature course. It was ten credits, but it took all the time from other courses, so it was not ten credits. It was like fifteen at least. You had to read a book in Icelandic every week and write papers on it and learn a theory on it.

The main issue was that the teacher while preparing the syllabus, did not take into consideration different levels of Icelandic skills, which could affect those who had a weaker grasp of the language. This substantially elongated some students' time spent on preparation for the course and assignment writing. The same course was also mentioned in an interview with another participant who studied languages. She said, "I don't know. I try to read something at home in Icelandic, and I don't read the books from that course. Why can't we choose and read something beautiful, Laxness for example". It was clear that the participant was interested in studying literature. Later in the interview, she revealed that she had some suggestions about reading material. The teacher, however, implemented the standardised syllabus and did not allow the students to choose some of the reading materials based on their preferences. This practice contradicts culturally responsive teaching, which encourages teachers to discuss the learning materials with students and evaluate how it could be adjusted to the students' interests, needs and existing level of knowledge (Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2018; Slee, 2010).

For a participant who studied languages and political science, it was important to know the goals of the course and have some flexibility. He complimented one teacher for being caring towards her students and allowing them to decide if they want to study the basics or if they would like to go beyond the syllabus.

She [teacher] is always just great. We have one chapter pretty much every week, and we have that fixed workload to do, and she is always giving us more, and if you want to keep up, you keep up. If you just want to stick to the basics, you stick to the basics.

This is an example of how flexible teaching methods are appreciated by some students because they are allowed to alter their workload according to their backgrounds and levels of knowledge and curiosity. Previous research stressed the importance of teachers taking time to get to know their students and learn about their abilities, expectations, goals, and levels of curiosity (Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2018; Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2014). This allows teachers to tailor a course, workload, course materials, and assessment methods to satisfy the diverse needs of the student group with whom they work.

Some participants revealed that they studied a subject only for practical purposes without intending to finish the degree. This often applied to students at the Faculty of Languages and Cultures, especially to students who studied Icelandic as a second language. During the interview, one of the participants said that it was too difficult for her to study dentistry, which was taught in Icelandic, because of the lack of language skills, so she decided to improve her Icelandic before she comes back to dentistry.

I started learning dentistry, but it was very difficult. There was too much competition there, and I was the only foreigner in the class. So, I decided to improve my Icelandic, and I'm doing that now [...] It is several years, but I'm not going to take all years. I just want to make sure that I'm ready to start again.

The participant explained later that she did not feel like she belonged in the Icelandic language departments because her goal was different from the goals of her peers. This created a challenge for university teachers, who needed to consider the diverse backgrounds, aims and needs of their students. According to the participant, her teachers had never asked about the students' goals, that could be useful in order to provide tailored educational support which could contribute to this particular student's sense of belonging, which is considered being highly important in a multicultural classroom (Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2018).

Several participants pointed out different approaches between faculties and programmes in addressing language-related issues and usage of different languages in written tasks such as essays and exam papers. The participants expressed their concerns about the lack of clear language policies within the universities. In most cases described by the participants, the usage of English in written assignments and the question of providing examination papers in English required negotiations with the individual teachers. A participant, who previously studied computer science, explained,

I don't know if this depends on department or not, but in comparison with the science and engineering department, if you ask for an English final exam, they always provide you an English exam, so that's why I have survived the first year so far. Everything is in English for me. But my friend who is now studying in business department, she has asked for an English final and the teachers were kind of like – no you cannot get.

According to the participants, a lack of clear policies and rules regarding the usage of English and other languages in written assignments creates confusion. The majority of participants wish for better language support and standardization of language policies within the universities. This is in line with the multicultural

education theory that emphasizes the importance of clear policies and providing appropriate educational support, including language support, which can compensate for lack of skills in the language of instructions (Banks & Banks, 2010; Boesch, 2014; Slee, 2010).

### Students' experiences of culturally responsive teaching and multicultural group work

Teaching not only requires having the appropriate content knowledge but also the ability to convey this content. Teachers should be able to manage their teaching, show a willingness to get to know their students, and care about them and their learning (Gay, 2018; Hill, 2014; Nieto, 2010). The analysis of the interviews suggests that culturally responsive teaching as a fully established teaching method is still an uncommon phenomenon at the Icelandic universities. However, even when culturally responsive teaching is applied unsystematically by some teachers, the participants' experiences become increasingly positive.

Theories claim that adult learners and their perspectives should be welcomed, respected, and valued in the classroom (Rubenson, 2011; Karge et al., 2011). Many of the participants stressed the importance of being able to express their own views. Especially those from Asia and Eastern Europe where the education systems, according to the participants, were more traditional and did not always allow students to engage in discussion in the classroom and express their opinions. A student who studied the Icelandic language and pedagogy highlighted,

You can always talk. There is always discussion in the class, always! Like, your opinion is your opinion. It's something you can say 'No I don't believe it, prove!' So, that's not in all the universities like this.

The majority of the participants combined studies with work. Some participants were studying subjects related to their current work, which gave them an opportunity to use their knowledge in practice every day. A participant, who studied to become a professional kindergarten teacher, also was working part-time in a kindergarten. "I have already applied some teaching methods in my work, and now, I am learning about them and, at the same time, trying them out with my pupils". Creating a link between formal education

and life, work, and experiences outside of the university is regarded as an important feature of culturally responsive teaching, as it motivates students and promotes active learning (Gay, 2001, 2018; Nieto, 2010).

A different story, shared by a student, who studied to become a primary school teacher, showed how a supervisory teacher supported and motivated her to train acquired knowledge during the teaching practice at a primary school. The teacher encouraged the student to be open about own cultural background and to use it as an advantage,

I really enjoyed the training in our courses. I just said to children that I am an immigrant and that is why my pronunciation is different, but I really want to read for you. And the supervisory teacher supported me, she said 'Just say it and be open, you will only get positive reactions from them!'

The above-mentioned example shows the importance of understanding immigrant students' challenges. The teacher understood that the student felt insecure about her pronunciation, but instead of criticising her and asking her to improve her language skills, the teacher encouraged her to overcome the fears and be open about her background and challenges that she experienced. Carefully chosen words of support play an important role in establishing a positive atmosphere in the learning environment and empower students (Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2018).

Several participants emphasised the importance of being able to use previous knowledge and experiences in the classroom. A student who studied pedagogy highlighted that the possibility of using her background was very important for her, especially during her first days at the university.

One of my first memories of classes is coming and just discussing the research that we had done, and it was just interesting. It was really different from the teaching I had before [...] It was an excellent introduction. Everybody wants to be there immediately.

A student who studied the English language and pedagogy added, "It was super cool that people could put their background into the studies. So, for me, that was super interesting". According to the participants, the teachers who were applying culturally responsive teaching methods were able to activate the students' interest and background resources and to provide an assessment that encouraged independent studying habits, sense of responsibility and usage of different sources. A student from the School of Education said the following,

I find it a bit more like free in that sense that if you like some topic then you are free to study the topic and use the information you find, maybe not just from the books but like your own experience and different materials you know. And at first, it was very challenging to me – this kind of assessment – because I was not very used to working by myself or studying by myself in that sense. But I find it very useful, and the more I get used to it, I can see the benefits of it.

Bridging cultures through allowing students to use their background and previous experiences in classroom is a characteristic feature of culturally responsive teaching, that promotes active learning, knowledge sharing and generally has positive impact on students' performance (Banks & Banks, 2010; Nieto, 2010; Slee, 2010).

The analysis of the interviews showed that group work was amongst the most frequently applied teaching methods in Icelandic universities. During the interviews, the participants' shared their experiences of the multicultural group. The experiences varied from being positive to negative. A participant who studied biology found the multicultural group work being very useful,

It is much better for me for sure. It makes it easier for me, because sometimes I would have misunderstandings about the task or the assignment or what to do or something in the background information. Then, if there are Icelandic people who I am working with - they definitely don't have misunderstandings, so they can correct me [...] For me, it's very helpful that we have to do our assignments and reports in groups and I am a little afraid of one day getting an assignment that I have to do it on my own in Icelandic because I can't really write Icelandic properly.

Previous research argues that multicultural group work helps students to integrate into the learning environment, encourages knowledge exchange and promotes collaborative learning (De Vita, 2005; Hassanien, 2006). The aforementioned example showed that Icelandic group members provided valuable language support, which had a positive impact on this particular immigrant student's experiences of the group work.

On the other hand, some participants had negative attitudes towards group work. As a language student explained it,

I think it is unfair to work in groups [...] I don't know why group work [is assigned]. It doesn't show anything. We all got the same grade even though everybody agreed that I was the best.

While group work is generally considered to be a beneficial way of teaching, especially advantageous in a multicultural educational environment, it is important that its characteristics and aims are well explained by teachers (Hassanien, 2006; Popov et.al, 2012). Previous studies showed that some seemingly well-known teaching and assessment methods might be unclear for students of immigrant backgrounds, as they might not have experienced them before (Boesch, 2014). In the above-presented example, the participant came from a culture where group work was rarely applied. During the interview, he commented that he was not familiar with the aims of the group work and generally did not know why it was assigned. The teacher did not properly introduce the purpose of the group work, and the negative attitudes towards it were created by the student's general misconceptions.

The analysis of the interviews revealed an interesting pattern, which was clearly portrayed in this section. The majority of the participants who experienced some dimensions of culturally responsive teaching, such as an ability to express their own thoughts, being able to use their previous experiences and knowledge and create a link between formal education and life were students in the School of Education, University of Iceland. This pattern could be explained by the current emphasis on the culturally responsive teaching methods and multicultural education in the School of Education and teachers' high level of the awareness of diverse students' needs (see also Books et al., 2011; Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2007, 2014).

### Power-sharing and equality in the classroom

During the interviewing process and thematic analysis, the research group became aware of a pattern. Several participants pointed out that they enjoyed the equality in classrooms and dialogue between teachers and students. Further, some participants expressed that this democratic way of teaching, where the majority of teachers were easily accessible, and the educational process was an exchange of knowledge between students and teachers, was totally new to them as they had not experienced it in their countries of origin. Equality and power-sharing in educational institutions in Iceland go along with democratic views and general equality that prevails in modern Icelandic society (Stjórnarskrá lýðveldisins Íslands [Constitution of the Republic of Iceland], 1944).

Various research studies showed that students valued teachers who possessed the knowledge of the subject they taught, had competences in diverse teaching methods, were well prepared for the class, and were able to manage time well (Carusetta & Cranton, 2009; Hill, 2014; Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2014; Vella, 2002). These are the primary factors measured in teaching evaluations. What is not less important for students is to form trusting relationships with teachers and experience an atmosphere of safety, respect, and flexibility in the learning space, the characteristic details of culturally responsive teaching (Gay; 2018; Nieto, 2010). The students want to feel supported in their learning and to be valued for what they bring into the classroom. Providing personal and relevant support can have a highly positive influence both on students' experiences of the learning process and their academic performance (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). A participant who studied computer science shared her story,

The trick is to have a good relationship with teachers [...] There was a teacher who knew that my Icelandic was not good, and he said that he was going to help me, you know to explain about the home assignments and so on. And we were skyping every day.

Developing a personal connection with immigrant students that is built on mutual respect, genuine concern for students, enjoyment of and commitment to teaching, and willingness to improve the practice are the characteristics that the participants of the study name as important in their teachers. Furthermore, multicultural education theorists emphasized the importance of power-sharing in a diverse classroom because it empowers the students, improves their sense of responsibility for their own learning and it generally contributes to their sense of belonging in the university environment (Banks & Banks, 2010). A student who studied pedagogy, and who had broad international experiences of studying in different environments, concluded,

I've been in other countries in universities. I've seen different methods of teaching, but that [Icelandic] was like absolutely different for me, I finally feel like home [...] Maybe because the group is not that big. Maybe we are not that many. Even teachers know you by name. It was kind of like personal.

On the other hand, misguided empathy resulting in holding immigrant students to lower standards and expecting less from them was considered by the participants to be the least motivating method. During the interviews, several participants expressed dissatisfaction with the low expectations that some teachers showed toward immigrant students. A participant who studied law mentioned, "The teacher didn't teach us very well. I think, she kind of approached us as if we were children". This participant's negative experiences are supported by various studies that show that teachers should have high academic expectations for all students because lowering expectations based on students' ethnic background leads to lower well-being for immigrant students, making them feel invisible (Banks & Banks, 2010; Boesch, 2014; Swaminathan & Alfred, 2001).

The analysis of the interviews revealed that the participants' experiences were positive in those cases when they felt that teachers approached them with respect and

valued their previous backgrounds and knowledge that they brought with them and encouraged critical thinking and discussions in the classroom. This is based on the notion of power-sharing which is considered being an important dimension of culturally responsive teaching (Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2010). Despite that the theorists of culturally responsive teaching argue that such teaching methods should be consistent and based on systematic implementation of all the dimensions, the current research findings highlight that even when single dimension such as power-sharing is applied it has a positive influence on students' experiences.

## Conclusion

The analysis of the interviews indicated that culturally responsive teaching as a fully established teaching method is still an uncommon phenomenon in Icelandic universities. According to the participants' experiences, the School of Education, University of Iceland shows the strongest emphasis on culturally responsive teaching.

The findings related to the participants' experiences of the workload in Icelandic universities, revealed two clear patterns in participants' experiences. The participants appreciated when teachers paid attention to the students' needs and allowed them to alter their workload while keeping the teaching within the frames of the syllabus. This corresponds to suggestions of theorists of multicultural education, that emphasise the importance of balanced workload and appropriate assessment methods that evaluate learning progress rather than measuring students' achievement (Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2018; Sree, 2010). On the other hand, the participants' experiences were mainly negative in those cases when the teachers ignored suggestions coming from the students and the participants were not allowed to choose some reading materials.

Language-related issues were widely discussed during the interviews and the findings indicated that the majority of the participants wish for better language support during their studies. Additionally, the participants were concerned with the lack of clear language policies regarding usage of English and other languages in written assignments. The participants expressed wishes for the standardisation of policies and rules regarding language support and special assistance during the exams.

When it comes to the participants' perspectives on culturally responsive teaching, especially applied by the teachers at the School of Education, the analysis of the interviews showed an apparent pattern in the participants' answers. Those students who were encouraged to use their previous knowledge and experiences during the learning process felt motivated and considered these teaching methods to be relevant. Building on students' existing knowledge and encouraging them to use their cultural background, languages and previous experiences are regarded as the main feature of culturally responsive teaching, that celebrates diversity and values every student (Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Previous research suggests that teachers should consider applying multicultural group work as a productive way of sharing knowledge and promoting cross-cultural interaction between the students (De Vita, 2005; Hassani, 2006; Popov et.al, 2012). According to the participants in the presented study, group work is frequently applied in the Icelandic universities. Those participants, who understood the purpose and the advantages of the multicultural group work, had positive experiences of it. On the other hand, those participants who were unfamiliar with the concepts of group work had mostly negative attitudes towards group work. As claimed by previous research studies, in order to eliminate misconceptions about multicultural group work, teachers should clearly introduce the main purposes and advantages of it, especially to those students, who are unacquainted with this teaching method (De Vita, 2005; Popov et.al, 2012).

Several participants in the presented study highly appreciated the democratic way of teaching, that is a characteristic feature of Icelandic education. According to their experiences, the majority of teachers were easily accessible, and they were genuinely caring for their students. An atmosphere of caring, mutual trust and respect is emphasised in the field of multicultural education (Banks & Banks, 2010). The participants reported that this way of teaching had an empowering effect and contributed to their sense of belonging in the university.

The goal of the study was not only to provide insight into immigrant students' experiences of teaching methods and education process at different universities in Iceland but also to call educational institutions to action to take steps towards equality in universities through introducing and implementing culturally responsive teaching methods in different academic disciplines. The presented study argues that culturally responsive teaching is highly relevant in universities where the diversity of student populations grows. Furthermore, the study highlights that immigrant students' experiences of learning process become positive, even when culturally responsive teaching is applied unsystematically by some teachers. This naturally triggers a rhetorical question of what implications culturally responsive teaching would bring if it were applied as a fully established teaching method and a mindset in higher education.

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## Paper III



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## Communication and Group Work in the Multicultural Classroom: Immigrant Students' Experiences

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**Abstract:** The paper is part of the qualitative research project Educational Aspirations, Opportunities and Challenges for Immigrants in University Education in Iceland, conducted in Iceland's three biggest universities. The main goal of the paper is to investigate immigrant students' experiences of communication with teachers during the learning process and their perspectives on multicultural group work. Furthermore, the paper explores immigrant students' experiences of learner-centred approach and culturally responsive teaching methods applied by some teachers. The data was collected through focus group interviews and qualitative, semi-structured individual interviews with immigrant students. The theoretical framework is mainly based on the constructivist theory, which emphasises the importance of communication and the learner-centred approach. Additionally, the theoretical framework includes multicultural education theory, which puts an emphasis on applying culturally responsive teaching methods in classrooms with diverse student populations. The analysis of the interviews revealed that the participants' experiences of communication with teachers and peers were mostly positive. However, culturally responsive teaching is still a rare phenomenon in Icelandic universities. When it comes to the participants' perspectives on group work, the experiences ranged from being highly positive to negative.

**Keywords:** Communication, group work, immigrant students, higher education, Iceland.

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### Introduction

In the era of globalisation, Icelandic society is developing very fast and every year Iceland receives immigrants from all different corners of the world. In 2017, the percentage of residents of foreign background, including first- and second-generation immigrants, living in Iceland was 18.8% (Statistics Iceland, 2017). According to Statistics Iceland, the term first generation immigrant is used to describe a person born abroad with both parents and grandparents born abroad (Statistics Iceland, 2017). With the increasing percentage of immigrants in the country, the number of immigrant students pursuing higher education is constantly growing (Statistics Iceland, 2018). The term immigrant student is applied in this research study to first generation immigrants pursuing tertiary studies in Iceland. The presented paper is based on the results from the first, extensive qualitative research project titled *Educational Aspirations, Opportunities and Challenges for Immigrants in University Education in Iceland* conducted from 2016 to 2018 in Iceland's three biggest universities. The project was funded by the Icelandic research Fund Rannís.

Modern education has become more interactive. Communication and discussions in the classroom play an important role in the educational process (Banks & Banks, 2010; Smart, Witt, & Scott, 2012). Multicultural education theory emphasizes the importance of cultural exchange through active communication between teachers and students (Banks & Banks, 2010; Nieto, 2010). Teachers are encouraged to apply culturally responsive and learner-centred approaches to teaching, which allow students to use their previous experiences and to construct new knowledge during the learning process and thereby become critical thinkers (Brown, 2003; Gay, 2000; Jabbar & Hardaker, 2013; Smart et al., 2012). Previous research has revealed that creating a rich multicultural environment based on power sharing and mutual respect empowers students and motivates them (Boesch, 2014; Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; Ragnarsdóttir & Blondal, 2014). The above-mentioned reasons show why it is important that universities promote modern teaching methods and encourage teachers to put more emphasis on the learning process and active knowledge construction in the classrooms.

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The primary goal of this study is to explore the participants' experiences of the learning process at Icelandic universities. The main research questions are:

- What are immigrant students' experiences of communication with teachers during the learning process?
- What are immigrant students' reactions to and reflections on the learner-centred approach and culturally responsive teaching methods applied by some teachers?
- What are immigrant students' perspectives on multicultural group work and what challenges do immigrant students encounter during the group work process?

