

# Why won't they stay in school? Investigation into the reasons for secondary school dropouts in Iceland



Austin Seepersad

Office of Undergraduate Research, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Daytona Beach, FL.

## Abstract

The purpose of this investigation is to examine different facets of Iceland's culture to determine why its secondary school dropout rates are so high, in hopes of deconstructing what factors in a society effect academic performance. Reviewing literature on the subject yielded potential factors such as childhood health and parental behaviors, Iceland's abundance of accessible jobs, and the low accessibility for higher education in rural parts of Iceland.

The methods for obtaining more information on this were limited to the review of more literature, a handful of interviews obtained in Iceland, and a couple firsthand observations. From the gathered information, it was concluded that family support is crucial in nurturing good scholastic performance and retention, that males were the most likely to drop out in Iceland due to the type of unskilled labor available, and Icelanders aren't incentivized to stay in school in their current society.

## Background

### • Icelandic school system

The Icelandic education system includes a pre-compulsory level (Leikskoli, or playschool) for ages below 6, a compulsory (required) level (Grunnskoli, or basic school) for ages 6-16, and secondary level (Haskoli, or high school) for ages 16-20 [1]. Secondary school is not required, and schools of this level are applied for, but free to attend. Students may pursue further academics, or attend a vocational school and eventually take internships and apprenticeships for their jobs. Students may take longer than four years to complete secondary school, but a large number drop out – in 2012, 30% of students in Iceland dropped out from secondary school, and this statistic may be increasing [2].

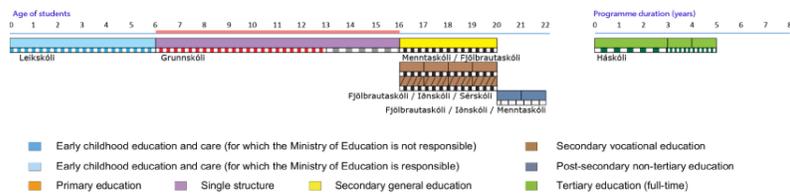


Figure 1. Timeline (by student age) of Icelandic education system [8]

### • Childhood health and parental behaviors may be a factor

Marital status and home-life can have a large effect on academic performance in compulsory school students. Behaviors of parents such as alcoholism and drug-use, as well as general health habits such as exercise and diet can be passed on to children, effecting their behaviors and health when in secondary and tertiary schools [2].

### • Abundance of accessible employment

The wage gap between unskilled labor and skilled labor is very low – unskilled labor wages ~87.5% of skilled labor wages [3]. Employment rates high, and haven't changed since 2005 [4]. Male dropout rates significant higher than female; could be due to unskilled labor being viewed as “men's labor” [5].

### • Accessibility of Education

All Icelandic citizens have equal rights to education, but this does not mean that education is equally accessible for all citizens. Not all towns have secondary schools, and tertiary schools and schools supporting those with special needs are even more sparse, so students may have to travel far to pursue their education [6]. Secondary school curricula is very compressed, causing much stress for students [7].

## Methodology

- Curiosity of foreign education systems led to a literature review of Iceland's education system; upon noting the particularly high dropout rates, the next question to crop up was “why?”
- From reviewing literature, a hypothesis was formed that the abundance of accessible jobs was a primary factor in Iceland's secondary schools dropout rates.
- Triangulation method – compare websites and new sources in Iceland as well as local interviews with information retrieved from literature review.
- This method was limited by the time spent in-country, as well as the limited number of people to interview during the trip.
- Primary sources obtained restricted to interviews of two people and observations of infrastructure.
- The two interviewees were the tour guide, Baldur Gylfasson (pictured to the right), and a friendly pool patron who is a secondary school student.



Figure 2. Baldur Gylfasson, the tour guide for our trip, and one of the two interviewees for this project (credit to Genesis Vargas for picture).

## Results

- Iceland's population outside of its two largest cities is sparse, with small towns being separated by long roads, rivers, and mountains, making it much more difficult for small-town students to attend secondary schools than to simply get a local job.
- Divorce, remarriage, and single-income families are common in Iceland [9]
- Drug-use and alcoholism seems higher with single-income families [9]
- Students often have to move away from home to attend secondary school [9]
- Not very much incentive to pursue higher education, especially for males [9][10]
- Computer-addiction beginning to become prevalent, especially among males [9][10]
- Male-female ratio for school retention even more drastic for tertiary school [9]
- High financial stress encourages students to start working early [9][10]

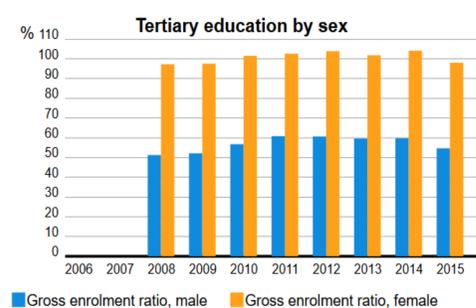


Figure 3. Tertiary enrollment rates between males and females [5]

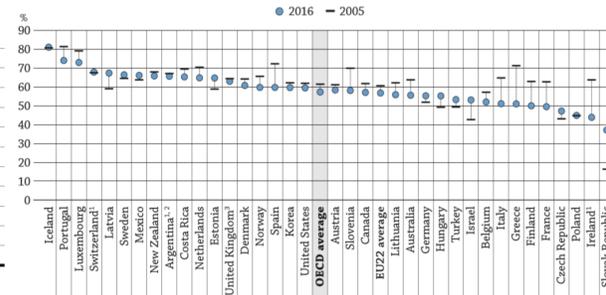


Figure 4. Employment rates in OECD countries from 2005 compared to 2016 [4].

## Conclusions

### • Family Support is Crucial in Academic Performance

Though Iceland faces a high divorce rate, the social systems in place give support to single-income families, implying family income may not be a major factor in secondary school dropouts. Regardless of marital status, most parents work multiple jobs; parents are not often home to directly support and help children with school, which may lead to students to lose motivation. Additionally, if students cannot attend secondary school locally, and cannot move in with extended family, they'd have to move out on their own at the age of 16 to attend, which is likely very daunting for someone at that age in comparison to getting a couple jobs on their home-town.

### • Health habits did not seem to be as major of a factor as literature may have suggested.

Though this is still likely to be a contributing factor to secondary school dropouts in Iceland, this was not largely corroborated by primary sources, and was only discussed by one secondary source. While Gylfasson mentioned that single-income families seem to have more drug-use and alcoholism than married families, he emphasized that drug-use is still extremely minor in Iceland.

### • The situation is very different between males and females

Despite cultural differences from most Western countries in social stigmas and equality, Iceland still holds some Western views on gender roles and behaviors, explaining the disparity in retention between males and females. According to Gylfasson, Icelanders never experienced the era of “stay-at-home parents,” and instead, both parents consistently work most of the day. However, physical labor has been viewed (until very recently) as work for men, so much of the unskilled labor is considered more accessible to males. Because of this trend, more men drop out earlier in secondary school than women, and even more women continue education into tertiary school.

### • Icelanders aren't incentivized to pursue higher education

Employment rates are consistently high in Iceland, and with the low wage gap between unskilled and skilled labor, and the high taxes and standard of living, Icelanders are encouraged to work multiple part-time jobs. Students are also encouraged to start working in conjunction with their school work early on relative to other Western nations, and those who can't or don't want to balance it see work as the more immediate gratification. However, students of this generation seem to be seeing dropping out as short-sighted, as with higher education, they could find better pay outside of Iceland.

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