



Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir and Patricia Prinz

# **An English Academic Writing Course for Secondary Schools A Pilot Study<sup>1</sup>**

► About the authors ► Key words

Recent studies suggest that there is a dissonance between the focus of EFL instruction in Icelandic secondary schools and the English needs of Icelandic students at university and in the work force (Anna Jeeves, 2013; Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2011; Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir & Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir, 2010; Robert Berman, 2011). The results of these studies indicate an emphasis on basic conversational (often receptive) English skills, that secondary students attain outside of the classroom, at the expense of formal academic literacy skills needed for study at the tertiary level. Recently, the Department of English at the University of Iceland developed a series of special writing courses designed to enhance students' English academic proficiency. One of the courses was deemed appropriate for secondary school. This article describes the adaptation and implementation of one of the university courses at the secondary level. The article outlines the art and architecture of the course, that focuses on awareness of different genres, demonstrations and scaffolded practice prior to production of academic text. The article presents some qualitative outcomes from a pilot iteration of the project. The findings suggest that students find writing less interesting than other activities such as watching movies, but that they recognize the future value of instruction aimed at enhancing their academic English proficiency.

## **Ensk ritun á framhaldskólastigi: Tilraun um námskeið**

► Um höfunda ► Efnisorð

Nýlegar rannsóknir á stöðu enskukennslu og enskunáms í framhaldsskólum benda til þess að meiri áherslu vanti á akademíska ensku, bæði ritaða og talaða (Anna Jeeves, 2013; Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2011; Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir og Hafdís

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Ingvarsdóttir, 2010; Robert Berman, 2011). Ósamræmi virðist vera milli áherslna í kennslu á framhaldsskólastigi og þarfa nemenda í háskólastarfi eða atvinnulífinu. Nemendur í framhaldsskólum almennt virðast hafa ánægju af enskunámi en kvarta yfir því að enskunámið bæti litlu við þá ensku sem þau læra utan skólans sem er almennt talmál sem þau heyra oftast en þau beita því í samskiptum og þegar í háskóla er komið, vanti upp á enskukunnáttuna (Anna Jeeves, 2010, 2013). Rannsóknir á enskufærni háskólanema styðja þessi viðhorf en liðlega þriðjungur stúdenta á erfitt með að tileinka sér texta á ensku (Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir og Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir, 2010). Til að mæta þörfum íslenskra nemenda hefur námsbraut í ensku við Háskóla Íslands þróað röð námskeiða í akademískri ensku bæði fyrir enskunema og aðra háskólastúdenta. Í framhaldi af því var ákveðið að aðlaga eitt ritunarnámskeiðanna að þörfum framhaldsskólanema og prófa í framhaldsskóla á Stór-Reykjavíkursvæðinu. Ritunarkennslan byggir á fjórum grunnstoðum: vitundarvakningu á mismunandi málsniðum, kynningu og dæmum, æfingu og mikilli ritun. Matið leiddi í ljós að nemendum fannst ýmislegt skemmtilegra en að fást við ritun, til dæmis að horfa á kvikmyndir, en áttuðu sig á notagildi verkefna sem þjálfuðu færni í enskri akademískri ritun fyrir framtíðina.

## Introduction

The general perception in the Nordic countries is that Nordic peoples have advanced English skills. This view is expressed in common Nordic language policies as a rationale for parallel language use of English and local languages in business and academia (Norden, 2006). Exposure to English through media and tourism is extensive in the Nordic countries. Most school children, including those in Iceland, receive 8-10 years of English instruction (Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2011; Phillipson, 2008). Results of a comprehensive study of the status of English in Iceland demonstrate, however, that exposure beyond educational settings is confined mostly to receptive conversational language (Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2011). Studies seem to indicate that these types of language skills are reinforced in the school system (Anna Jeeves, 2013), which results in Icelandic students' overestimation of their English proficiency (Anna Jeeves, 2010). Academic study requires specific literacy skills as multiple studies have shown (Cummins, 1991; Thomas & Collier, 2002). New studies on the status of English in Iceland suggest further that there is a dissonance between the focus of English instruction at secondary school and the needs of Icelandic students at university (Anna Jeeves, 2013; Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir & Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir, 2010). In response, the Department of English at the University of Iceland has implemented a series of specially developed English courses designed to enhance students' academic English proficiency.