Furthermore, the paper highlights the importance of maintaining an empowering school culture within institutions of higher education, which can contribute to students' positive experiences of the learning environment and encourage their further development.

The methodological limitation of the study is that the results cannot be generalised and applied to all immigrants studying in Icelandic universities. However, generalisation is not the main goal of qualitative research (Lichtman, 2013). Qualitative research aims to explore individual experiences, provide a deeper understanding of the social interactions and give insight into particular cases, which no quantitative research can do.

The study is highly relevant for Icelandic higher education because the number of immigrants pursuing higher education in Iceland is growing every year and the issues that immigrant students might be dealing with on a daily basis are still largely unknown. According to Statistics Iceland, approximately 19% of all newly registered university students had a foreign background in 2017 (Statistics Iceland, 2018). The present study is also relevant in the European context. According to the Bologna Process Implementation Report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015), immigrants are less likely to enrol in higher education. The newest statistics in Norway show that, while the general number of people pursuing higher education is growing every year, the number of immigrants pursuing higher education is gradually dropping (Tønnesen & Larsen, 2018). The reasons behind the lower percentage of immigrant students could be a lack of proper educational support and, as a result, a lack of motivation and increasing dropout amongst immigrant students (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015; Thång & Larson, 2010; Wahlgren, Lund, & Geiger, 2010). This indicates that more research should be conducted to better understand the position of immigrants in higher education in Europe and the challenges that may affect their academic performance and motivation.

### **Literature Review**

The theoretical framework is based on constructivist theory, which primarily focuses on the learning process and active construction of knowledge through constant development of the student's skills (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). Constructivist theory places students in the centre of the educational process and emphasises development of each student's professional skills. Special attention is given to students' backgrounds and previous experiences and how they could impact the knowledge constructed during the learning process (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002). Furthermore, sharing of experiences and knowledge is highlighted in the constructivist theory, which promotes social interaction, critical thinking and reduction of prejudice (Brooks & Brooks, 1993; Cornelius-White, 2007; Henson, 2003).

Constructivist theory has similar elements to multicultural education theory, which values every student's previous experiences and emphasises everyone's equal rights and access to education, regardless of ethnicity, race, social status or any other status (Banks & Banks, 2010). One of the important goals of multicultural education is creating an empowering school culture, where every student feels respected and supported (Banks, 2007). Failure to create an empowering educational environment could affect the motivation of students from various minority groups, including immigrants and lead them to drop out of higher education (Banks, 2007; Nieto, 2010). Multicultural education theory promotes a learner-centred teaching approach, called culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). This approach emphasises encouraging all students to use their previous experiences and cultural backgrounds to construct knowledge (Gay, 2001). A culturally responsive teacher learns about students' previous experiences through active dialogue and prepares curriculum based on students' backgrounds and cultures (Gay, 2000, 2010).

The learner-centred approach has become increasingly prevalent in the field of higher education, which is gradually shifting from a traditional teacher-centred approach that predominantly focuses on students' achievement instead of on the learning process itself (Brown, 2003). Despite the fact that the teacher-centred approach has been actively used throughout centuries, it has some significant weak points, making it irrelevant in modern society. The teacher-centred approach is a passive model, where students are dependent on a teacher who is the primary source of knowledge, which is transmitted to students, who have little chance to criticize it or construct their own knowledge (Grant & Hill, 2006; Smart et al., 2012).

In contrast to the teacher-centred approach, the learner-centred approach provides students with the opportunity to become critical thinkers and create their own knowledge during active discussions with teachers and peers (Brown, 2003). The role of the teacher is to generate topics of discussions and maintain a productive learning environment that encourages students to learn effectively (Henson, 2003). Previous research has shown a positive impact that the learner-centred approach has on students' learning outcomes (Cornelius-White, 2007). Students who experienced a learner-centred

approach developed positive relations to peers, became more innovative and learned how to use a wider range of instructional resources, for example, online, multimedia, human, books, etc. (Cornelius-White, 2007; Grant & Hill, 2006).

Moreover, the learner-centred approach gives students more power to control their educational process and develops their responsibility skills. Power is no longer exclusively in teachers' hands; students are also allowed to decide what they learn and how (Brown, 2003). Sharing power with students and improving their access to managing their learning process can increase equality in the classroom and make every student feel valued (Guy, 1999). Previous studies suggest that adults learn best when they have the opportunity to actively participate in the learning process when they receive practical information and guidelines from the teacher and are granted control over the learning process (Karge, Phillips, Jessee, & McCabe, 2011; Rubenson, 2011; Wood, 2003).

According to research, positive experiences of personal communications with teachers have also a positive effect on students' academic performance (Boesch, 2014; Ragnarsdottir & Blöndal, 2014). Research conducted by Boesch (2014) revealed that the teachers, through their willingness to create better personal connections with students, improved the dynamics in the classroom and motivated immigrant students. Most students highlighted the fact that teachers' availability and willingness to support students after class hours contributed to their positive experience of the learning process (Boesch, 2014).

The importance of establishing mutual respect and of understanding different students' positions and challenges is often discussed in the field of multicultural education (Banks & Banks, 2010; Nieto, 2010). However, the results of previous studies emphasize that this does not imply loosening requirements based on student ethnicity (Swaminathan & Alfred, 2001). Teachers must have equally high academic expectations for all students, regardless of their origins or native languages (Boesch, 2014; Swaminathan & Alfred, 2001).

Establishing positive and productive peer-to-peer interactions are as important as maintaining positive relations between teachers and students (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002; Smart et al., 2012). Earlier research studies have emphasized that group work plays an important role in students' integration into the university environment and develops their communication skills (Hassanien, 2006; Popov et al., 2012). Furthermore, researchers suggest that multicultural group work has a positive effect on students' academic performance, promotes cross-cultural knowledge exchange and empowers students (De Vita, 2002, 2005; Kimmel & Volet, 2010; Sweeney, Weaven, & Herington, 2008). Multicultural group work contributes to the elimination of cultural stereotypes and prejudices (De Vita, 2005), an important dimension in multicultural education (Banks, 2007).

Despite all the positive elements connected to group work, different studies have revealed that many students hold negative preconceptions about multicultural group work because they see cultural differences as a barrier instead of advantages (De Vita, 2005; Popov et al., 2012; Sweeney et al., 2008). Popov et al. (2012) studied students' attitudes towards multicultural group work in a university in the Netherlands. The study highlighted some issues connected to multicultural group work. The participants pointed out that difficulties occurred because of some group members' insufficient language skills and general communication problems within the groups, likely related to students' different learning styles, which may come from students' educational cultures (Popov et al., 2012). Students try to avoid multicultural group work by asking teachers to allow them to choose teammates. However, the results of the previous research suggest that teachers should assign group members in order to create more balanced groups and prevent marginalization of some students (De Vita, 2002, 2005). Maiden and Perry (2011) studied issues related to the free-riding phenomenon. Their study revealed that the students appreciate when teachers are observant of the tendencies in the groups, and they use different approaches to deal with free-riders. Among other preconceptions about multicultural group work is that it has a negative effect on the learning outcome and the final grade of the group assignment (De Vita, 2002). The results of previous studies have indicated some tendencies regarding the effect that multicultural group work has on the learning outcome. A study conducted by De Vita (2002) at a British university disproved the misconception that multicultural group work could pull students' average down and emphasized that multicultural group work has positive effects on all members' academic performance. On the other hand, a study conducted by Moore & Hampton (2015) at an Australian university with diverse student populations revealed that students classified as high-performing with respect to individual assignments received lower grades for group assignments, while mid-performing students received higher grades. However, Moore & Hampton noted that there was no correlation between students' backgrounds and the differences in grades received for group and individual assignments, which suggests "that individual ability rather than background may be implicated in these differences" (Moore & Hampton, 2015, p.403).

Previous research has highlighted the teacher's role in multicultural group work and pointed out that proper introduction of goals and helping students to understand the advantages of multicultural group work could eliminate some misconceptions (Forehand, Leigh, Farrell, & Spurlock, 2016). The assessment method must also be clearly explained, especially when the group is graded as a whole because some students view this assessment method as inequitable (Hassanien, 2006). To avoid negative attitudes towards the assessment methods, some studies suggest combining teacher professional assessment and peer assessment through modifying the teacher's grade by the grades allocated by peers (Forehand et al., 2016; Hassanien, 2006).

One of the main goals of multicultural group work is to help students to obtain new knowledge through the process of active communication between group members. The teachers should focus the students' attention on the opportunity to explore new cultures, to learn about group members' different cultural backgrounds and to view their own culture from different perspectives (Kimmel & Volet, 2010; Sweeney et al., 2008).

The research presented in this article is the first extensive study on immigrant students' experiences of learning environments, teaching methods and group work in Icelandic universities. The results of the study will be discussed in light of the above-listed theories and related to previous research conducted in different countries.

### **Methodology**

An extensive qualitative study was conducted from 2016 to 2018 in three Icelandic universities: University of Iceland, University of Akureyri and Reykjavik University. The researchers' aim was to select participants through maximal variation sampling, based on characteristics such as age, first language, country of origin, field of studies and Icelandic language proficiency. The registrars of the targeted universities were asked to provide information about students of foreign origin. Later, a snowball sampling method of recruiting participants was applied (Flick, 2009; Lichtman, 2013). A total of 41 students (12 male and 29 female) who have studied at the undergraduate level for at least one year were recruited to participate in the research. The participants' ages ranged from 20 to 52 years old. They come from 23 different countries in Europe, Asia, and North and South America and have lived in Iceland from 2 to 18 years.

The Icelandic Data Protection Authority was informed about the research. All privacy considerations were in compliance with Icelandic law nr.77/2000 and the Ethics Committee standards for qualitative research.

The study was split into three phases: focus group interviews (conducted in September 2016 – January 2017); individual, in-depth interviews (conducted in September 2016 – May 2017); and repeated focus group interviews (conducted February 2018 – April 2018). Focus group interviews were conducted through a directive interviewing approach, where the researcher played a directive role by asking questions and leading the group towards specific topics (Lichtman, 2013). The goal of the focus group interviews was to create a discussion about the chosen topics of the research between participants and observe their interactions around the research topic (Bender, 2003; Lichtman, 2013). The results of the focus group interviews were used to create an interview guide for the individual, in-depth interviews with the same participants. The individual interviews were semi-structured, which gave the participants room to discuss issues not covered by the interview guide (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Flick, 2009). The researchers decided to meet the participants again nine months after the last individual interview was conducted. The main purpose was to discuss the participants' educational progress and compare their current experiences of the learning environment to the experiences that they shared earlier. All interviews were conducted in Icelandic and/or English.

The individual interview guide included a variety of questions related to the participants' experiences of the learning environments, teaching methods, communication with peers and teachers as well as background questions and questions about formal and informal support received during their studies. The average length of the interviews was 47 minutes. The interview questions that are related to this paper's main goal are presented below:

- What can you tell about your experiences of being an immigrant student at the university?
- What can you tell about the relations between the students in the classroom?
  - How did the teachers encourage students to get to know each other?
- What is your experience of group work?
  - How were the members of the groups assigned? (teacher assigned or students chose themselves)
  - What are your experiences of communication in the groups?
  - What language did you use during the group work?
  - How was the workload divided between members?
  - What can you tell about the assessment of the group work?
- What can you tell about your relations with the teachers?
  - Have you ever personally contacted a teacher? (Before or after the class start)
  - What can you tell about your experiences of communication with teachers?
  - If the courses were taught in Icelandic: Did the teachers ask whether there were any students who could not understand Icelandic?
  - What did the teacher do to resolve language related issues?
- What do you think about the teaching methods? What teaching methods did the teachers apply?
  - Did the teacher use examples to explain things? Were the examples good?
  - Could you use your previous knowledge and experiences in your study? If yes, please explain how.
- Do you have anything else that you would like to share with us regarding your experiences at the university?

Processing and analysing the collected data started immediately after the first interview was transcribed (Creswell, 2008). The total amount of data collected during the interviews exceeded 1500 pages. The data was analysed using thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Lichtman, 2013). Special analytical software, Atlas.ti, was used to analyse all interviews. Raw data from the transcriptions was coded and constantly compared using the Atlas.ti software. Codes were assembled in categories, and at the final stage, main themes were created out of the categories. These themes are presented below including the key codes, which support the themes.

- Learner-centred approach and the importance of communication
  - Class discussions
  - Communication with teachers
  - Critical thinking
  - Negative experiences of communication
  - Power sharing
  - Usage of Icelandic/English during the learning process
- Advantages of culturally responsive teaching
  - Culturally responsive assessment
  - Culturally responsive teaching
  - Freedom of expressions and critical thinking
  - Knowledge / Experiences sharing between teachers and students
- Multicultural group work as an opportunity to share knowledge across cultures
  - Assigning members of the groups
  - Free-riding
  - Group assessment
  - Knowledge sharing within the groups
  - Language related issues
  - Misunderstanding of the purpose of group work
  - Negative experiences of group work
  - Positive experiences of group work
  - Role of teachers in group work
- Teachers' low expectations based on student background
  - Lowering the requirements
  - Misinterpretations of immigrant students' needs
  - Teachers attitudes towards immigrant students
- Movement towards empowering school culture
  - Autonomy and emancipation
  - Equality and sense of belonging in the classroom
  - Positive learning environment

In the next chapter, the findings, including quotations related to the themes and the key codes will be presented and analysed in the light of the relevant theories and results from earlier research studies.

### **Findings**

Five main themes were derived from the interviews with the participants. The first theme covers the participants' experiences of communication with teachers during the learning process and reveals the importance of applying a learner-centred approach in the multicultural classroom. The second theme presents the participants' reflections on culturally responsive teaching and highlights the advantages of it. The third theme reveals the participants' perspectives on multicultural group work. The fourth theme exposes issues related to teachers' lower expectations for immigrant students. The fifth theme presents the participants' experiences of the empowering school culture developing in Icelandic universities. All quotations derived from the interviews that were conducted in English are presented in their original form. Quotations from the interviews that were conducted in Icelandic have been translated by the authors from Icelandic into English.

*"The class became livelier because there was more communication"*

#### *Learner-centred approach and the importance of communication*

Modern education theorists emphasise the significance of a learner-centred approach and previous research shows the positive effect that such an approach has on students' academic performance and general experiences of the learning process (Brown, 2003; Cornelius-White, 2007; Smart et al., 2012; Webber, 2012). According to the results of the interviews with the participants in the presented study, there is some evidence of learner-centred approaches in learning environments in Icelandic universities. When it comes to power sharing in the classroom, the majority of teachers are open

for discussions and the communication with them was based on mutual trust. Students revealed that most of the teachers were open to having an active dialogue with students and putting emphasis on equality in the classroom, which are important elements of the learner-centred approach and are especially valued by the theorists of multicultural education (Banks & Banks, 2010; Brown, 2003; Freeman et al., 2007; Guy, 1999).

The participants emphasised the importance of teachers promoting active interaction in the classroom. Several distance learning students who participated in the research revealed that they found it very helpful and encouraging when teachers fostered interaction between students during the sessions for the distance learning students.

They bring discussions to the students. These are the best teachers that actually promote some interaction.  
Even if we are distance learners, they have found ways to promote interaction.

Previous research revealed the significance of active communication during the learning process to further contribute to the students' integration and sense of belonging in the university environment (Freeman et al., 2007; Ragnarsdottir & Blöndal, 2014).

The participants stated that the majority of teachers were easily accessible, and they were interested in getting feedback from the students. Several students mentioned that it was unusual for them to call their teachers by their first names without adding any titles when referring to a teacher. The participants valued the atmosphere of equality and trust created in the classroom and concluded that it had a positive impact on their experiences of the learning environment.

Teachers are really helpful. You know, they are not trying to have levels or status. It is always kind of the same level everyone [...] We have a relationship like a friendship.

Furthermore, the participants highly valued the importance of teachers providing necessary tools and guidelines to pursue education and allowing students to work independently. Teachers' role shifted from being merely a source of knowledge to becoming contributors to students' development.

Teachers expect students to be much more independent [...] The teacher is presenting a class and has the tools to present for the students. But students are pretty much expected to work on their own.

According to the participants, some teachers are following a teacher-centred approach and still put an extensive focus on students' achievement and do not encourage active knowledge construction in the classroom. In those cases, the participants' experiences were mostly negative, and they even concluded that this kind of approach has little to do with teaching. In one of the interviews, the participant, who studied psychology, compared two different teaching methods and shared her experiences of them.

Basically, they are not exactly teaching per se. They have translated the book, the chapter of the book that we are studying. They have put it in a Power Point presentation, and so it is a summarized translation of the book. And sometimes teachers are basically reading the slides so there is not much teaching in it. There is not going to be anything extra [...] But not all the teachers. Some of them bring extra materials besides the books [...] Sometimes we have sessions via Skype. When we have the teaching sessions, they bring discussions to the students.

This particular participant's experiences confirm the significance of bringing active discussions into the classroom and applying a learner-centred approach. According to research and theory, this approach promotes critical thinking and knowledge construction during the learning process (Brown, 2003; Cornelius-White, 2007; Henson, 2003).

During one of the group interviews, an interesting case was described by a participant who is currently studying foreign languages. A teacher noticed that several immigrant students did not participate in the class discussions. He found out that the reason was the students' limited Icelandic language skills. In order to activate those students, the teacher suggested carrying out the discussion in English instead of Icelandic, a change that gave good results.

There were one or two classes that ended up being in English. And the class became livelier because there was more communication. People started to interact with the teacher. They started answering questions and discussing things, which really did not happen when class was taught in Icelandic, because then there was like one or two questions and teacher just talking all the time.

In the above-mentioned case, the teacher did not merely care about following the teaching plan. He observed the tendencies in the classroom and made a step towards improving the learning process by allowing all students to participate in the class discussions. Different studies showed that communication in the classroom during the learning process is very important for creating a productive learning environment (Rubenson, 2011; Smart et al., 2012). However, students' limited language skills and lack of support could become an obstacle in communication with peers and teachers (Boesch, 2014; Erisman & Looney, 2007). That is why it is important to provide appropriate support and apply an individual approach to every student in the classroom in order to ensure a positive learning experience and active engagement in the learning process.

The results of this study indicate that the participants valued those teachers who encouraged them to use their previous knowledge and experiences throughout the learning process. During the interviews, the researchers were highly interested

in analysing the participants' reactions to and reflections on culturally responsive teaching methods, which are an important dimension of multicultural education. The results related to the experiences of culturally responsive teaching methods presented in the next section.

*"You could share your experiences and it was just interesting to speak to everyone"*

#### *Advantages of culturally responsive teaching*

Culturally responsive teaching methods are designed to incorporate students' backgrounds and knowledge into their learning processes (Gay, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). In the course of the interviews, the participants were asked if they could use their backgrounds in the learning process and whether teachers encouraged them to do so. Relatively few participants experienced culturally responsive teaching.

Several participants revealed that some teachers were trying to activate immigrant students by integrating content from students' home countries into curriculum and by encouraging students to relate new knowledge to their previous experiences. These teaching techniques were appreciated by the participants, and they expressed positive attitudes towards the courses where similar techniques were applied.

