

Mini Cases

Responsibility for Workforce Skill Upgrades

“Lack of government funding is preventing foreigners who want to learn Icelandic from accessing courses,”¹ stated a recent article on the issue on the need for government funding for language training. With foreign nationals making up a growing part of the population – 15% at last count - the need to integrate newcomers continued to grow. A publicly-traded company was taking the initiative to provide language training to its workers. But was this a service that governments should be providing? Was there a better way to approach this issue?

Acquiring fluency in a new language required a commitment of time and money. For example, according to a mix of sources, here was what was required to achieve fluency in these languages:²

Language	Hours	Cost in Euros
Mandarin	2,000	77,261
Arabic	2,200	73,359
Japanese	2,000	61,776
French	500	16,380
Telugu	1,100	11,583
Spanish	600	15,444

The Icelandic government recognized the need for language training and set out this objective for integrating immigrants through language education: “Adult immigrants on the labour market as well as outside it shall have access to good education in the Icelandic language”. This would be accomplished as follows (the following is taken from the Ministry of Social Affairs’ “Government Policy on the Integration of Immigrants” and more information is in Exhibit 1):

- Develop a 200-hour course that meets the requirements of immigrants irrespective of their origin.
- Provide grants to educators and companies that fulfil the formal requirements

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established by the Ministry of Education as regards applications for grants for Icelandic language education for immigrants.

- Students' course costs shall be kept to a minimum.³

At the Icelandic language program at Fræðslunet Suðurlands, Steinunn Ósk Kolbeinsdóttir mentioned in an interview that demand was more than the centre had funding for: “We can only take the same number as usual as we are not receiving more funding from the state to hold Icelandic language courses. We could teach many more [people] than we do and I see that there are many foreigners who are a bit surprised and astounded that they cannot continue to study for example when they've finished one course and then they want to take another course. Then we've used up the government grant and then we have to stop until the following year.”⁴

Brim hf., a seafood company in Iceland, was taking matters into its own hands. The company provided subsidized language training for its immigrant workforce. No government funding was accessed or requested. The company had 800 employees in total.⁵

According to Brim, the company was an equal opportunity employer: “Brim plays a leading role when it comes to social responsibility and places great emphasis on environmental issues and innovation. The company has established a clear human resources policy with an emphasis on equality, safety and facilities for staff. Efforts are made to recruit capable, reliable and achievement-orientated individuals.”⁶ In 2021, Brim reported net income of €72 million on sales of €369 million.

Brim was a profitable company. But was it the company's – and shareholders' – responsibility to provide language training to its workforce?



Exhibit 1 – Icelandic Language Education for Adults

Icelandic language education for adults

The Government plans to ensure that everyone has access to Icelandic language education which is designed to meet the needs of each individual. A prerequisite for integration into a new society and participation therein is the ability to express oneself in that nation's language. Surveys and interviews have shown that the majority of people of foreign origin in Iceland want to learn Icelandic. As a general rule, Icelandic language education for immigrants should include education about Icelandic society, its values, cultural heritage and the rights and obligations of citizens.

Increasingly, work places employing foreign workers offer Icelandic language education in the work place, during working hours. The teaching is often free, and participants are paid partial wages, in some cases full wages, while the courses take place. Such arrangement is considered to achieve the greatest success. In all Icelandic language education, it must be kept in mind that people have different reasons for learning Icelandic and, at the same time, different abilities to read and understand the Icelandic language. Particular attention shall be paid to people who have had little or no formal education.

The curriculum and educational material for Icelandic language education must be flexible in order to meet the needs of different groups, among other things, according to origin and level of education. Such material shall be composed of units which can be arranged into a larger whole. The principal goal of the curriculum must be to define general performance goals in Icelandic. These could also be taken into account in decisions on the granting of citizenship.

The Ministry of Education monitors the implementation of Icelandic language education in accordance with rules established by the Ministry. Adult immigrants on the labour market as well as outside it shall have access to good education in the Icelandic language
Means:



- Develop a 200-hour course that meets the requirements of immigrants irrespective of their origin.
- Provide grants to educators and companies that fulfil the formal requirements established by the Ministry of Education as regards applications for grants for Icelandic language education for immigrants.
- Students' course costs shall be kept to a minimum.

https://www.government.is/media/velferddarraduneyti-media/media/acrobat-enskar_sidur/stefna_integration_of_immigrants.pdf



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- ¹ <https://www.icelandreview.com/culture/more-funding-needed-to-teach-foreigners-icelandic/>
- ² LanguageLine, as reported by https://www.dailymail.co.uk/travel/travel_news/article-3901682/Dospare-66-000-learn-mandarin-Interactive-map-reveals-cost-mastering-world-s-20-languages.html
<https://www.superprof.com/blog/how-long-does-it-take-to-learn-arabic/>
<https://japanesetactics.com/how-long-does-it-take-to-become-fluent-in-japanese>
<https://spanishlandschool.com/how-long-to-be-fluent/>
- ³ https://www.government.is/media/velferdarraduneyti-media/media/acrobat-enskar_sidur/stefna_integration_of_immigrants.pdf
- ⁴ <https://www.icelandreview.com/culture/more-funding-needed-to-teach-foreigners-icelandic/>
- ⁵ <https://www.brim.is/en/about>
- ⁶ <https://www.brim.is/en/about>