This article begins with a discussion of the status of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) at Nordic universities with a special focus on the use of English at the University of Iceland where a substantial amount of the curriculum is in English. It includes a brief description and evaluation of a new academic writing course that is part of an initiative to improve university students' academic literacy in English. The English proficiency of Icelandic university students is shaped to some extent by the English instruction students receive at the secondary level. In the second half of this article, authors discuss efforts to adapt and pilot a university academic English course for use at the secondary level. The rationale for the pilot is that that all students who enter university will be expected to read and even write in English in all disciplines. Findings from the pilot study reveal that a significant number of the secondary students recognized the value of learning academic writing, but found it less enjoyable than current English activities. Finally, questions for future research and educational implications are outlined.

## Academic English at Nordic Universities

The use of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) is increasing steadily in higher education in the Nordic countries (Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir & Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir, 2010; Brock-Utne, 2001; Hellekjær, 2005; Ljösland, 2007; Percorari, 2012). The goal is to strengthen Nordic universities' academic standing and attract the best students and researchers. With a few exceptions this transition has taken place with minimal consideration of its effect on the quality of teaching and learning. The prevailing ideology is that shifting to English, will not affect students' ability to learn, nor the instructors' ability to teach.<sup>2</sup> The shift to English is taking place despite research findings that suggest that learning in English constrains both teaching and learning. Hellekjær and Westergaard (2003) found that insufficient English proficiency of both students and faculty is a "mounting problem" in academia in Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland. Hellekjær (2005) found that two thirds of the Norwegian student participants in his study would not meet the minimum level of English required for admission to universities in English speaking countries. Additionally, Hellekjær suggests that many of the secondary students in his sample had an "unrealistic impression" of their level of reading proficiency in English. A study by Anna Jeeves (2008) supports Hellekjær's findings. She found that even high proficiency English secondary students in Iceland overestimate their English reading proficiency. The research of Pecorari, Shaw, Irvine and Malmström (2011) shows that reading in English places an extra burden on Swedish university students. They read more slowly in English than native English speaking students, and have difficulty retaining terminology specific to their field of study (Mešak, 2012; Percorari, 2012). Albrechtsen, Haastrup and Henriksen (2008) found that advanced cognitive processing of text was three times faster in the first language (Danish) than the second language (English) (p. 96). Clearly, using a second language to master the curriculum affects the learning process.

## English at the University of Iceland

Use of English as a medium of instruction is increasing steadily at the University of Iceland. Recent studies have shown that approximately 90% of the textbooks used at university level in Iceland are written for native speakers of English. The percentage is close to 100% in Engineering, Medicine and the Natural Sciences (Hulda Kristín Jónsdóttir & Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2009). The use of textbooks in a language different from the native language is not a new phenomenon in small and unprofitable markets. What has changed is that students enter university in Iceland today with a much more diverse educational backgrounds and academic skills and abilities than in previous exclusionary systems. While no research is available on the effect of studying in English on student retention at Icelandic universities, the drop-out rate at the University of Iceland is almost 50%.

The effects of using English on students' learning at university has been examined by Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir and Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir (2010). Data were collected through electronic surveys sent out on the University of Iceland's student post lists in November 2009. Almost 1100 students responded from all five schools at the University. The survey included questions that asked students to: (1) evaluate their English proficiency and their preparation to meet the demands of reading textbooks written in English; (2) describe how working with two languages affected the quality and quantity of their academic work; and (3) explain the strategies they used to negotiate meaning between the two languages.

Over 87% of the 1100 respondents thought their English reading was rather good or very good and 75% felt that their writing was good or very good. Yet, approximately 44% of respondents indicated that their workload increased and up to 70% used various strategies

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<sup>2</sup> There are exceptions to this, see <http://cip.ku.dk> at The University of Copenhagen.

to access the English text. Two-thirds of students reported using an online dictionary and translate the text in their mind into Icelandic, and 60% create an Icelandic glossary while reading. Another 30% of the respondents write a summary of the text in English and 40% of students use *Google Translate* regularly. Students also report that university instructors provide sporadic and limited language assistance to facilitate students' comprehension of their English textbooks (Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir & Hafdís Ingvarsdóttir, 2010).

In follow-up interviews students said that "reading of novels and watching movies" in secondary school did not prepare them for the reading and writing of academic texts once at university. This dissonance between the kind of English taught in secondary school and the English required for university study also appears in Anna Jeeves' doctoral study of the relevance of English instruction to Icelandic youth (Anna Jeeves, 2013). The findings demonstrate that despite a general view expressed by respondents that their English was good or very good, many go to great lengths to make the English texts comprehensible, meaning that workloads increase and many simply give up on reading the texts entirely. These challenges went unacknowledged by students themselves, instructors and university officials until recently.