They [teachers] are the best! I mean they are really good, and the communication was really friendly. And teachers allowed us to be ourselves and I really enjoyed it.

In the School of Education, it is very personal ... You could share your experiences, and it was just interesting to speak to everyone.

During the analytical process, the researchers noticed a tendency that the vast majority of the participants who experienced culturally responsive teaching were students at the School of Education at the University of Iceland. This tendency could be explained by the current emphasis on the implementation of culturally responsive teaching methods at the School of Education. A special programme named International Studies in Education has been recently developed at the School of Education (Books, Ragnarsdottir, Jonsson, & Macdonald, 2011; University of Iceland, 2018). The programme particularly focuses on international students and students whose native language is not Icelandic, and the developers of the programme emphasized the importance of multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching methods (Books et al., 2011). Earlier research on students' experiences of the teaching methods confirmed that the International Studies in Education programme empowered students and gave them the confidence to pursue further studies (Ragnarsdottir & Blöndal, 2014).

A current student at the School of Education, who formerly studied at the School of Humanities, revealed that the differences between the schools were significant.

There is a huge difference. At the teaching department, you can feel that it is warmer, like all the activities are very nicely combined. So, I don't know, but I felt the difference.

The same participant later provided more details about why his experience of the learning environment at the School of Education was so positive.

It was just an enjoyment. We were always discussing things and talking about them. Always. It was not just some academic studies, it was an experience. And we were always listening about different opinions and discussing what we have learned.

This student is talking about fundamental dimensions of culturally responsive teaching, open discussion and knowledge exchange in the classroom (Gay, 2000; Nieto, 2010). This also corresponds to the main principles of the learner-centred approach, where discussions and knowledge construction are in the centre of the learning process (Brown, 2003; Henson, 2003).

A participant who studied geology compared two different teaching styles that she experienced and gave her preferences for teaching methods where the teacher shared his or her own personal experiences with the students and related them to the subject.

I am keener on teachers who are not just reading slides, but who speak about something interesting, which is easy to remember. Not just reading the slides. The teachers who tell about their experiences.

The participant emphasizes the importance of mutual knowledge exchange, where both students and teachers share life experiences with each other. By providing examples from his or her personal experience, the teacher is not merely making the teaching more interesting, but he or she encourages the students to do the same.

Previous research has highlighted the importance of applying culturally responsive assessment methods in a multicultural classroom (Slee, 2010). A participant who studies biotechnology shared his experiences of culturally responsive assessment.

I see, for example, that teachers are trying to fish for strengths and weaknesses from the students. And I see there is at least one teacher who says that I am good in something particular, and I get a chance to develop me further. And he points out my weaknesses and he says that I should try more.

The participant is talking about teachers who analyse students' educational performance and emphasize their strengths while encouraging them to develop further and pointing out places for improvement. This corresponds to culturally responsive assessment methods that prove to be useful in multicultural learning environments (Slee, 2010).

Culturally responsive teaching involves a lot of communication in the classroom. In order to activate students and provide an opportunity to share knowledge, group work is often recommended during the learning process. However, several research studies revealed that students' experiences of group work are different and range from being highly positive to negative (De Vita, 2005; Forehand et al., 2016; Popov et al., 2012).

*"It enriches you as a person"*

#### *Multicultural group work as an opportunity to share knowledge across cultures*

During the interviews, the question of group work was one of the most discussed and the participants' experiences of multicultural group work and communication with peers were very different.

Earlier research studies have highlighted the importance of multicultural group work in classrooms with diverse student populations (Popov et al., 2012; Sweeney et al., 2008). Multicultural group work encourages students to enter into direct dialogue with their peers and helps to reduce existing cultural prejudices in a classroom. A participant who studied international relations revealed that it was a positive and beneficial experience to work with students from different countries.

It was interesting and fun sometimes. And useful to follow different opinions from the American school, German, Russian and even, you know, Nordic and Chinese students. It was something very beneficial.

Another participant who studied foreign languages also considered multicultural group work being useful. Furthermore, he concluded that group work was effective for learning how to work together with a diverse group of people and adapt to different situations.

I think it [multicultural group work] is very interesting because it enriches you as a person. And also, to get to know how to expand your limits and go forward as well.

There were several participants who preferred working with Icelandic students rather than in multicultural groups because the final reports from the group work had to be written in Icelandic. Some participants saw an advantage in working with Icelanders who could do the written part while they would contribute orally. A participant who studied biology clearly explained the advantages of working in groups with Icelandic peers. He also mentioned that his Icelandic peers were generally open to speaking English during the group discussions.

We sit together and it's really up to my student mates what language are we speaking, but they are usually even more open than the teachers to English. And then they write in Icelandic the report, and you know, I just give them verbal input on what my opinion is, and they just translate it into Icelandic.

A participant who currently studies business administration discussed some issues that might occur in Icelandic settings around multicultural group work. He felt that some members of the group could pull the whole group down because of a lack of language skills in academic Icelandic. His worry was that the workload in a multicultural group work might be divided unevenly and that Icelandic students had to do writing and editing work for their non-Icelandic peers.

If I have to do group work, then of course is difficult because sometimes people [peers] have to read over what I did. So, I always try to compensate in other areas. But I actually experience sometimes, there are few Polish people here who are studying with me, and they always ask if I wanted to be in the group with them. And in the beginning, I always did it. But then I started turning people down because it's too much, it's too difficult for other Icelanders to have many foreigners in the same group if the assignment was done in Icelandic. So, that was probably the most difficult thing.

While the participant's fears may be understandable, preceding research has emphasized the fact that multicultural group work does not have a negative impact on students' performance, and the assumption that multicultural group work could pull down individual members' academic scores was not confirmed (De Vita, 2002).

In the above quotation, the participant highlights the fact that it was difficult for him to turn people down based on their language skills or origins. The solution to this problem was suggested in previous studies, where the emphasis was put on the teacher's role in reducing such problems by assigning people into groups and creating more balanced groups rather than allowing students to choose members of a group (De Vita, 2002, 2005). Another participant who studies business administration revealed that she understands the advantages of members being assigned to the groups and saw it as an opportunity to prepare for future work.

Teachers do not want to allow us to choose [members for the group work]. They want to assign groups, because they are just preparing us for future work, because you won't get to choose who you work with when you are working in a company.

A different issue that several participants became aware of is free-riding within groups and, as a result, a lower group grade.

I am generally satisfied with the grades which I get, but sometimes it is just bad, when some members are just riders. Do you understand? They are in the group but don't do anything but still get the same grade as a person who have done a lot [...] I think it is unfair that this member gets the same grade as me. And it is pulling the grade down.

Earlier research studies suggest different ways of dealing with free-riding within the groups and reducing student dissatisfaction with grades (Forehand et al., 2016; Hassanien, 2006; Maiden & Perry, 2011). It is suggested, among other things, that teachers develop more advanced assessment methods and combine peer assessment with teacher assessment. Peer assessment is also recommended as an assessment method when applying a learner-centred approach to teaching, as this type of evaluation triggers active discussions and communication within the groups (Brown, 2003; Webber, 2012).

During one of the group interviews, the researchers became aware that some participants lack understanding about the purpose of group work, which later resulted in the participants' dissatisfaction with the learning process and the learning outcome. A participant who studies Icelandic as a second language shared his experiences of group work, while several other participants who took part in the same group interview agreed with him.

Maybe it is just my problem, but I hate group assignments [Researcher note: Several other participants nod their agreement and one of them says, Yes, yes] Because if I make mistakes, they are just my mistakes, and I don't want to think that there are other people in the group. It makes me stressed. I just don't understand why we are doing so many group assignments, because it is like a group knowledge, not what I have learned.

In this case, the issues could probably have been solved at an early stage if the teacher clearly introduced the purposes of group work and explained the advantages of multicultural group work. This particular student does not understand how the group work can contribute to his education and he does not see the benefits of the process of knowledge construction within the group. Different research studies highlighted that proper introduction, dialogue with students and more advanced assessment methods could eliminate some issues and misconceptions related to multicultural group work (Forehand et al., 2016; Hassanien, 2006).

Although the majority of the experiences shared by the participants were positive or neutral, some of their experiences were negative, and the participants wished that universities could improve in some areas. One issue described by several participants stood out and will be discussed in the next section.

*"I think, she approached us as if we were children"*

#### *Teachers' low expectations based on student background*

Several participants revealed that they wished that some teachers would change their attitudes towards immigrant students and did not evaluate academic competences solely based on the students' origins or language skills. The participants described situations when teachers had lower expectations for immigrant students and did not treat them equally.

In our field, they [teachers] were not really qualified. They treated us very positively, like their sons and daughters, but it was a bit of a kindergarten.

The teacher didn't teach us very well. I think, she kind of approached us as if we were children.

The participants understood that the teachers, by approaching them differently, were trying to help, but this particular approach did not work well. Theorists and previous research in the field of multicultural education underline the fact that understanding students' needs and being flexible without loosening the requirements based on students' ethnicity or background is very important in the multicultural learning environment (Banks & Banks, 2010; Nieto, 2010; Swaminathan & Alfred, 2001). Teachers' misinterpretation of immigrant students' needs resulted in the participants' negative experiences of the learning process and communication with those teachers.

Although the participants experienced challenges related to some teachers' misconceptions, they admitted that Icelandic university culture is positive and open to immigrant students.

*"The university gave me emancipation and ambition to think freely"*

#### *Movement towards empowering school culture*

The study revealed that the environments at the three target universities are modern and open for immigrant students. The participants stated that the majority of teachers were willing to provide extra support and were generally open for discussion of any issues that occur during the learning process.

Creating an empowering school culture, where every student feels valued, where knowledge is constructed through active dialogue, and where the whole system is based on equity pedagogy and an individual approach for every student is a significant goal of multicultural education (Banks & Banks, 2010). These factors are also included in constructivist education theory, which gives priority to students' learning experiences and development as critical thinkers (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002). The results of the presented research indicate that the participants have already experienced some of the dimensions of multicultural education and that their experiences are mainly positive. A participant who studies education sciences and a participant who studies sociology both reflected on the question of autonomy and independence, which they enjoyed during their studies. They appreciated teachers allowing them to be critical thinkers and encouraging them to construct their own knowledge during the education process.

I am very happy with the international program because it gives me more autonomy in what I want to study.

I like that you are independent, and you are free to innovate your own thoughts, create your own identity instead of being a robot in the class. So, I really like especially this Icelandic way of teaching.

A participant who studies foreign languages and a participant who studies biology had similarly positive experiences of the learning environment and revealed that they enjoyed the equality and friendly atmosphere. They mentioned that the university became their home away from home.

In our department [Faculty of Languages and Cultures] it's kind of a small family you know. So, we just invite each other for dinner eating outside, that kind of things, which is quite nice here.

I really felt at home in Askja [School of Engineering and Natural Sciences]. I very quickly found my own place, where I do things and yeah, I usually feel really comfortable there generally, I like going there.

The students who participated in the research studies conducted by Boesch (2014) and Freeman et al. (2007) also underlined how good communication with teachers and a school environment based on equality and trust can have a positive impact on students' sense of belonging and create a positive learning environment.

A participant who studied both Icelandic as a second language and international relations summarized his positive experiences of the learning process and concluded that the education empowered him. During the learning process, he learned how to be an independent thinker.

I like that the university gave me emancipation and ambition to think freely. And this is the place where I got an encouragement to be a free thinker, that's the most important thing.

The results of the current research revealed that, despite some challenges the participants faced during their learning process, their overall experiences are positive. The learning environments at Icelandic universities are considered by the majority of the participants being open and free from prejudice.

### Conclusion

The analysis of the findings shows that many participants have had similar experiences of the learning process, which may indicate some common tendencies and challenges that other students with similar characteristics face during their studies. Based on the data analysis, several themes related to the research goals developed from the interviews. The primary focus of the study was on exploring the participants' experiences of communication with teachers during the learning process, culturally responsive teaching methods and a learner-centred approach. Furthermore, the participants' perspectives on multicultural group work were analysed as well as challenges related to group work.

The majority of the participants stressed the fact that their experiences of communication with teachers were generally positive. Teachers were easily accessible, and they encouraged students to think critically. The analysis of the interviews revealed that many teachers in Icelandic universities apply a learner-centred approach, and according to the participants' experiences, this approach had a positive effect on their academic performance and triggered discussions in the classroom. The participants valued teachers who were trying to provide every student with appropriate educational support and to allow everyone to follow his or her own learning style rather than seeking one teaching method that would suit all. This corresponds to the constructivist theory, which put emphasises a learner-centred approach and highlights the importance of allowing students to take an active part in the learning process, as opposed to passively following teachers' instructions (Henson, 2003; Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002). In contrast to the positive experiences of the learner-centred approach, the participants' perspectives on the teacher-centred approach were mostly negative. They criticised those teachers who put an extensive focus on students' achievement rather than on the learning process.

The participants appreciated it when teachers allowed them to use their cultural backgrounds and previous experiences during the learning process. Although some teachers apply several, single dimensions of culturally responsive teaching, such as content integration and prejudice reduction through open discussions in the classroom, the analysis of the interviews revealed that culturally responsive teaching is still an uncommon phenomenon in the Icelandic universities and that relatively few teachers apply these teaching methods. The participants' experiences of culturally responsive teaching are exclusively positive, and they highlighted the positive impact it had on their sense of belonging in the learning environment.

Despite all the positive elements related to group work, the participants' experiences ranged from being highly positive to distinctly negative. Some participants valued group work and saw it as an opportunity to exchange knowledge and learn about different group members' experiences. They also approached group work from the point of view of it preparing them for future jobs, as the majority of modern professions require at least some amount of group work. The participants whose experiences of group work were negative showed signs of a general misunderstanding of the purpose of group work or had some misconceptions related to the process itself, such as a misguided belief that multicultural group work could pull down individual members' academic scores. Previous research in the field of multicultural group work has indicated that, in most cases, these issues and misconceptions could be eliminated by properly introducing the purpose of group work to students and applying more advanced assessment methods (De Vita, 2002, 2005; Hassanien, 2006; Popov et al., 2012).

During the process of analysis, several participants pointed out the significant issue of some teachers' having low expectations towards immigrant students based on their origins and skills in Icelandic. Earlier research studies have underlined the importance of treating all students equally and having high academic expectations for every student regardless of his or her cultural or ethnic background (Banks & Banks, 2010; Nieto, 2010; Swaminathan & Alfred, 2001). Several participants' negative experiences revealed that lowering the expectations and treating some students like children were not the ways that teachers should have chosen.

Regardless of the highlighted issues, the participants' overall experiences of the learning environments in the three Icelandic universities in this study were mostly positive. Several participants emphasised the empowering effect that university education had on them. They revealed that their university or department is a place where they feel valued and where they have an opportunity to develop their strengths and become independent thinkers.

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## Paper IV

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## ICELANDIC AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES

The aim of this paper is to present and analyze how university students experience teaching methods of Icelandic as a second language and communication with teachers during the learning process. The theoretical framework includes multicultural education theory and second language teaching and learning theories. The findings are based on qualitative interviews with twelve students who study Icelandic as a second language at the University of Iceland. The analysis of the interviews revealed that the participants were generally satisfied with the learning environment and had positive experiences of communication with the majority of the teachers. Nevertheless, the participants described themselves as being rather passive recipients of knowledge in the courses where explicit teaching of grammar was applied and lacking active participation in the learning process. Additionally, the participants encountered several challenges during the learning process such as issues related to task-based and group assignments and, in some cases, teachers lacked understanding of different students' needs, such as that of providing extra learning materials.

Keywords: higher education, second language, teaching methods, qualitative research, Icelandic

### INTRODUCTION

Icelandic language courses for university students have been available in the School of Humanities at the University of Iceland since 1954 (Hjartardóttir, 2000). Both teaching methods and course materials have changed significantly since that time. Nowadays, the University of Iceland offers a variety of courses in Icelandic as a second language. Two different programs have been developed within the School of Humanities; the Icelandic as a Second Language Practical Diploma (60 ECTS) and the Icelandic as a Second Language BA Program (180 ECTS). These two programs have some important differences. The Practical Diploma program is designed for beginners and exchange students who take an interest in learning Icelandic. The Icelandic as a Second Language BA Program is a full degree program designed for students who have an academic interest in Icelandic language and culture (University of Iceland, n.d.-b).

The full BA degree program includes various courses that focus on developing different language skills. In courses such as Grammar and Syntax, explicit teaching methods are used, and the main focus is on grammar and linguistic competence in Icelandic (University of Iceland, 2017). On the other hand, courses such as Conversational Practice focus on advancing students' communicative competence, and implicit teaching methods are usually applied (University of Iceland, 2017). The terms explicit teaching and implicit teaching are antonyms, where the former term implies intentional teaching approaches, during which students are instructed to learn language rules and practice them through pattern drills and similar exercises (N. C. Ellis, 2015). The term implicit teaching refers to teaching approaches based on the notion that students should acquire language skills, including linguistic competence, naturally through different classroom activities, such as group work and class discussion (N. C. Ellis, 2015).

Despite the long tradition of teaching Icelandic as a second language at the University of Iceland, little knowledge exists on university students' experiences of the teaching methods. Hence, it is highly relevant to provide insight into students' experiences of learning Icelandic as a second language and to highlight the main challenges and obstacles that could impact their academic performance.

The main focus of this paper is to explore how university students experience the teaching methods of Icelandic as a second language courses offered in the two different programs at the University of Iceland. Furthermore, the paper aims to present and analyze students' experiences of communication with teachers during the learning process. It is important to highlight that the goal of this paper is not to compare the Icelandic as a Second Language Practical Diploma Program (60 ECTS) with the Icelandic as a Second Language BA Program (180 ECTS).

The statistics available on the University of Iceland's webpage suggest that there is significant dropout from the Icelandic as a Second Language programs (University of Iceland, n.d.-a, n.d.-c). From 2009–2018, there was an average of 83 newly registered students in the BA program, while an average of only 16 students graduated with the BA degree during the same time frame (University of Iceland, n.d.-a, n.d.-c). When it comes to the Practical Diploma, from 2009–2018, the average number of newly registered students was 82, while on average 32 students graduated from the Practical Diploma program during the same period (University of Iceland, n.d.-a, n.d.-c). This statistical data provides a rough estimate of the dropout rate. In order to reveal the exact numbers, a separate quantitative study should be conducted using more detailed data from the office of the registrar.

The paper is based on results from twelve individual, in-depth interviews with university students who have taken at least three different courses in Icelandic as a second language. The main research questions are presented below.

- What are the participants' experiences of communication with teachers during the learning process?
- What are the participants' reactions to and reflections on implicit teaching methods that focus on developing communicative skills?
- What are the participants' experiences of courses where explicit teaching of grammar is applied?

This paper is derived from the qualitative research project Educational Aspirations, Opportunities and Challenges for Immigrants in University Education in Iceland conducted from 2016 to 2018. The project was funded by the Icelandic Centre for Research (Rannís).

The paper includes five sections and an abstract. The next section presents the theoretical framework of the study. The theoretical framework mainly focuses on multicultural education theory, specifically culturally responsive teaching and second-language teaching theories. The third section covers research design and methods of data collection. The fourth section combines presentation and discussion of the findings. The fifth section is a conclusion comprising several final remarks.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to previous research (Erisman & Looney, 2007; Sinacore & Lerner, 2013), limited language skills, lack of support and insufficient language teaching for immigrant students can have a serious impact on the students' learning outcomes and sense of belonging in the learning environment. Furthermore, knowledge of the dominant cultures' languages is considered to be an important element in the integration process as language is inseparable from culture (Erisman & Looney, 2007; Sinacore & Lerner, 2013). In contemporary education, it is highly relevant to implement teaching and assessment methods designed with equity in mind because they provide equal learning opportunities to all students regardless of nationality, race or any other status.

The essence of multicultural education is to create an empowering school environment where all students, regardless of their origin or social status, have equal access to education and are treated with respect by peers and teachers (Banks & Banks, 2010; Nieto, 2010). Culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) is a learner-centered approach to teaching within multicultural education theory. Culturally responsive teachers try to understand their own cultural identity and their students' cultural identities through dialogue in the classroom and they allow every student to bring his or her own knowledge, talents, and experiences to invest in the learning process (Gay, 2018). Furthermore, multicultural education theory and previous research emphasize the importance of applying diverse and unbiased assessment methods in culturally diverse classrooms (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Padilla & Borsato, 2008; Slee, 2010). According to Padilla and Borsato (2008), high-stakes examinations, such as final exams, are not always fair towards students from culturally diverse backgrounds, including immigrants. Culturally responsive assessment does not measure students' achievement based on standardized criteria only (Padilla & Borsato, 2008; Slee, 2010). Teachers are encouraged to take students' cultures, previous experiences and individual learning styles into consideration and to assess learning by prioritizing diverse low-stakes tests and assignments applied evenly throughout the learning process (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Padilla & Borsato, 2008).

Culturally responsive teaching may be related to constructivist theory in the way that it highlights educational shifts from mere knowledge acquisition to empowering experiences of knowledge exchange (Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2018). Constructivist theory emphasizes discovery as an essential element of the learning process and learning is considered to be active knowledge construction performed by the students themselves (Birenbaum, 2003; Cornelius-White, 2007).

The role of students is transformed from being passive recipients of knowledge to becoming active participants in the learning process (Cornelius-White, 2007; Schiller, 2009). Students' active participation is an essential element in the culturally responsive approach to teaching (Gay, 2018; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Classroom activities such as discussions and group work are recommended in learning environments with diverse student populations because such activities motivate students to actively participate in the learning process (De Vita, 2005; Sweeney, Weaven, & Herington, 2008). According to the results of previous research, multicultural group work has a positive effect on students' performance and their integration into the learning environment (De Vita, 2005; Popov et al., 2012; Sweeney et al., 2008). These activities are also useful in language learning environments, as they activate students, encourage them to use the target language during discussions and group work and, thereby, improve their communicative language skills (Oroujou & Vahedi, 2011; Pedersen, 2007; Wesche & Skehan, 2002). When it comes to second language teaching, it is as important to work on developing students' knowledge of the language as it is to teach the students to use the language actively in everyday life.

Focus-on-forms is an explicit teaching approach, where the syllabus includes a predetermined list of linguistic forms that students are supposed to practice through a set of exercises (Long, 2011). This approach has been widespread within the field of second language teaching. The early theorists of explicit teaching methods of grammar concluded that intensive exercises of grammar rules are an essential element in the language acquisition process (Harmer, 1987; Lado, 1964). Student involvement in the learning process is very limited. Thus, this approach is considered to be less motivating and not learner-centered (N. C. Ellis, 2015; Long, 2011). Focus-on-forms is usually opposed to the teaching approach called focus-on-form, which claims that a better learning outcome could be achieved by occasionally drawing students' attention to linguistic elements, including morphology and syntax during lessons that are primarily focused on communication or meaning (R. Ellis, 2012; Long, 2011).

Focus-on-form is considered to be a learner-centered approach which activates students and has a positive effect on their involvement in the learning process (R. Ellis, 2009, 2012). Focus-on-form combines elements of explicit language teaching and implicit language teaching (R. Ellis, 2012; Loewen, 2005). Theorists argue that traditional grammar teaching has different negative side-effects that can be avoided by rejecting explicit teaching of grammar rules based on pattern drills and by incorporating grammar teaching into communicative activities that motivate students (R. Ellis, 2012; Long, 2011). Focus-on-form is divided into two types: incidental focus-on-form and planned focus-on-form, where the planned focus-on-form implicates the use of predetermined tasks with a specific focus on linguistic elements (R. Ellis, 2012). On the other hand, the distinctive feature of incidental focus-on-form is that teaching of grammar is applied "spontaneously without prior planning in meaning-focused interaction" (Loewen, 2005, p. 361). Incidental focus-on-form is supported by Swain's (1993) output hypothesis, which claims that second language acquisition is more effective when students become aware of their knowledge gaps and learn something new about the target language by making an effort to modify their output (Loewen, 2005; Swain, 1993; Swain & Lapkin, 1995). Both Loewen (2005) and Swain (1993, 2005) emphasize that, in order to develop students' language skills, some explicit teaching methods need to be applied especially when students are graded in accordance with their academic performance and improvement.

In contrast to explicit language teaching methods, implicit or usage-based teaching methods prioritize meaning instead of forms and use communication as a tool to acquire language skills (N. C. Ellis, 2015). Early in the 1980s, Krashen pointed out that the acquisition of a second language should take place in a stress-free environment without an extensive focus on the linguistic elements (Krashen, 1985). This natural learning environment could be achieved by applying implicit teaching methods, where communication is an important element of the learning process. Communicative teaching methods have some essential characteristics, such as teachers using authentic texts and applying learner-centered approaches that motivate students (Wesche & Skehan, 2002). This corresponds to culturally responsive teaching methods, where special attention is also given to communication during the learning process (Gay, 2018). Furthermore, students are encouraged to share their knowledge with peers while resolving task-based communicative assignments provided by teachers (Richards, 2006; Wesche & Skehan, 2002). By using communicative language teaching methods, teachers not only develop students' language skills but also create social interaction in the classroom (Pedersen, 2007; Richards, 2006). Different classroom activities are suggested, such as group work, interviews, opinion sharing, and role play.

The task-based teaching approach claims to develop all language skills, including listening, reading, speaking, and writing, as well as creating a productive learning environment by motivating students to participate in the learning process (R. Ellis, 2009; Pedersen, 2007). However, the theorists strongly suggest that teachers should apply task-based assignments carefully and take students' existing knowledge and language skills into consideration (R. Ellis, 2009; Richards, 2006). The key characteristics of a task are introduced by Richards (2006), who claims that a task requires students to use their existing language resources. Tasks focus on meaning and have "an outcome which is not simply linked to learning language, though language acquisition may occur as the learner carries out the task" (Richards, 2006, p. 31). While no task fits all classrooms, every task must be tailored to a particular group of students in order to achieve good results (R. Ellis, 2009; Swan, 2005). Theodórsdóttir and Friðriksdóttir (2013) explored how students of Icelandic as a second language experienced a task-based assignment called *Íslenskuborpið* (The Icelandic Village). Their theoretical framework was based on a paper by Wagner (2004), who suggested that adding a social dimension into task-based instruction by sending students out of the classroom and encouraging them to use their language resources could have benefits and develop students' communicative competences. The task, *Íslenskuborpið*, aimed to promote daily interaction in Icelandic and to improve students' language skills by speaking Icelandic to Icelanders, recording and analyzing the conversations. The findings presented by Theodórsdóttir and Friðriksdóttir (2013) were positive and they report students' satisfaction with the task.

Different levels of curiosity and motivation amongst students could be among the challenges that teachers might experience during the teaching process (Karge, Phillips, Jesse, & McCabe, 2011; Norton & Toohey, 2011). However, Norton and Toohey (2011), in their work on identity and language learning, point out that motivation and investment in the learning process are two different things. A highly motivated student could have little investment in the learning process, which can be explained by the student's lack of a sense of belonging in the classroom or negative attitudes from teachers or peers. The role of the teacher is to be observant of tendencies in the classroom and provide better support for students whose investment is relatively low as compared to other students (Norton & Toohey, 2011).

Both explicit and implicit teaching methods have their pros and cons. Explicit teaching methods are criticized for being less relevant and having little practical value (Long, 2011; Norris, 2011), while implicit teaching lacks advanced insight into linguistic elements of the language which could help students to further develop their language skills (N. C. Ellis, 2015). According to previous research, it is reasonable to incorporate the teaching of linguistic elements into communicative language teaching by applying incidental focus-on-form (Loewen, 2005). However, this teaching approach must be carefully tailored to the particular students in order to achieve better learning outcomes (R. Ellis, 2009; Swan, 2005).

The theoretical framework creates a base for the presented study. The theories and earlier research will be used to discuss the findings from different perspectives. In the next section, the research design and methods of data collection are presented.

## METHOD

The project *Educational Aspirations, Opportunities and Challenges for Immigrants in University Education in Iceland* (2016– 2018) is a qualitative study based on interviews with 41 university students, who are first-generation immigrants in Iceland. In Iceland, the term immigrant is applied to “a person born abroad with two foreign-born parents and four foreign-born grandparents” (Statistics Iceland, 2016). Only those immigrant students who had studied at undergraduate level for at least one year were recruited to participate in the study. The additional requirement was that the participants were not exchange-students. Information on some participants was obtained from the office of the registrar, while the majority were recruited by using a snowball sampling method (Flick, 2009).

As this paper focuses on students’ experiences of teaching methods for Icelandic as a second language, the findings are based on individual interviews with those participants who have taken at least three courses in Icelandic as a second language at the University of Iceland (from the Icelandic as a Second Language Practical Diploma Program and/or Icelandic as a Second Language BA Program). Twelve participants out of the 41 in the larger study met the selection criterion. These participants come from eight different countries in Europe, Asia and North America and have been living in Iceland from two up to twelve years. Six out of twelve participants have been registered students in the Icelandic as a Second Language BA Program, and as of today, one of them has graduated with the BA degree in Icelandic, two have changed their major and three have quit their studies at the University of Iceland. Three participants have been registered students at the Icelandic as a Second Language Practical Diploma Program, and as of today, two have graduated with the diploma and one has quit. Three participants took the Icelandic language courses as elective courses; that is, they did not aim to receive a degree in Icelandic and only wished to improve their language skills.

The participants were advised about the project and informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews started. The participants’ identity and contact information is not revealed, and the study is in compliance with the privacy requirements in Icelandic law about data protection.

Data was collected through qualitative, individual, semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Flick, 2009). All interviews were conducted in Icelandic and/or English, audio-recorded, and later transcribed verbatim. During the interviews, the students were asked to share their experiences of the learning environment, the teaching methods and their communication with teachers as well as to share their perspectives on group work and assessment methods. Additionally, several background questions were included in the interview guide. The questions relating to the main goals of this paper are presented below.

- What can you tell us about your experiences of communication with teachers?
- What teaching methods did the teachers apply?
- What do you think about these teaching methods?
- What is your experience of group work?
- What are your experiences of communication in the groups?
- What language did you use during the group work?
- What are your experiences of the assessment methods?

The interviews were analyzed using the thematic analysis approach, and the analysis took place concurrently throughout the research period (Creswell, 2008). Atlas.ti analytical software was used to code the interviews and create categories and themes. The raw data was coded using the complete coding approach (Braun & Clarke, 2013), later the codes were organized into categories, which subsequently were developed into the three themes presented in the finding and discussion section.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are divided into three sections representing the three main themes derived from the interviews. In the first section, the participants' experiences of communication with the teachers during the learning process are presented and analyzed. The second section reveals the participants' reactions to, and reflections on, implicit teaching methods focusing on developing communicative skills. Additionally, the second section includes the participants' perspectives on group work and the task-based assignment *Íslenskuborpið*. Finally, the third section presents the participants' experiences of courses where explicit teaching of grammar is applied, emphasizing the participants' perspectives on workload and assessment in those courses.

In this chapter, quotations from interviews conducted in English are presented in their original form according to interview transcriptions. Quotations from interviews conducted in Icelandic have been translated from Icelandic into English by the authors, who tried to provide as accurate a translation as possible. The analysis is solely based on the participants' interviews; that is, their memories and experiences of the teaching methods. The researchers realize that there could be inconsistencies and/or contradictions between the participants' answers and official syllabi in the courses discussed.

### **Communication with teachers during the learning process**

The participants highlighted that the teachers' role is not solely to transmit knowledge and assess students' academic performance but also to be observant and caring for the students. Previous studies emphasized the importance of creating a positive learning environment that could have a strong impact on students' level of investment in their education (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Generally, the participants were satisfied with their teachers and they emphasized the importance of being able to communicate with them in an informal way. Three participants said, "[t]he teachers are very accessible, and the classes are interesting", "[Translated from Icelandic] I find the teachers really, really approachable and they are interested in what they are doing", "[t]he teachers are always there for you. You know it is like a sharing process, very personal communication". These responses indicated that in many cases teachers were accessible and caring for their students. This contributed to the participants' positive experiences of the learning process and generally motivated them. According to multicultural education theory, communication with teachers is important in a multicultural classroom where the teacher should ensure that all students feel valued and participate equally in the learning process (Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2010).

The participants were not satisfied with those teachers who failed to create connections with their students and ignored suggestions coming from the classroom. During the analytical process, a pattern was discovered in several participants' comments on one of the core courses in the Icelandic as a Second Language BA Program. The participants encountered problems when requesting extra learning materials and educational support.

The teacher was always like rushing us. If you didn't understand anything, you just had to deal with it. And when I once had an interview with the teacher and [the teacher] was like "Okay I'll give you three months. If you can't do it, I will just put you in practical diploma, because you are just lower than the whole class" and I was just like... Oh! Ok! But it wasn't my question.

*Researcher:* What was the question?

Like, do you have any advice on how I could just improve myself like do you have any books, anything. But it was just like "No, we have plenty of material already just deal with it". (Student in the Icelandic as a Second Language BA Program)

The above example reveals the participant's negative experience caused by the teacher's lack of understanding of the student's needs. The teacher refused to provide additional learning material that would suit this particular student and help him to improve. Instead of offering educational support, the teacher chose to threaten the student with expulsion from the BA program. While the participant's negative attitudes may be understandable, one must take into consideration the specifics of this particular course which is one of the core courses on the Icelandic as a Second Language BA Program.

As further explained by the participants, this course had a fixed syllabus and a relatively large number of students. These could potentially be the reasons why the teacher refused to alter the syllabus or provide personal support. Nevertheless, earlier research and multicultural education theory emphasize the notion that teachers should be open to suggestions coming from students, value every student's opinion and try to provide personal support to the students (Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2010). This has a positive effect on students' sense of belonging and motivates them. Dialogue and positive connection between students and teachers is especially important in the language learning environment, where the main goal of the education process is to teach students to communicate in a second language, which often requires active communication in the classroom.

### **Implicit language teaching: The emphasis on active participation and communication**

The Icelandic as a Second Language BA Program includes two Conversational Practice courses where the main focus is on developing students' communicative skills (University of Iceland, 2017). The participants who took those courses generally expressed positive attitudes towards communicative teaching methods applied in the classroom. They reported that the teachers encouraged every student to participate in classroom discussions and tried to make the learning process dynamic and interesting. One of the students, who took the same course twice with a one-year pause between, commented on the changed teaching methods applied by the teachers.

*[Translated from Icelandic]* The course has changed a lot. I can say it is better now. We speak more. We spoke maybe just five minutes last year. Maybe not five minutes, but we spoke very little. Now in the Conversational Practice, which is once a week, we are just speaking together for one and half hours. There are discussions. (Student in the Icelandic as a Second Language BA Program)

In the same interview, the participant explained that the teacher played the role of facilitator. The teacher generated topics and encouraged the students to discuss them in Icelandic. The teacher offered assistance when the students had questions, both relating to the linguistic elements of Icelandic and to the discussion topics. This approach corresponds to the principle of incidental focus-on-form, where the teacher focuses on the linguistic elements and explains them when the issues naturally appear during lessons mainly focused on communication (Loewen, 2005). Several other participants of the study also gave positive feedback about the same course and wished that there were more such courses.

Previous research emphasizes that encouraging students to use the target language as much as possible during classroom activities is an important principle for teachers who are implementing communicative teaching methods (Richards, 2006; Wesche & Skehan, 2002). However, one student in the Icelandic as a Second Language BA Program commented that the teacher was not always aware of one particular problem during the classroom activities. The student pointed out that sometimes students switched to English during the discussions. “[Translated from Icelandic] I tried to speak Icelandic, but there were many who switched to English. You know, if there is a group of native English speakers, they immediately start speaking English”.

The participants who were enrolled in the Practical Diploma Program specifically mentioned a communicative task-based assignment called *Íslenskuporpið* (The Icelandic Village). According to the task requirements, the students had to work in pairs to practice Icelandic in a natural environment; they had, for example, to go together to a coffee shop or a bookshop and order a coffee or ask for assistance in Icelandic. They also had to audio-record themselves speaking Icelandic with a shop assistant and then analyze the conversation together. A pattern was discovered in the participants’ answers. Their experiences were ambivalent in that they clearly understood the benefits of the idea behind the task but the experiences of doing the task were mostly negative. The participants felt they were poorly prepared for the task and this resulted in extensive stress and generally negative attitudes towards the whole process. The participants mentioned that the task was given too early and they did not have enough skills or confidence to go out and start speaking Icelandic. One student said that:

As an idea, it is just wonderful, but it doesn’t work as the teacher might hope for ... You are new to the country and you still don’t really know it and you don’t know the people. And you have to speak the language that you can’t speak. And just to start speaking was a bit difficult. I was not ready for it. (Student in the Icelandic as a Second Language Practical Diploma Program)

The students’ negative experiences of and the failure in this particular task may be explained by the substantial knowledge gap between students’ existing communicative skills and the skills required to do the task. Research on communicative teaching methods further emphasized the importance of applying appropriate task-based assignments, which should not be far above the students’ abilities and “should be challenging but not threatening” (Wesche & Skehan, 2002, p. 217).

These experiences contradict the findings from Theodórsdóttir and Friðriksdóttir (2013), who studied students’ experiences with the *Íslenskuporpið* task. The researchers reported that students had highly positive attitudes towards *Íslenskuporpið* and generally considered the task to be a success (Theodórsdóttir & Friðriksdóttir, 2013). According to the interview guide in Theodorsdóttir and Friðriksdóttir’s study, the students were specifically asked to describe the advantages of the task and its value. However, they were not specifically asked about the disadvantages or failures. The differences between students’ experiences in Theodórsdóttir and Friðriksdóttir’s (2013) study and those in the current study could be explained by the different focuses of the studies.

The earlier study specifically focused on the *Íslenskuporpið* and particularly looked for positive experiences associated with it (Theodórsdóttir & Friðriksdóttir, 2013). While the current study did not include any questions about the task concerned, the participants revealed their experiences when they were asked to comment on teaching methods applied by the teachers of Icelandic as a second language. Besides, the differences between these two studies could be explained in terms of the students' different learning styles, personalities or levels of language proficiency. Furthermore, the task was probably not adapted to new groups of students. Several theorists highlight that there is no single way of doing task-based instruction; task-based assignments must be adapted to students' level of competence in the target language and other circumstances (R. Ellis, 2009; Richards, 2006; Swan, 2005). This creates challenges for teachers, because the same task can be highly relevant for one particular group of students but irrelevant for another group.

A participant who took the Icelandic language courses as elective courses revealed that one of the teachers in the BA program tried to combine interaction on social media and language teaching, and this teaching method worked for the students who experienced it. The participant described how engaged the teacher was in the educational process. “[The teacher] is really interested. [He/she] set up a Facebook group, and is desperate to talk to us all the time because [he/she] says that that is going to make us better”. This element combines the dimensions of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2010) and communicative language teaching (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 2005). The teacher cared about the students and their academic performance, used every opportunity to promote active interaction in Icelandic and helped to develop students' writing skills by communicating with them via a social media platform. The importance of creating a link between school and the outside world and using a variety of teaching approaches has previously been proved to be effective (Gay, 2018; Nieto, 2010; Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2014). Two other participants who were enrolled in the BA Program confirmed that the above-mentioned approach to teaching is suitable for the Icelandic learning environment; it takes communicative language teaching to a different level, gives good results and motivates the students.

Group work is often described as one of the most significant elements of multicultural education because it triggers interactions between students and helps to create a positive atmosphere in the classroom (Banks & Banks, 2010; De Vita, 2005; Gay, 2018; Popov et al., 2012). Additionally, it is suggested that group work helps to maintain students' motivation and interest in the second language learning process (Oroujou & Vahedi, 2011). Group work was one of the most discussed teaching methods during the interviews with the participants. Students' attitudes towards group work were very diverse. Some students really appreciated the group work and wished there were more group projects, while several students considered group work to be a waste of time.

A student in the BA program who had highly positive experiences of group work described it as an opportunity to share ideas with people from different cultures. “[Translated from Icelandic] When people come from different corners of the world and have different ideas, sometimes it is just enjoyable”. Later in the interview, the participant explained that it was challenging to get used to each other at the start, as students involved in group work may have very different experiences and world views.

Several other participants did not agree with the point of view that group work was a positive experience. They mentioned different reasons why group work was an unpleasant aspect that merely made the whole educational process more difficult. According to the participants, one of the main reasons for group work being experienced in a negative way was that the members of the group had different levels of language skills, which made advanced language users more active members of the group, while those whose level was relatively low became mute members and did not feel involved in the process. One participant who took the Icelandic language courses as elective courses commented that “[t]he group work is not chosen really carefully. Some of us had much more advanced knowledge and teachers just tend to communicate better with them”. Another participant also brought up this issue.

*[Translated from Icelandic]* If someone speaks fluent Icelandic and I just come for example and say, “Good morning”, this just doesn’t work ... I think it is boring to do the group work ... It is best to divide students according to their level or according to their origin. (Student in the Icelandic as a Second Language BA Program)

While the participant’s idea that it could be beneficial to divide students according to their origins might sound reasonable, several other participants concluded that working in a monocultural group might become an obstacle because they would start chatting in their native language and forget about the assignment and the purpose of the group work. Previous research suggests that group work is more productive when the members of the group have different backgrounds because they can share experiences and fill one another’s knowledge gaps (De Vita, 2002, 2005). Furthermore, it is recommended that teachers assign group members rather than allowing students to choose group members themselves (De Vita, 2002, 2005). This would create more balanced groups.

Some participants did not fully understand the purpose of group work and were generally less satisfied with the process and the outcome. A participant shared his experience of the group work in one of the courses included in the BA program “[Translated from Icelandic] I think it is unfair to work in groups ... I don’t know why group work [is assigned]. It doesn’t show anything. We all got the same grade even though everybody agreed that I was the best”. The participant did not reveal the name of the course, but he shared several details of the aforementioned group assignment. He highlighted that the teacher did not properly introduce the main goals of the group work up front. Furthermore, the participant was excessively focused on achievement and the final grade but not on the working process. It was not clear to him how the assignment was going to be assessed. The participant believed that the group members would be assessed individually, while in reality everyone was assessed as a group and received the same grade. Those are the reasons for the participant’s dissatisfaction with the group work itself and with the grade when the assignment was finished. As pointed out by several different researchers in the field of higher education, a proper introduction to the purpose of group work assignments, making sure that every student understands the assessment methods before the actual group work begins, is crucially important for both students’ experiences of the group work and the learning outcomes (Forehand, Leigh, Farrell, & Spurlock, 2016; Hassanien, 2006; Sweeney et al., 2008).

Apart from the communicative teaching methods, some of the courses included in the Icelandic as a Second Language BA Program placed a strong emphasis on the students' achievement in mastering the grammar of Icelandic. In the next section, the students' experiences of explicit grammar teaching methods will be presented and discussed.

### **Explicit teaching of grammar: The emphasis on the students' achievement**

During the interviews, all of the participants who were enrolled in the BA program discussed their experiences of courses where explicit teaching of grammar was applied. They particularly shared their views on the courses Grammar and Syntax. Explicit teaching methods are considered useful by some theorists, especially when teachers are working on strengthening the students' knowledge of the target language and closing knowledge gaps by making the students aware of them (N. C. Ellis, 2015; R. Ellis, 2012). Despite the positive intention of applying such methods, the participants' experiences of the explicit teaching of grammar were mostly negative. The participants explained that the main reason for their dissatisfaction was that they did not feel involved in the learning process. The learning became a routine review of grammatical exercises and homework assignments. The emphasis on keeping the learning process within the frames of the syllabus and the predetermined number of assignments contributed to the students' negative experiences of the learning process.

They try to make sure that you follow the program. And at the end of the day, we ended up just doing the home tasks instead of being involved in the learning process. So, it was just ... I realized that I was a machine that produced homework. (Student in the Icelandic as a Second Language BA Program)

Later, the same student concluded that the workload in the Grammar and Syntax courses was very heavy. Two other participants shared this student's experience and mentioned that sometimes the amount of work was too much. They spent significantly more time studying for the courses where explicit teaching methods were applied than for the courses where implicit methods, such as communicative language teaching, were used. A participant, who had quit the program, concluded that one of the courses with the excessively heavy workload was probably a reason for quitting the studies.

[Translated from Icelandic] Probably I quit, because it was just too much for me. Yes, first the books that we had to study were not interesting to me and difficult ... And the home assignments ... I couldn't do everything. I was trying but no. (Student in the Icelandic as a Second Language BA Program)

The participants' negative attitudes towards the courses where explicit teaching methods of grammar are applied can potentially be explained using constructivist theory. The core elements in constructivist theory are learners' active participation and learner-centeredness (Cornelius-White, 2007; Schiller, 2009). The explicit teaching methods of grammar are intrinsically not learner-centered, and the participants have often described themselves as being passive recipients of knowledge in grammar courses.

The findings indicated that the students enrolled in the BA program would appreciate being active participants in the learning process. They suggested that it could be more beneficial if the teachers could incorporate the teaching of grammar rules in communicative teaching through incidentally focusing on linguistic elements during the communicative activities in the classroom; that is, applied incidental focus-on-form approach. Another suggestion coming from the participants of the study was that they wished the teachers would invite them to discuss the syllabus at the beginning of every term, to allow them to evaluate the workload and probably choose some amount of the reading materials. This agrees with the suggestions made by culturally responsive pedagogy theorists, who emphasize the importance of constructive dialogue between teachers and students and, in some cases, allowing students to choose some of the learning materials (Gay, 2018; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

The majority of the participants indicated that they were less satisfied with the courses that based their assessment solely on the outcome of the final exam, which is a common practice in grammar courses. The participants would have liked the assessment to be diverse and more evenly divided throughout the academic semester. Previous research highlights the importance of applying different assessment methods throughout the learning process instead of relying on final exams (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Slee, 2010). This is particularly relevant in culturally diverse classrooms, where students have different levels of knowledge and are used to different learning styles (Padilla & Borsato, 2008; Slee, 2010). Those participants who came from countries outside the European Economic Area (EEA) experienced even more pressure because their residence permits depend on their academic performance at the university. A single failure in one exam could potentially have serious consequences for those students and, in some cases, might even result in a student having to leave the country (The Directorate of Immigration, n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-c).

Even though the study revealed several important problems relating to the teaching methods used in Icelandic language courses, the participants' overall experiences of the learning environment are positive. The participants hope to see improvement in the university, and it would be appreciated if university administrators and teachers addressed the issues discussed in this paper.

## CONCLUSION

The main goal of this study was to analyze the participants' perspectives on the teaching methods of Icelandic as a second language and their involvement in communication with the teachers. The findings presented here shed light on the individual participants' experiences of second-language education at the University of Iceland. Although the findings cannot be generalized beyond that, the study nevertheless gives some indication of challenges that other students might experience.

The findings indicate that the majority of the participants have positive attitudes towards the learning environment within the university. They highlight the fact that the majority of teachers are generally accessible and communication with them is easy. According to the participants, many teachers value the students' previous knowledge and care about their experiences and learning outcomes. Several participants in the study also shared negative experiences, which were usually caused by lack of communication between teachers and students. In a few cases, the participants reported that they had been refused educational support in the form of extra learning materials suited to the students' diverse proficiency levels. This contradicts the teaching practices based on multicultural education theory's important principles; that is, mutual respect, genuine concern for students and relevant educational support (e.g., Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2018).

When it comes to courses where implicit teaching methods are applied, the experiences of the participants were positive when teachers initiated class discussions and encouraged students to use Icelandic as much as possible during classroom activities. On the other hand, the participants' perspectives were less positive and, in some cases, negative when teachers applied a communicative task-based assignment called *Íslenskuborpið*, although task-based assignments, including *Íslenskuborpið* have been reported in the literature to have a positive influence on language learning. Some participants concluded that the task was not tailored to the students' proficiency level, applied too early in the learning process and could have worked better if the teacher had assigned the task in question later when the students' communication skills were more advanced.

The participants' attitudes to group work were diverse. Some participants valued group work and saw it as an opportunity to exchange knowledge and learn from one another. On the other hand, several participants saw the group work as a challenge. While the theorists recommend group work as a teaching method, especially in the field of multicultural education (Banks & Banks, 2010), different studies emphasize the importance of properly introducing the goals of the group work and explaining how the working process should be carried out (Forehand et al., 2016; Hassanien, 2006; Sweeney et al., 2008). Teachers' failure to introduce the benefits of group work together with insufficient explanations of assessment methods could result in students' negative experiences, such as those described in detail by one of the participants in the current study.

The participants' main concerns were mostly related to courses where explicit teaching methods, such as grammar teaching, were applied. The participants felt those courses were mere knowledge transmission where the students were passive recipients. Furthermore, the participants had negative attitudes towards the assessment being solely based on final exams and preferred diverse assessment methods and assessment evenly divided throughout the academic semester. Multicultural education theory and constructivist theory support the participants' views and highlight the importance of implementing learner-centered approaches to teaching and applying diverse assessment methods (Banks & Banks, 2010; Cornelius-White, 2007; Padilla & Borsato, 2008; Schiller, 2009; Slee, 2010).

The presented research indicates the participants' overall satisfaction with the Icelandic language courses. According to the participants, university staff members are criticism-tolerant and genuinely willing to work on resolving issues and creating an empowering learning environment. Apart from the main goal of presenting and analyzing students' perspectives regarding the learning environment and the teaching methods, the secondary aim of the study is to motivate further research on adult students' experiences of second language learning in Iceland, because the volume of research and knowledge within this area is still relatively low.

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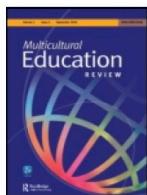
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## Paper V



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### Immigrant students' experiences of assessment methods used in Icelandic universities

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Immigrant students' experiences of assessment methods used in Icelandic universities

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### ABSTRACT

The paper comes from the first extensive qualitative research project on immigrant students' experiences of higher education in Iceland. The aim of the paper is to explore immigrant students' experiences of different assessment methods, such as summative, formative and group assessment, applied in three Icelandic universities. The analysis of the participant interviews revealed that teachers still frequently apply summative assessment methods involving high-stakes examinations, which the participants regarded as not beneficial. The participants highlighted the fact that high-stakes examinations neither motivate them nor promote active learning. The study also revealed that culturally responsive assessment is almost non-existent in Icelandic universities. Additionally, the participants wished for standardisation of the policies regarding special support during the examination periods for students whose native language is not Icelandic. The paper is highly relevant for teachers, policymakers and other academic personnel of universities with diverse student populations.

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Assessment; higher education; immigrant students; qualitative research; Iceland

The modern European population is becoming increasingly diverse through constant immigration. In 2017 more than 2.4 million people immigrated to the European Union (EU) from non-EU member countries according to Eurostat (2019). In Iceland, first-generation immigrants made up 10.6% of the total population in 2017 (Statistics Iceland, 2017). Immigration brings both new opportunities and challenges to the educational settings in Iceland. This includes higher education institutions, where the percentage of newly registered students of foreign origin, including immigrants, has grown from approximately 5% in 1997 to 19% in 2017 (Statistics Iceland, 2018). Despite the high percentage of immigrants in Icelandic universities, teachers, administrators and policymakers still lack information on immigrants' experiences of the learning environments, teaching and assessment methods used in higher education.

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This paper derives from the qualitative research project Educational Aspirations, Opportunities and Challenges for Immigrants in University Education in Iceland, 2016-2018.

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International research shows that, even in countries where the percentage of minority students, including immigrants, is high, inequalities continue to be a reality (e.g., Owens & Lynch, 2012; Parekh, 2006; Swaminathan & Alfred, 2001). Minority group students experience difficulties in communication with teachers and peers, which are often caused by language-related issues (e.g., Boesch, 2014; Lau & Lin, 2017). They lack appropriate educational support, and the percentage of dropouts continues to be relatively high amongst this group (Altbach et al., 2009; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008).

Educational institutions in Iceland have become increasingly aware of immigrant students' needs and try to address these issues by implementing learner-centred teaching methods and developing new programmes for international students (e.g., Books et al., 2011). The language policies of the Icelandic universities clearly state that the main language of instructions on the undergraduate level is Icelandic, but English is also considered important because most of the learning material is in English (Wozniczka & Ragnarsdóttir, 2016). This technically requires all undergraduate students to have good skills in both languages in order to successfully pursue their studies, excepting those in courses specifically designed for exchange and international students, which are mostly in English. Previous research has emphasised the importance of relevant language support for diverse students, including immigrants (Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2014; Sinacore & Lerner, 2013), which could eliminate the inequalities caused by language-related issues and motivate the students. Additionally, suitable assessment methods with clear criteria are claimed to be among the most significant elements that ensure fairness and equal opportunity (Medland, 2016; Padilla & Borsato, 2008). In this paper, assessment methods are defined as different approaches in evaluating students' learning and skills. Some assessment methods focus on measuring students' achievement based on standardised criteria, while other methods put emphasis on providing feedback that could motivate students and encourage further learning.

When looking at different university programmes in Iceland, it appears that Icelandic universities still put strong emphasis on summative assessment methods involving high-stakes final examinations and assignments on the undergraduate level, while formative assessment methods involving low-stakes assignments are significantly less frequently used (Reykjavik University, 2019; University of Akureyri, 2019; University of Iceland, 2019). Summative assessment methods have often been criticised for being less motivating, focusing extensively on student achievement and not promoting further development (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Gerdy, 2002; Schiller, 2009). Previous research has emphasised that the main purposes of assessment should be to facilitate learning and provide a deep understanding of the skills that students acquired instead of just being a measuring tool (Medland, 2016; Schiller, 2009).

In contrast to summative assessment, the purpose of formative assessment is to produce feedback on student performance with the aim of motivating and improving learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Some theorists move even further and advocate for sustainable assessment methods that are centred on empowering students and 'establishing a basis for



students to undertake their own assessment activities in the future' (Boud, 2000, p. 151). In contemporary educational settings, a new approach to assessment has emerged in the field of multicultural education, called culturally responsive assessment, that takes students' languages, previous experiences and cultural backgrounds into consideration (Padilla & Borsato, 2008). Instead of attempting to measure students' achievement based on standardised criteria, culturally responsive assessment attempts to evaluate learning progress based on individual students' abilities and previous experiences (Slee, 2010). Previous studies have emphasised that diverse students, including immigrants, can potentially find themselves in a discriminatory position if the assessment methods are applied without considering the cultural backgrounds and previous experiences (Padilla & Borsato, 2008; Sinacore & Lerner, 2013; Slee, 2010). According to Padilla and Borsato (2008), all details are very important when it comes to assessment of diverse students, including the language of the assessment, the criteria, the methods and the type of feedback. Attention to the details could help in creating a learning environment based on the equality and trust.

The main goal of this paper is to explore immigrant students' experiences of assessment methods, including summative, formative and group assessment, used in three different universities in Iceland. Additionally, the paper investigates immigrant students' perspectives on special support aimed at compensating for inequalities often caused by a lack of skills in academic Icelandic offered by the universities during the examination periods. The paper is based on findings from focus group and individual interviews with immigrant students. In this study, the term immigrant student is applied to university students who are first-generation immigrants to Iceland. According to the official definition stated by Statistics Iceland (2017), an immigrant is a person born abroad with both parents and grandparents also born abroad.

As part of the first, extensive qualitative project on immigrant students' experiences of university education in Iceland, this paper is highly relevant for Icelandic higher education. Furthermore, the study has a comparative value as it makes a relevant contribution to the discussion about immigrant students' experiences of higher education. The study presents the views of those immigrant students who shared their experiences with the researchers. Thus, the results cannot be generalised and applied to all immigrant students who pursue higher education in Iceland. The study reveals some patterns in the participants' answers that may indicate some common challenges that other students with similar characteristics might experience as well. However, generalisation was not the goal of this study because it aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of individuals.

### **Theoretical framework and previous research**

Constructivist theory highlights the importance of learner-centred teaching that features active learning, knowledge construction and critical thinking during the education process (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002; Wright, 2011). As opposed to conventional lecture-based teaching, a teacher-centred approach where students passively acquire knowledge from a teacher, a



learner-centred approach focuses on creating an effective and motivating learning environment where students are at the centre of the learning process and encouraged to create their own knowledge based on the knowledge exchange between teacher and students (Smart et al., 2012; Webber, 2012). The role of teachers transforms from being merely a source of knowledge to becoming a mentor and advisor who makes the learning process multidimensional by transmitting new knowledge to the students and, at the same time, encouraging students to think critically and to challenge the presented theories in order to create their own knowledge (Schiller, 2009). Appropriate assessment methods that are integrated into the learning process and motivate students are regarded as an important element of the learner-centred approach to teaching (Medland, 2012, 2016; Schiller, 2009). In this section, four different approaches to assessment are discussed: summative, formative, sustainable and culturally responsive.

### *Summative and formative assessment*

Assessment is often associated with monitoring or measuring an achievement. However, appropriate assessment methods can go far beyond that; they can promote learning and motivate students (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Gerdy, 2002). Summative assessment has been frequently criticised for being a measuring and decision-making tool that does little to promote active learning and is usually associated with conventional teaching methods, where assessment has the sole purpose of certifying the level of student achievement (Schiller, 2009). Summative assessment involves, in most cases, high-stakes examinations and assignments in the form of written exams and final essays. The extensive focus on achievement can diminish the value of the potential benefits of supporting and motivating students through of assessment (Medland, 2016).

The main criticisms of summative assessment is that it is usually only applied at the end of the semester and that it separates assessment from the learning process (Medland, 2016; Schiller, 2009). Furthermore, it does not provide valuable feedback that students could use to improve their performance and does not assess the depth of the acquired knowledge (Boud, 2000; Falchikov, 2005; Schiller, 2009). Although advocates of summative assessment methods claim that this type of assessment is essential for determining the level of skills acquired by students, previous research argues that summative assessment is flawed and that the majority of assessment criteria in higher education is still derived from the dominant culture and does not reflect student diversity (Medland, 2016; Padilla & Borsato, 2008; Struyven et al., 2005; Yorke, 2011).

Formative assessment methods usually involve low-stakes tests and assignments that take place throughout the semester (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Padilla & Borsato, 2008). Low-stakes assessment could involve weekly quizzes, journaling, breaking down larger projects into parts, providing feedback on drafts, etc. (Falchikov, 2005; Padilla & Borsato, 2008). Formative assessment is considered to be a learner-centred approach (Schiller, 2009). Instead of merely determining the level of knowledge acquired by students and generating grades, formative



assessment focuses on student development; it aims to determine what students still need to learn and promote learning (Medland, 2012, 2016; Webber, 2012; Wright, 2011).

Formative assessment methods are incorporated into the learning process and aim to provide immediate feedback on student development (Medland, 2016; Shull, 2005). Constructive feedback is a very important feature of formative assessment as it encourages students and gives them opportunities for further development (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Schiller, 2009). However, this puts extensive pressure on teachers to constantly evaluate student work and provide narrative feedback on assignments before starting new ones (Shull, 2005). Despite the positive elements of formative assessment, several theorists question its potential to empower because power still lies with the teachers (e.g., Boud, 2000; Boud & Falchikov, 2006). It is difficult to see how students can be empowered if they depend on teacher evaluation and follow feedback solely provided by teachers (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

### *Sustainable assessment*

Boud and Falchikov (2006) stated that a big disadvantage of the majority of the assessment methods is that students are passive recipients of the actions of teachers. In contrast to other assessment methods, sustainable assessment promotes life-long learning and empowers students to take responsibility for their own assessment both during and after finishing formal education (Boud, 2000; Boud & Falchikov, 2006). According to Boud and Falchikov (2006, p. 402), '[n]either teachers nor a curriculum drive learning after graduation; it is the desires of learners, the initiatives they take and the context in which learning takes place that are powerful influences'. Sustainable assessment fits well into constructivist learning theory, as it emphasises active participation in the learning process and self-generation of feedback (Boud, 2000). Sustainable assessment includes different activities, such as peer assessment, self-assessment, and collaborative assessment (Boud, 2000; Falchikov, 2005).

Group work has proven to be useful when it comes to developing students' skills in working collaboratively (Hassanien, 2006; De Vita, 2005). Furthermore, group work can be used as a sustainable assessment tool by introducing peer assessment as part of the group work (Falchikov, 2005). In order for students to benefit from peer assessment, it is recommended that teachers clearly separate feedback from grades and involve students in the discussion about assessment criteria (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000). Earlier research shows that peer assessment within groups has a positive effect on the group members' academic performance and promotes a deeper understanding of course content (Shull, 2005).

### *Culturally responsive assessment*

Culturally responsive teaching methods come from the field of multicultural education (Banks, 2016; Gay, 2018). The characteristic feature of culturally responsive teaching is that it pays



special attention to students' previous experiences, cultural backgrounds and languages (Gay, 2018). When it comes to the assessment of diverse students, according to Slee (2010), it is important to prioritise culturally responsive assessment that takes individual learning styles into consideration and assesses learning rather than measuring achievement based on standardised criteria. Padilla and Borsato (2008) claim that high-stakes tests are not fair towards minority group students, including immigrants, because evaluation guidelines are still normed on dominant group populations. So, minority students may find themselves in the situation of being unfairly assessed and, because of this, denied access to educational opportunities (Padilla & Borsato, 2008). On the other hand, some researchers found that it is essential that teachers maintain equally high academic expectations towards all students regardless of ethnicity and/or language skills (Gay, 2018; Swaminathan & Alfred, 2001). Assessment should be non-biased and include a variety of methods that are recognised as culturally responsive within multicultural education, such as self- and peer assessment, group assessment and oral and written low-stakes assignments (Gay, 2015; Lloyd et al., 2015; Montenegro & Jankowski, 2007; Shannon-Baker, 2018).

In order to ensure more equitably access to education, it is recommended that appropriate support be provided to minority group students, including immigrants (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2007; Padilla & Borsato, 2008; Slee, 2010). In most cases, support includes allowing students to bring dictionaries to exams, providing translations of examinations, allowing students to use different languages when they answer examination questions and write assignments, and encouraging students to ask for definitions of words that they do not fully understand (Keith-Spiegel et al., 2002). However, Hambleton and Patsula (1999) reveal several myths related to the translation of tests and examination papers, including the most widespread myth that anyone who knows two languages can provide a sufficiently good translation of assignments or exams questions. To provide an acceptable translation, a teacher should possess a deep understanding of the source and target languages and cultures, as well as being knowledgeable about designing examinations and assignments, something quite challenging for teachers (Hambleton & Patsula, 1999). When it comes to other forms of support, multicultural education theorists stress that teachers should make sure that all students understand the requirements and assessment criteria and that the students know the existing assessment culture at the particular educational institution (Banks, 2016; Gay, 2018; Slee, 2010).

Previous research has highlighted the importance of appropriate assessment methods and emphasised the effect that assessment can have on student motivation and engagement in the learning process (e.g., Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000; Medland, 2016; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Teachers should evaluate student learning, provide valuable feedback and encourage the further development of students rather than merely assigning grades. Formative and sustainable assessment methods share many features with culturally responsive assessment, such as an emphasis on applying a variety of assessment methods, including self-, peer and group assessment, and activating students to develop a sense of responsibility for their own learning (Gay, 2018; Lloyd et al., 2015; Slee, 2010).



## Research design and methods

The project is based on focus group interviews and individual, in-depth semi-structured interviews with 41 immigrant students. The qualitative design was chosen in order to provide a deep understanding of the participants' experiences. The research was conducted in Iceland's three biggest universities. The University of Iceland is a public university established in 1911 located in Reykjavík with 12296 registered students in 2017 (University of Iceland, 2018). As Iceland's biggest university, the University of Iceland offers a great variety of programmes and has a significant number of immigrant students. The University of Akureyri is a public university established in 1987 located in northern Iceland with 2074 registered students in 2017 (University of Akureyri, 2018). Reykjavík University, a private university established in 1998, is located in Reykjavík and had 3800 registered students in 2016 (Reykjavík University, 2017). These three universities offer study programmes on all academic levels.

In the initial stage of the research project, The Icelandic Data Protection Authority and the Ethics Committee of the University of Iceland were informed of the study. All privacy considerations were in compliance with Icelandic law nr.77/2000 about data protection. During the first stage of recruitment, the registrars of the universities were asked to provide contact information for students of foreign origin. The potential participants were contacted via email; however, few responded. Later, snowball sampling (Flick, 2009) was used to recruit participants. Snowball sampling, or chain sampling, is a method used to identify potential participants by asking those already contacted or interviewed to name others who might meet the selection criteria for participants (Lichtman, 2013).

Several criteria for the selection of participants were determined by the research group. The participants should be first-generation immigrants to Iceland who had been pursuing full-time undergraduate studies at one of the three above-mentioned universities for at least one year. Additionally, the researchers aimed to recruit diverse participants based on characteristics such as age, nationality, field of studies, socio-economic status, number of years in Iceland and language skills in Icelandic, English and their native language(s). Forty-one participants agreed to take part in the study. The participants' ages varied from 20 to 52 and they had been living in Iceland for 2 to 18 years at the time of the study. They came from 23 different countries in Europe, Asia, and North and South America and had 21 different native languages. The participants studied subjects such as biology, computer science, languages, pedagogy, sociology, etc. The interviews with the participants were conducted in Icelandic and/or English. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed by the research group.

In the first stage of the data collection, seven focus group interviews were conducted. The average length of each focus group interview was one hour. During the focus group interviews, the researchers applied a directive interviewing approach, where the researchers led group discussion towards the topics of the study (Lichtman, 2013). The findings from the focus group interviews were analysed and used to create interview guides for individual interviews with the same participants. The individual, in-depth interviews were based on the interviewing approach



presented by Lichtman (2013). This approach was chosen to explore every participant's unique experiences of higher education in Iceland. The interview questions related to the goals of this paper are presented below.

- What are your experiences of the assessment methods at your university?
  - What can you tell me about the assessment criteria and requirements?
  - What can you tell me about the assessment of group work?
  - Please tell me about your experiences of how it was for you to sit for exams.
  - Did you receive any special support during the examination periods? If yes, please tell me what kind of support and what are your experiences of it?

The average length of the individual interviews was forty-seven minutes. The individual interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Creswell, 2008) with the Atlas.ti software developed for handling large qualitative databases (Lichtman, 2013). The research group worked collaboratively throughout the analysis. In the beginning of the analysis, the group familiarised themselves with the data through reading and discussing preliminary findings. Later, all interviews were coded using the complete coding approach with researcher-derived codes applied to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The initial codes were evaluated and refined by adding new codes, subtracting irrelevant ones, and splitting and merging some. Thematically similar codes were grouped into several categories that were constantly compared and discussed during research group meetings. In the final stage of the analysis, memos and code-networks were created to visualise the themes that emerged from the coding and categorizing process. Figure 1 shows the code network behind the theme of the immigrant students' perspectives on the assessment methods and special support.

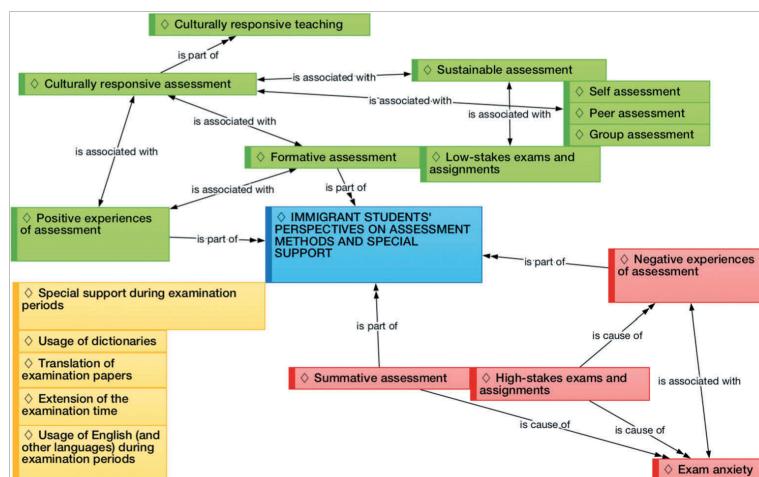


Figure 1. Immigrant students' perspectives on assessment methods and special support.



During the analytical process, the participants' reflections on the assessment methods and special support were coded and the codes were divided into three code clusters. The reader should start exploring the code network from the blue square towards the middle of Figure 1. Following that, the reader should look into the three clusters, starting from the one highlighted with green colour and consisting of the participants' perspectives on formative, sustainable and culturally responsive assessment. The analytical process revealed that the participants had positive experiences of this kind of assessment methods. The next cluster is highlighted with red colour and consist of the participants' perspectives on the summative assessment methods including high-stakes examinations and assignments. The majority of the participants held negative attitudes towards the summative assessment and considered it to be unfair. The third cluster is highlighted with yellow and consists of the participants' reactions to and reflections on special support available to them during the examination periods. The arrows and lines within the network represent the relations between the codes and show whether the specific codes are part of other codes, are associated with them or are considered by the participants to be a cause for their particular attitudes.

## Findings

This chapter presents the participants' experiences of assessment methods in the three target universities. The first section presents the participants' experiences of summative assessment that involves high-stakes examinations and assignments. The second section explores findings revealing the participants' experiences of formative assessment that involves low-stakes examinations and assignments. The third section presents the participants' experiences of group assessment. The fourth section includes the participants' perspectives on special support offered by the universities during the examination periods.

### *'The exams only show your stress resistance'*

#### *Immigrant students' experiences of summative assessment*

During the individual interviews, the participants widely discussed summative assessment methods that involve high-stakes examinations. The majority of the participants revealed that this kind of assessment dominates at the three target universities. The participants' experiences of high-stakes assessment methods were mainly negative. The reasons behind students' dissatisfaction with summative assessment varied, but they most frequently mentioned that it did not promote active learning and had a negative effect on their motivation and investment in the learning process. The participants generally considered summative assessment to be an old-fashioned method, especially when teachers expected students to learn facts without reflecting on the learning material. A participant, who studied both biology and languages shared her experiences.



He [a teacher] just wanted us to learn things by heart, which I thought made no sense [...] There was one course where the classes were really easy, and the test had nothing to do with what we had been learning. It was just way too hard for literally everyone in class, even the best students, and we all basically failed it [...] We all complained, and he never listened to that. I think that when the whole class complains that the test has nothing to do with the teaching materials, he should either redo it or ignore it. But from what I understand, he just included it as a big portion of the grade, but basically, no one really knows what he does with those grades.

The above-mentioned example reveals several different issues related to the assessment methods in that particular course. First, the student explained that the final examination questions were not derived from the course syllabus provided to the students. Second, the assessment criteria were not explained to the students, who fundamentally had no idea how the final grades of this course were assigned. Finally, and probably one of the most alarming findings, was that the teacher was indifferent to the students' opinions about the exam and ignored complaints coming from the students.

Another frequently discussed issue was related to the psychological aspects of high-stakes exams. The participants reported feeling a lot of stress during the examination periods, especially when they have several high-stakes exams. Some participants shared that extensive stress even affected their physical health, and in one case, a participant ended up being admitted to hospital for treatment. Two particular groups of participants experienced stress more often than others during the examination periods. They were participants who came from the countries outside the European Economic Area whose residence permits are dependent on the number of ECTS credits granted during every semester and participants who received student loans that require them to successfully finish a certain number of ECTS every semester. A participant, who studied biotechnology and received student loan revealed that:

[Translation from Icelandic] There were 5 exams, 30 credits. Yes, it puts a lot of pressure on me because I receive student loan and I have a family. I must pass all the exams, even though I think exams are an ancient method. There shouldn't be any final exams. The exams only show your stress resistance. For me, I learn a lot before the exams, and when I come to the exam, I am just blank. I am stressed out. The first 45 minutes are very difficult for me because I am just trying to overcome the stress.

Several participants compared their academic performance in low-stakes assignments with their performance in high-stakes exams. A student who studied languages shared his experiences of a course where assessment was divided into two parts. One part included several low-stakes assignments applied evenly throughout the semester that counted for 40% of the final grade, while the final exam counted for 60%.

A perfect example would be my history course from last year when I had two best grades in class after 40% of the grade. I was really proud of that! But then comes to the exam, and I get a really bad grade and ended up with a 6 [out of 10], which was really bad. I was really not satisfied.



The analysis of the interviews with the study participants revealed that summative assessment methods involving high-stakes examinations and assignments are considered to be irrelevant. The participants shared that these assessment methods put unnecessary pressure on them and have a negative impact on their experiences of the education process. The majority of the participants wished that the number of summative high-stakes exams would be reduced and replaced with more productive and motivating assessment methods.

*'It would be much more rewarding for us students to have feedback and answers from our own teachers'*

#### *Immigrant students' experiences of formative assessment*

The participants' experiences of formative assessment methods that involved low-stakes examinations and assignments evenly applied throughout the learning process were mostly positive. Students highlighted the fact that these assessment methods motivated them and encouraged active learning. Furthermore, they stated that formative assessment helped them to identify knowledge gaps and feedback provided by the teachers played an important role in their development. A student who studied pedagogy revealed how important teacher feedback was for her.

I personally care about both the grade and the assessment, you know, feedback. Feedback that we get from the teacher, that is very important because you can have word on what you can improve, what you do good or wrong, so you can improve it for the next assignment.

The participants especially valued teachers who provided organised course syllabi that included transparent assessment criteria and clear explanations of the main goals of the course. A participant who was enrolled in a programme named International Studies in Education shared her positive experiences.

I like how the assignments are organised. I think all the courses we have, we get assignments throughout the semester and each of them has, like, a certain value and we know about it up front so we always get, like, a kind of, like, a course criteria sheet or something like that [...] It's never, like, you don't know what to expect. That never happens because you are informed about everything.

Two students from the School of Education at the University of Iceland revealed that sometimes teachers recruit PhD candidates to help them to evaluate students' written assignments and provide feedback. Although the participants understand that this practice helps teachers to reduce evaluation and grading time, the participants still preferred having their teachers assess the assignments.

Sometimes it can be very hard for us to receive a review from a person who does not know us or has not even been present in any of our classes. I do believe that many people have different opinions, but it would be much more rewarding for us students to have feedback and answers from



our own teachers, who know a bit more our personal perspectives, because it actually feels like an abandoned child being corrected by an unknown parent.

The participants of the current study revealed that formative assessment involving low-stakes assignments throughout the learning process is still a relatively rare phenomenon at the targeted Icelandic universities. The participants who frequently experienced formative assessment studied at the School of Education in the University of Iceland.

*'It seemed like all the grades were given out randomly'*

*Immigrant students' experiences of group assessment*

The analysis of the interviews revealed that sustainable assessment, such as peer and self-evaluation, were rarely used, so the participants could not comment on their experiences of these. Despite group work being one of the most frequently applied teaching methods at the Icelandic universities, the participants revealed that they scarcely ever got a chance to formally assess each other's performance in group work assignments and thus take an active part in the assessment. The grades were, in most cases, assigned by teachers, which contradicts the main sustainable assessment principle of involving students into the assessment process as much as possible.

The most common issue related to group assessment was that the assessment criteria were unclear and that the teachers did not present the purpose of the group work before giving the assignments. The lack of information on the assessment criteria made some students feel like grades were assigned unsystematically and were solely based on a teacher's subjective opinion. A participant who studied biology shared her experiences regarding group assessment in one of her courses.

I remember there was one course, and we worked really hard on the project. And then, it seemed like all the grades were given out randomly. We were making a poster, so in the end, it was quite subjective if the teacher liked the poster or not. So yeah, sometimes the grade was just sort of filtering.

Another commonly discussed issue was related to different students' attitudes towards group assignments and their different levels of academic aspirations. A case described by a participant who studied Icelandic revealed that her experiences of group work were affected by other group members' negative attitudes towards the group work. She assessed their aspiration level as being very low and their performance as not satisfying.

[Translation from Icelandic] There were people who didn't bother. They said, 'Oh! Let's just finish it and get something!' This was difficult for me; I was not satisfied at all. You know, it wasn't just about the grade but more like the group members' attitudes towards the assignment.

The findings related to group assessment in the three Icelandic universities revealed some issues, mainly caused by the lack of a clear explanation of the assessment criteria and internal



problems due to group members' different learning styles and levels of motivation. Despite the challenges, approximately half of all the participants were satisfied with group work assignments and understood that the group work assignments have a sustainable quality and prepare them for future work in their fields.

*'Instead of political science, everything turned out to be about flying birds, keys, cars and bears'*

#### *Special support for immigrant students during the examination periods*

When it comes to culturally responsive assessment, the findings revealed that such assessment methods are still uncommon in Icelandic universities, according to the participants. However, some teachers cared for students whose native languages were not Icelandic and provided some form of support to compensate for language-related issues. An interesting story was shared by a student who studied computer science. She revealed that her teacher offered valuable personal support via Skype and explained the assignments and the assessment criteria, which were provided in Icelandic in the syllabus. The student regarded this form of support as highly relevant, and it helped her to understand the assignments. This later resulted in better learning outcomes and positive experiences from this particular course.

Language support during examination periods was one of the central themes highlighted by the majority of the participants. The main issue is that special support for students whose native language is not Icelandic is not clearly regulated at the three target universities. According to Student Counselling Services at the University of Akureyri, every student whose native language is not Icelandic can apply for special support during examination periods, which is usually being allowed to use a dictionary during exams and an extended examination time (staff member at Student Counselling Services at the University of Akureyri, personal communication, 22 February 2017).

At Reykjavik University, students can book an appointment at the Student Counselling and Career Centre and apply for special support, which may be in form of being allowed to use a dictionary and/or translation of the examination questions. Extended examination time is usually not an option, but it may be considered in special circumstances (staff member at the Student Counselling and Career Centre at the Reykjavik University, personal communication, May 18, 2017). When it comes to the University of Iceland, the case of special support during the examinations is very complicated as different schools and faculties have different policies. Usually, a student must negotiate special support with a teacher first and then send a formal application to the Student Counselling and Career Centre. In 2018, the School of Education at the University of Iceland made a step towards standardisation of its policies regarding special support by introducing a new policy. Every student at the School of Education whose native language is not Icelandic can bring a dictionary to the exams and apply for extended examination time. A formal application is required and must be addressed to the school's office (staff



member at the School of Education at the University of Iceland, personal communication, 26 February 2019).

All participants who studied at the University of Akureyri revealed that they always applied for extended examination time and that they were very grateful for this assistance. They considered this type of support as fair, since they reported spending a relatively long time on understanding the questions and, in some cases, translating them for themselves.

Usage of dictionaries was, according to the participants, the most common support offered by the teachers. However, the participants did not regard this support to be useful because it took time to find the words. Moreover, bilingual dictionaries have been replaced by electronic translation software that can help students to understand the formulation of the assignments, but it can also do them a disservice. A student who studied sociology shared an experience of a teacher using software to translate the examination but not checking the translation, which resulted in everything going very wrong. When talking about the whole experience, the participant smiled. However, he later admitted receiving such an examination was far from funny on examination day.

I have another very bad experience. They used translation during the exam, so instead of political science, everything turned out to be about flying birds, keys, cars and bears. Björnsson [an Icelandic surname] for example, was translated as a son of the bear.

More than half of the participants repeatedly noted that, in most cases, they did not need full translations of the examinations, but they always appreciated when they were given the choice of answering exam questions in English. They considered it the most effective form of support that could compensate for a lack of language skills in academic Icelandic. However, this form of support is amongst the least regulated in the three Icelandic universities and totally relies on the discretion of the teacher in question. In some cases, the decision comes days before the examination. One participant shared her negative experience of an exam at the School of Health Sciences at the University of Iceland.

I asked her [a teacher] first whether it is possible to take the final exam in English or not. She said yes. But two days before the exam she called me and said that it is not possible to take the exam in English. I lost all the hopes and wishes and said to myself 'Ok I just fail' [...] Because she said that it is a competition exam and all the students should be the same. You know it is not the same; it is their mother tongue. I could take the exam in English. It was also difficult, but it is easier since it is my second language. Icelandic for me like the third language, so we were not the same. I think it was not fair but ...

Despite several participants' negative experiences, many participants revealed that their teachers were generally open to allowing students to answer exam questions or write assignments in English, as teachers understood that this could eliminate inequalities caused by language barriers. A participant who studied languages and international affairs revealed that



his teachers had a deep understanding of the diversity of student needs, especially when it came to language support,

Our teachers were very open to English as a language of writing assignments and exams. All of them [...] They even published some article in English, so you feel this encouragement from them. And you don't feel like any kind of the second sort.

Different and complicated rules and policies regarding special support during examination periods create confusion among students, especially when the policies require rounds of negotiations with teachers, faculty offices and student counsellors. The participants explained that the procedures are often unclear and time-consuming. These are several reasons why the majority of the participants wished for clearer standardised policies regarding special support and language support within the universities.

## Discussion

The participants of this study revealed that their teachers mainly applied summative assessment methods that involved high-stakes examinations. This type of assessment was criticised by the participants. They did not see practical value in summative assessment and often made a correlation between high-stakes examinations and the stress that they experienced during examination periods. Additionally, the participants highlighted how summative assessment does not encourage active learning and has negative effects on their motivation, investment and, in some cases, on learning outcomes. Previous research in the field shows similar results regarding summative assessment, which is considered to be a tool used to monitor learning and measure students' achievement while doing very little to promote active knowledge construction and critical thinking (Schiller, 2009). Furthermore, earlier studies argued that test anxiety distracts students from the task and, as a result, could have a negative impact on a student's performance and learning outcomes (Struyven et al., 2003). Medland (2016) discussed the role of assessment in higher education in the UK and concluded that British higher education is still dominated by summative examinations that do not allow students to actively participate in assessment. This also contradicts the constructivist theory of education's emphasis on active participation in the learning process and the sustainability of any acquired knowledge (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002; Wright, 2011).

When it comes to formative assessment involving low-stakes examinations and assignments, the participants' experiences were predominantly positive. They highlighted the fact that such assessment provides valuable feedback from teachers and motivates students to learn. Formative assessment is a learner-centred approach (Schiller, 2009), and according to previous studies, formative assessment is an inseparable part of the learning process, where constructive feedback points to knowledge gaps and activates further learning focused on closing the gaps and building upon existing knowledge (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Webber, 2012). The participants in this study emphasised how low-stakes assignments were evenly distributed



throughout the semester, therefore motivating continuous learning and development, in contrast to high-stakes assignments that were concentrated at the end of every semester.

Feedback is regarded as a key feature of formative assessment (Falchikov, 2005; Schiller, 2009). Furthermore, prompt feedback provided to students before they begin to work on their next assignments is considered more effective than feedback submitted with a significant delay (Shull, 2005). According to the interviews, Icelandic teachers strove to provide quick feedback, and in some cases, they recruited PhD candidates to evaluate assignments and write feedback. However, this strategy was not valued by the students, since they would rather receive more personalised feedback from the teachers who had been working with them throughout the process.

When analysing the interviews, the researchers became aware of a clear pattern. The majority of the participants who had experienced formative assessment methods were students at the School of Education at the University of Iceland. This pattern could be explained by the emphasis on multicultural education and culturally responsive teaching in some courses offered at the School of Education, particularly those included in the International Studies in Education programme, which focuses on an individual approach to every student and students' active learning (Books et al., 2011; Ragnarsdóttir & Blöndal, 2014).

Sustainable assessment is considered to be a very productive assessment method that has an empowering effect on students, develops their critical thinking abilities and promotes life-long learning (Boud, 2000; Boud & Falchikov, 2006). In Icelandic universities, sustainable assessment is usually limited to group assessment and peer assessment within the groups. However, the findings indicated that the participants were hardly ever given a chance to assess each other's work in groups and that the assessment criteria of group assignments were often unclear, which affected the students' attitudes towards the whole process of group work. A comparison of the participants' experiences of group assessment in Icelandic universities and sustainable assessment as described by Boud and Falchikov (2006) revealed that group assessment in the form described by the participants cannot be referred to as sustainable. The participants could not comment on other sustainable assessment methods, such as self-assessment or peer assessment, as they rarely or never experienced them.

When it comes to culturally responsive assessment, the findings indicated that this assessment approach was applied very seldom in Icelandic universities. The few participants who experienced culturally responsive assessment, were positive towards them. Earlier studies highlight that culturally responsive teaching promotes holistic assessment methods that are non-biased and applied with equity in mind (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2007; Slee, 2010). Furthermore, previous research showed that minority students, including immigrants, often held a weak position caused by language-related issues and the prevalence of high-stakes examinations (Padilla & Borsato, 2008; Slee, 2010). The study participants described how they spent a lot of time on understanding the examinations and assignments and sometimes translated them for themselves. The universities try to compensate for the inequalities caused



by differing levels of academic Icelandic by offering special support during examination periods, usually in the form of extended examination time, translation of examination questions, allowing students to use dictionaries and/or allowing them to answer questions in English. The participants considered dictionaries to not be useful because of the time it takes to use a paper dictionary, especially when students are not used to it. An interesting case was described by a participant whose teacher used translation software to translate and exam. This resulted in questions becoming incomprehensible nonsense. In spite of this extreme example, Hambleton and Patsula (1999) emphasised the importance of shattering the myth of anyone who speaks two languages being able to produce an adequate translation, especially when it comes to translation of examinations.

On the other hand, the participants revealed that they usually did not need full translations of the examination question, but they appreciated being able to write answers in English. The findings showed that this option always required negotiations with teachers, who evaluated each case and decided whether or not to allow particular students to answer questions in English. In fact, the whole system of special support during exams for students whose native language is not Icelandic seems to be unclear. The universities lack clear policies and rules on this matter, which makes the process of applying for special support complicated and confusing and requires students to negotiate special support with student counsellors, teachers and/or faculty offices.

The findings here are highly relevant for the Icelandic education system as they provide a platform for discussion about the assessment methods used in Icelandic universities, where student diversity is growing. Furthermore, the findings show that the students' concerns about special support during the examination periods should be seriously considered and addressed in a more systematic way. The research is also relevant from a comparative perspective because several other studies point out that, despite the general modernisation of educational systems around the world, summative assessment involving high-stakes examinations is still one of the most frequently used assessment methods (Medland, 2012, 2016; Struyven et al., 2005).

## Conclusion

Overall, the findings revealed that higher education in Iceland is slow developing away from traditional teacher-centred approaches with a focus on evaluating and measuring students' achievement into more learner-centred approaches based on constructivist beliefs, which promote active learning and motivate students. The participants' positive experiences of formative assessment methods confirm this statement. This especially applies to the School of Education at the University of Iceland, where the International Studies in Education programme emphasises formative assessment and learning-centred approaches (Books et al., 2011). However, the participants who study in other faculties reported having primarily negative experiences of the summative assessment used in their faculties. The participants wished for less summative assessment involving high-stakes examinations and more formative assessment



involving continuous evaluation of students' performance through low-stakes assignments and formative feedback. Group work and group assessment also need to be improved, according to the participants. They reported a lack of involvement in the assessment process and the need for clearer explanation of the purpose of the group work and the assessment criteria.

On the other hand, introducing a variety of different assessment methods and simply replacing the traditional methods with new ones 'will not serve to challenge the dominant discourse of the testing culture that underpins the assessment system' (Medland, 2016, p. 89). It is important that educational institutions act in a unified manner to challenge the existing dominant culture collaboratively, which requires students, teachers, programme leaders and other academic personnel to participate equally in discussions about new assessment and teaching methods in order to understand which are suitable for a particular learning environment. In Icelandic universities, the policies and rules regarding special support during the examination periods for students whose native language is not Icelandic need to be standardised on the university level rather than on the faculty level.

With the growing number of immigrant students in Icelandic universities (Statistics Iceland, 2018), the whole higher education system is challenged to provide appropriate educational support, to value a variety of backgrounds and cultures, and to encourage diverse groups to take advantage of previous knowledge and languages in the education process. The goal is to work collaboratively on creating an equitable educational environment where every student feels empowered and motivated to continue learning, even after their formal education is finished. These changes require further research, standardisation of policies and implementation of relevant teaching and assessment methods.

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## Appendix A. Participant Information Sheets

English version



### Væntingar og tækifæri innflytjenda á Íslandi til háskólamenntunar og áskoranir henni tengdar

*Educational aspirations, opportunities and challenges for immigrants in  
university education in Iceland*

6. Oktober 2016

This fall semester 2016 we will be gathering data for the project *Educational aspirations, opportunities and challenges for immigrants in university education in Iceland*. The research will be conducted in universities in Iceland and it is estimated that it will take three years (2016-2018).

The goal of the research project is to study aspirations, opportunities and challenges for immigrants in university education in Iceland. Participants in the project are immigrants of varying ethnicity, gender, with different educational background and social status total of 40 participants from 3 universities in Iceland. The projects research questions concern participants access to and experience of universities, challenges in their education, formal and social support for their education.

Other participants are key people in the three universities.

The merit of this research project is to create insight to the aspirations of immigrants to university education in Iceland and the challenges they face. To understand their aspirations, opportunities, challenges and experience has great value for Icelandic educational system and future policy making.

The project has received a grant from Rannís/Rannsóknasjóði.

The project supervisor is Hanna Ragnarsdóttir professor at the school of education of Iceland University.

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The project data gathering includes:

Interviews with current and former student in the universities

Interviews with key people in the universities

Gain for participants:

Report of the results of the research

Introduction of the results

Access to the results of the research in Icelandic and foreign magazines.

The Data Protection Authority has been informed of the research and the ethics committee has given a positive review. Permits for data gathering have been acquired from the university management. Informed consent is requested from all participants in addition all privacy considerations will be in compliance to law nr.77/2000. Participants can suddenly and without explanation quit their participation. The service of an interpreter will be available if a participant would request it.

With my signature I confirm my participation in the above described research.

Name:

Date:

## Icelandic version



### Væntingar og tækifæri innflytjenda á Íslandi til háskólamenntunar og áskoranir henni tengdar

6. október 2016

Á haustmisseri 2016 mun hefjast gagnasöfnun í verkefinu *Væntingar og tækifæri innflytjenda á Íslandi til háskólamenntunar og áskoranir henni tengdar*. Rannsóknin mun fara fram í háskólum á Íslandi og áætlað er að hún taki þrjú ár (2016-2018).

Markmið rannsóknarverkefnisins eru að rannsaka væntingar, tækifæri og áskoranir í háskólamenntun innflytjenda á Íslandi. Þáttakendur í verkefinu eru innflytjendur af ólíku kyni, ólíkum uppruna og með ólíkan menntunarbakgrunn og félagslega stöðu, alls 40 þáttakendur í þrem háskólum á Íslandi. Rannsóknarspurningar í verkefinu lúta að aðgengi og reynslu þáttakenda í háskólinum, áskoranir í menntun þeirra, formlegan stuðning við menntun, svo og félagslegan stuðning. Aðrir þáttakendur eru lykilfólk í háskólinum þremur.

Gildi rannsóknarverkefnisins er að veita innsýn í væntingar innflytjenda til háskólanáms á Íslandi og áskoranir sem þeir standa frammi fyrir. Skilningur á væntingum þeirra til menntunar, tækifærum, áskorunum og reynslu hefur mikil gildi fyrir stefnumótandi aðila og íslenskt menntakerfi.

Verkefnið hefur hlotið styrk frá Rannís/Rannsóknasjóði.

Ábyrgðarmaður rannsóknarinnar er Hanna Ragnarsdóttir prófessor við Menntavísindasvið Háskóla Íslands, s. 525-5377, netfang: [hannar@hi.is](mailto:hannar@hi.is)

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Gagnaöflun í rannsókninni felur í sér:

- Viðtöl við núverandi og fyrrverandi nemendur í háskólunum
- Viðtöl við lykilfólk í háskólunum

Ávinningur fyrir þáttakendur:

- Skýrsla um niðurstöður rannsóknarinnar
- Kynningar á niðurstöðum rannsóknarinnar
- Aðgengi að niðurstöðum rannsóknarinnar í íslenskum og erlendum tímaritum
- Aðgangur að sérfræðiþekkingu og stuðningi

Persónuvernd hefur verið tilkynnt um rannsóknina og Vísindasiðaneftnd Háskóla Íslands hefur gefið jákvæða umsögn. Aflað hefur verið leyfa til gagnaöflunar frá stjórnendum háskólanna. Óskað er eftir upplýstu samþykki frá öllum þáttakendum auk þess sem persónuverndarsjónarmiða verður gætt að fullu við meðferð, vinnslu og eyðingu frumgagna í samræmi við gildandi lög (nr.77/2000). Þáttakendur geta fyrirvara laust og án útskyringa hafnað eða hætt þáttóku. Boðið verður upp á túlkaþjónustu í viðtölu ef þáttakandi kýs það.

## **Appendix B. Focus Group Interview Guide**

### **English version**

*Educational aspirations, opportunities and challenges for immigrants in university education in Iceland*

#### **Interview framework. Group Interviews**

*What can you tell about your experiences of being a foreign student at the university?*

##### **STUDIES/ EXPECTATIONS AND CHALLENGES**

*Why did you choose this study programme?*

1. Selection of the studies and expectations.
2. The purpose of the studies (hobby, work-related, etc.), future plans

*How was it to begin the studies at HÍ?*

3. First acquaintance and impressions of the university and studies
4. Assessment methods
5. Language of the studies, how was it to learn Icelandic as a second language?

*Teaching methods:*

6. What do you think about the teaching methods?
7. What can you tell about workload in the courses, that you took?
8. Are the requirements clear?
9. Is it easy or difficult to follow the teacher?

*Could you use your previous knowledge and experiences in your study?*

*Are the Icelandic teaching methods similar or different to the teaching methods in your home country?*

10. Possibilities of using own experience, background, knowledge in the studies

*Questions about communication:*

11. What can you tell about the relations between the students in the classroom?
12. What can you tell about your relations with the teachers?
13. Support in the classroom

*Challenges in the studies:*

14. What challenges did you have in the university? And how did you deal with them?

##### **RELATIONS WITH OTHERS AT THE UNIVERSITY AND SUPPORT**

15. Information flow
16. Knowledge of support available for students, especially for students of foreign origin
17. Communication with and/or support from student counsellors (Námsráðgjafi)
18. Communication with and/or support of International Office /other entities within the university

##### **SOCIAL AND FAMILY LIFE**

19. The integration of education and work/family
20. Social participation
21. Social support



## Appendix C. Individual Interview guide

English version

<b>Questions</b>	<i><b>Extra Questions</b></i>
<b>“GRAND TOUR”-QUESTION</b>	
0. What can you tell about your experiences of being an immigrant student at the university?	
<b>Experiences of the learning process/ teaching methods/ learning environments / communication w/teachers, peers</b>	
1. What do you study?	<p><i>Is this your first degree?</i></p> <p><i>If not: What degree do you already have?</i></p> <p><i>Is this degree recognized in Iceland?</i></p> <p><i>Why did you decide to go to school again?</i></p>
2. When did you begin your current studies?	<i>Did you begin immediately after moving to Iceland?</i>
3. Why did you choose HÍ / HR / HA?	
4. Why did you choose this study programme?	<p><i>Is it your interest? Did you see good opportunities to find a job when you finish your education?</i></p> <p><i>Was it the only programme you considered, or did you consider any other programme(s)?</i></p> <p><i>Have you ever changed your programme? If yes: Why did you do it?</i></p>

<p>5. Did you know anything about the higher educational system in Iceland? If not: Where from did you get the information about the system?</p>	<p><i>Did you know about the ECTS-system? Did you think it was more difficult or easier to study in Iceland than in your home country? (Is the educational system in your home country similar or different to the Icelandic one?).</i></p>
<p>6. How was it to begin the studies at HÍ / HR / HA?</p>	<p><i>How long time did it take to get started? Did you know how to choose courses? Was it easy or difficult to choose courses? Did someone teach you how to use Uglá/Moodle etc.? If yes: Who taught you? Did you visit introduction seminars for the new students, which are usually held at the beginning of each term (HÍ)? If yes: Was the information that you got at this seminar useful?</i></p>
<p>7. What was the language of the instruction?</p>	<p><i>Was it possible to choose the teaching language? (Some courses are available both in Icelandic and English) How was it to study in a foreign language?  Did you know about the extra language courses for all university students (HÍ), which are available at the faculty of foreign languages?</i></p>
<p>8. What can you tell about the relations between the students in the classroom?</p>	<p><i>How many immigrant students took the same courses that you chose? Was it difficult to get acquainted with co-students? How did the teachers encourage students to get to know each other?</i></p>
<p>9. What is your experience of group work?</p>	<p><i>How were the members of the groups assigned? (teacher assigned or students decided themselves) What are your experiences of the communication in the group? What language did you use during the group work? How was the workload divided between members? What can you tell about the assessment of the group work?</i></p>

<p>10. What can you tell about your relations with the teachers?</p>	<p><i>Did the teachers know that there were foreign students in the classroom? Did the teachers ask whether the new students had any practical questions, which they could answer?</i></p> <p><i>Have you ever personally contacted a teacher? (Before or after the class start)</i></p> <p><i>If yes:</i> were the questions related to the course (course material) or was it any practical questions?</p> <p><i>Did you get any answers?</i></p> <p><i>If the courses were taught in Icelandic:</i> Did the teachers ask whether there were any student who could not understand Icelandic? Did the teachers encourage students to ask to explain words / sentences, which they couldn't understand?</p> <p><i>What did the teacher do to resolve language related issues?</i></p>
<p>11. What do you think about the teaching methods? / What teaching methods did the teachers apply?</p>	<p><i>What are your experiences of the assessment methods?</i></p> <p><i>What can you tell about workload in the courses, that you took?</i></p> <p><i>What can you tell about the assessment criteria and the requirements?</i></p> <p><i>Were the requirements clear?</i></p> <p><i>Was it easy or difficult to follow the teacher?</i></p> <p><i>Did the teacher use examples to explain things? Were the examples good?</i></p> <p><i>Has the teacher ever asked whether foreign students could come with their own examples based on their experiences from the home country?</i></p> <p><i>Could you use your previous knowledge and experiences in you study? If yes please explain how?</i></p> <p><i>Are the Icelandic teaching methods similar or different to the teaching method in your homeland?</i></p>

	<p><i>Did you give the teacher feedback? What feedback?</i></p> <p><i>Did you participate in electronic teaching evaluation? What feedback did you give?</i></p>
<p>12. Please share your experiences how it was for you to go to the exams?</p> <p>Did you receive any special support during the examination periods? /</p> <p>If yes, please tell what kind of support and what are your experiences of it?</p>	<p><i>Did you know all the rules related to the exam procedures at HÍ / HR / HA?</i></p> <p><i>Did you know that you had right to see the old exams (from previous years)?</i></p> <p><i>Did you know that you could get the explanation of the grade given after the exam and go through the exam with the teacher?</i></p> <p><i>Did you know / attend exam-anxiety course?</i></p>
<p>13. What challenges did you experience during the education process? And how did you deal with them?</p>	<p><i>Did you go somewhere to get help?</i></p> <p><i>Did you receive any help?</i></p>
<p>14. What are you going to do when you finish your education?</p> <p><i>Future plans</i></p>	<p><i>Are going straight to the job market?</i></p> <p><i>Are you going to continue your studies on a higher educational level? If yes: Are you going to continue at the same university or not? (Why).</i></p>
<b>LÍN, finances &amp; housing</b>	
<p>15. Have you ever applied for LÍN (Icelandic Student Loan Fund)? Can you tell about your experiences of the application procedure at LÍN?</p>	<p><i>Where did you first hear about LÍN?</i></p> <p><i>Was it easy or difficult to apply?</i></p>
<p>16. Have you ever received a scholarship?</p> <p>Can you tell about your experiences of the application process?</p>	<p><i>Do you know about any possible opportunity to get a scholarship? (For students in Icelandic language: Scholarship from Stofnun Árna Magnússonar)</i></p>

17. Have you ever applied for a student apartment on campus? If yes: Can you tell about your experiences of the application procedure?	<p><i>Did you know about the student housing?</i></p> <p><i>Did you know that foreign students have priority over domestic students?</i></p> <p><i>Did you know that the rent is lower than on the common market?</i></p>
<b>Formal support</b>	
18. Where do you go if you need consultation regarding any practical issues?	
19. Have you ever visited the Student Counselling Centre? (Located on the second floor of Háskólatorg above Bóksala Stúdenta)	<p><i>What can you tell about your experience of communication with Student Counselling Centre?</i></p> <p><i>Do you remember the name of the adviser that you spoke with?</i></p> <p><i>Did you get answers on your questions?</i></p> <p><i>Did adviser encourage you to visit the centre again if you have any other questions?</i></p> <p><i>Did adviser give you any contact information, so you can contact him/her personally (e-mail, phone number)?</i></p> <p><i>Would you like to visit the same adviser if you have any further questions? Or you would prefer to speak to a different adviser.</i></p>
20. Have you ever visited the International Office? (Located on the second floor of Háskólatorg)	<p><i>What can you tell about your experience of communication with the International Office?</i></p> <p><i>Was the information, which you got appropriate and useful?</i></p>
21. Do you know any other ways of getting information regarding practical issues?	<p><i>What ways are they? Are they useful?</i></p> <p><i>Was the information, which you got through these contacts appropriate and useful?</i></p>
<b>Other questions</b>	
22. Is it likely that you would recommend HÍ / HA / HR to any of your friends that is considering going to the university? Please explain your answer.	

<p>23. What do you think is missing at the university's information network for foreign students?</p> <p>What could the university do to make it easier for foreign students to get started?</p>	<p><i>Issue a brochure for foreign students?</i></p> <p><i>Prepare a short introduction course for all new foreign students?</i></p> <p><i>Inform teachers about special issues that foreign students have when they begin at the university?</i></p> <p><i>Anything else?</i></p>
<b>Background &amp; previous experiences</b>	
<p>24. When did you arrive to Iceland?</p>	<p><i>How old are you now?</i></p> <p><i>How old were you when you arrived to Iceland?</i></p>
<p>25. Where are you from?</p>	<p><i>Is Iceland the first foreign country that you moved to?</i></p> <p><i>Have you lived in other countries?</i></p> <p> <i>If the participant is from a country outside EEA:</i></p> <p><i>How difficult was it to apply for an Icelandic resident permit? Did you apply once or several times?</i></p> <p><i>How long time did it take to get a permit?</i></p>
<p>26. Why did you decide to move to Iceland? What was the main reason?</p>	<p><i>Did you know anything about Iceland?</i></p> <p><i>Was Iceland the only country that you wanted to move to or did you consider other countries? If yes: why did you finally choose Iceland?</i></p>
<p>27. Did you move to Iceland alone or with family / friends?</p>	<p><i>Did your family / friends move later to you?</i></p> <p> <i>If the participant moved to Iceland alone: Was it difficult to meet people (make first connections) in Iceland, to find friends etc.?</i></p>
<p>28. What is your family status?</p>	<p><i>Married, have a boyfriend / girlfriend?</i></p> <p><i>Is your partner Icelandic?</i></p> <p><i>Has the school had any influence on your personal life?</i></p> <p><i>If yes: can you tell more about this influence?</i></p> <p><i>Does your family give you moral support?</i></p>
<p>29. Do you work?</p>	<p><i>What is the job percentage?</i></p>

	<p><i>Has your work any connections to your studies?</i></p> <p><i>Does your work or study take higher priority in your life? Please give reasons for it.</i></p>
30. What language(s) do you speak?	<p><i>Do you speak any Icelandic? Do you understand anything in Icelandic?</i></p> <p><i>Are you learning / have ever learned Icelandic? If yes: Where and how did you learn it?</i></p> <p><i>What language do you use home?</i></p> <p><i>If the participant does not speak Icelandic: Why don't you want to learn Icelandic? Do you think it is not necessary? Do you have time to learn it? Any other reasons? Please explain.</i></p>
31. Do you have anything else that you would like to share with us regarding your experiences at the university?	



## **Appendix D. Focus Group Repeated Interview Guide**

Eruð þið ennþá í sama námi? Ef það eru breytingar af hverju?

*Are you still studying the same subject? If there are any changes, please tell why.*

Eruð þið með sömu væntingar um námið / framtíðina og áður?

*What about your expectations, future plans? Are they the same?*

Hefur eitthvað breyst í náminu síðan við hittum ykkur síðast?

*Are there any changes in your studies?*

Hefur skipulagið breyst?

*Organization of the courses*

Eru kennsluaðferðirnar öðruvísí?

*Teaching methods*

Er viðnuálagið meira eða minna? Svipað?

*Workload*

Eru námskröfurnar svipaðar?

*Requirements*

Eru áskoranir þær sömu?

*Challenges and difficulties*

Hvernig hefur þitt fyrra nám (reynsla og þekking) nýst í náminu hér?

*Could you use your previous knowledge / you background in your studies?*

*For those who quit: Do you use knowledge that you obtained during the studies in your life?*

Hafa samskipti ykkar við íslenska og aðra nemendur aukist á námstímanum?

*Communication with Icelandic and other co students*

Hvers vegna hafa þau aukist / minnkað eða óbreytt?

*More, less, the same. Explain changes.*

Tengjast þessi samskipti námi? Hópvinnu? Undirbúningur fyrir próf?

*Does your communication with co students happen within the university or outside too. Related to group work in courses? Preparations to the exams?*

Hafa samskipti ykkar við kennara aukist á námstímanum?

*Are there any changes in communication with teachers?*

Hvers vegna hafa þau aukist / minnkað eða óbreytt?

*More, less, the same. Explain changes.*

Hvaða leið farið þið til að afla ykkur upplýsinga um nám ykkar og þjónustu sem er í boði?

*How do you obtain the information that you need? Where do you usually go to get an assistance?*

Farið þið á deildarskrifstofur? / Námsráðgjafa? Skrifstofa alþjóðasamskipta? Annað?

Heimasíður. Upplýsingar í tölvupósti. Facebook. Annað?

*Do you visit faculty offices? Student counselling and career centre? International office? Anyone else?*

*Official university webpages. Information via e-mail. Facebook. Anything else?*

Hefur þátttakan þín í félagslífi breyst frá því þið byrjuðuð nám ykkar? Í skólanum / utan skóla

*Participation in the social life. Social activities. At the university and outside*

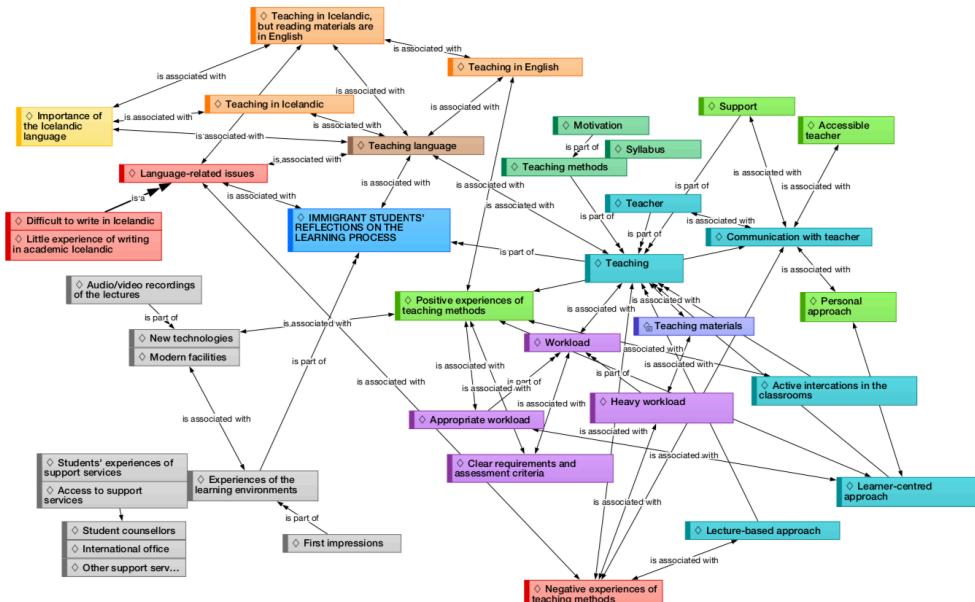
Hvernig liður ykkur í skólanum?

*How do you feel when you are at the university?*

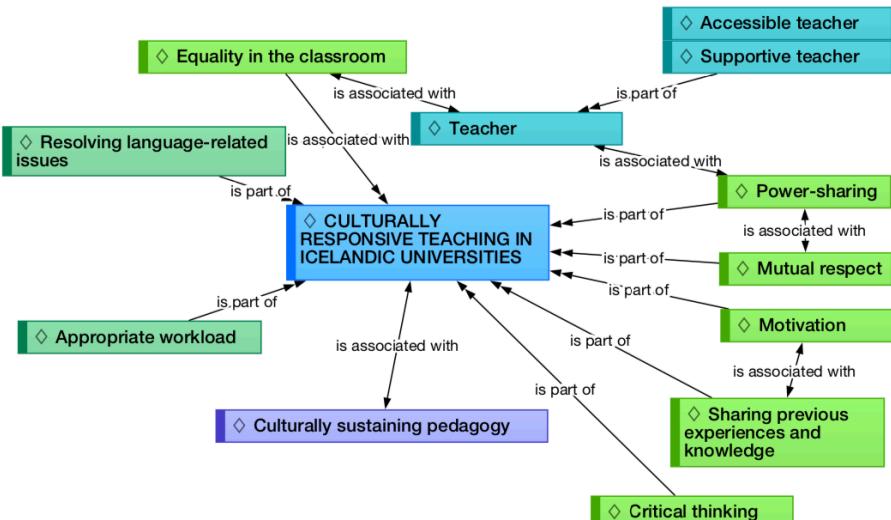
Hafið þið upplifað fordóma frá nemendum, kennurum, starfsfólki?

*Have you ever experienced any prejudices at the university?*

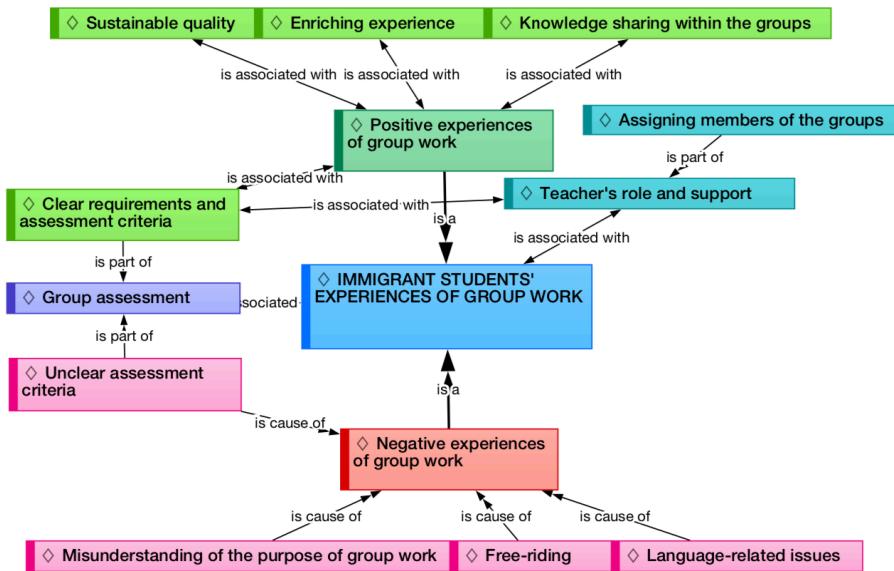
## Appendix E. Code Networks



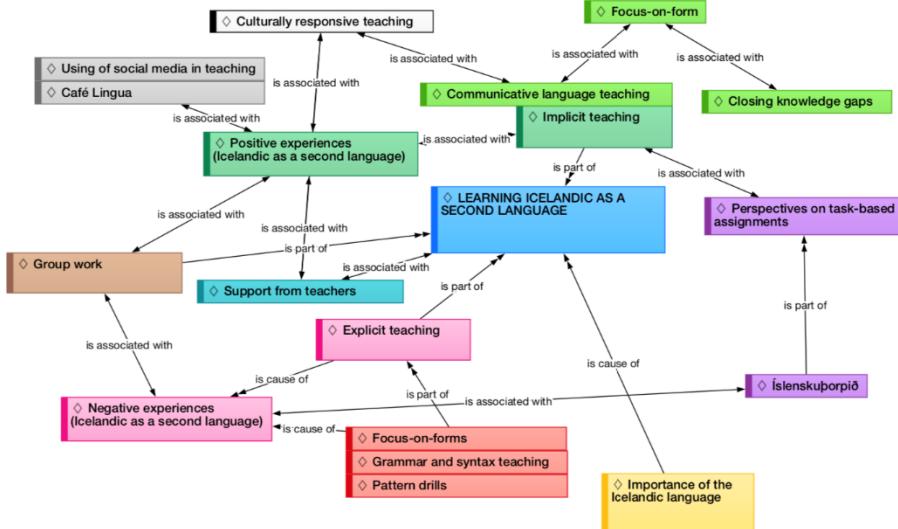
Code-network 1. Immigrant students' reflections on the learning process



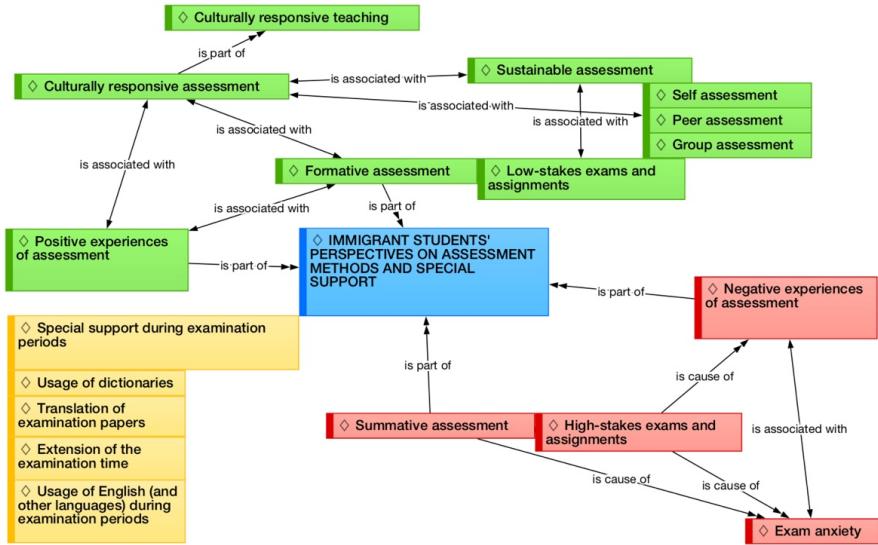
Code-network 2. Culturally responsive teaching in Icelandic universities



**Code-network 3. Immigrant students' experiences of group work**



**Code-network 4. Learning Icelandic as a second language**



**Code-network 5. Immigrant students' perspectives on assessment methods and special support**