The university's initial response to the need to provide preparation in academic English was to develop a series of writing courses. The goal was to unlock the code of the academic genre by making the key structural features (architecture) and stylistic elements (art) of academic writing transparent for the students. The English Department reviewed the available EFL and English Composition Writing textbooks. The department was concerned that the long readings typical of English academic writing texts would shift students' focus from writing to reading about writing and add additional pressure on students. The department engaged a second language literacy expert, the co-author of this paper, to collaborate in the development of an English writing textbook that would develop a set of core competencies that support thesis driven writing and the comprehension of thesis driven text. The text, *The Art and Architecture of Academic Writing* (Prinz & Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2012), focused on the academic essay as a foundation which would allow students to deepen and expand their skills for participation in the genre specific discourse of their discipline (Artemeva & Fox, 2010). Students in the English BA program would go on to complete either a course in Writing about Linguistics or Writing about Literature. University students' evaluations of the basic academic writing text are presented briefly in the next section.

*The Art and Architecture of Academic Writing* was pilot tested during three semesters in the Department of English at the University of Iceland. Approximately 500 first year university students and five experienced writing instructors provided feedback through surveys, focus groups and interviews. Student and instructor feedback in the initial piloting efforts were encouraging and ranged from evaluations of the overall program to specific feedback on the effectiveness of individual writing tasks. Students also documented their writing progress through regular reflective writing assignments.

In general, students' evaluation of the course was very positive. On questions that focused specifically on the textbook, students reported that the text and instructions were easy to read and the assignments helpful. In addition, students said that as a result of this course, they wrote more drafts of papers, had a better overview of the different components of composing an academic essay, and felt significantly more confident as writers. Over 95% said they would recommend the book to other students. Students made suggestions that future editions contained more assignments and made recommendations about specific exercises and activities. Guided by student and instructor feedback, the textbook was revised at the end of each of the three semesters.

An additional finding was that the entering first year university students recognized the concepts and terminology used in academic writing, but lacked an understanding of their function and did not have the tools and strategies to apply them. One of the university instructors suggested that parts of the basic university writing textbook might be piloted at the secondary level to help develop necessary academic skills prior to university study.

## Writing Academic English at the Secondary School Level

*The Art and Architecture of Academic Writing* textbook was then adapted to fit the English proficiency levels of secondary school students. This new academic writing text was integrated into the current English curriculum. The curriculum typically consists of reading literature and watching movies as a context for vocabulary development and grammar exercises. The writing activities in the university text thus had to be reduced to meet the time constraints posed by the curriculum and the school schedule. For this pilot study, the first four chapters of the *Art and Architecture of Academic Writing* textbook were presented. The final assignment was an expository essay using primary sources. For the essay students conducted research and wrote a description of a remarkable person they knew personally. Assigning a topic that draws on students' own knowledge rather than on outside sources helps the students focus on meaning and increases confidence in expressing own ideas before they are asked to synthesize the ideas of others.

The foundation of this beginning academic English writing text is learning to write a thesis driven academic essay (Lavelle, 2001; Lavelle, Smith, & O'Ryan, 2002). The authors of *The Art and Architecture of Academic Writing* (Prinz & Arnbjörndóttir, 2012), believe that all students can acquire skills in organizing ideas and composing clear and effective text in English across all genres. The text accomplishes this by developing awareness of writing as a recursive process, knowledge about which strategies to employ and when to employ them, revising skills and the persistence to rewrite until the text is acceptable. What differentiates this approach from others are three key principles. First, the book hones the content into a set of core competencies that support thesis driven writing. This is a departure from the broad sweep of writing skills which is typical of academic writing texts for both native and ESL/EFL/ELF users. The second distinct feature of the text is that it minimizes reading and explanation in favor of learning by doing. The book makes each element of writing explicit by "showing" how it is constructed and then maximizing the time students spend in active strategy practice, scaffolded production, independent writing, revising, and reflection. A third unique feature is that it builds writer autonomy by assigning topics that draw on students' own knowledge rather than outside sources. This approach requires students to focus on meaning and lessens the tendency of insecure EFL/ELF writers to reproduce others' ideas through cut and paste or plagiarism.

The authors of this book have observed that most writing texts tell students to use writing strategies and writing skills without giving them an opportunity to understand and practice strategies in meaningful ways. Because good writing takes practice and reflection, this program presents many opportunities for students to think about writing, plan writing, and write short and long assignments. Specifically, this program shows students how to:

- write in his or her own voice
- produce clear, concise and well organized text
- recognize the relevance of writing to their academic needs
- practice using effective strategies at different stages of the writing process
- follow the writing conventions of the academic community
- compose and revise an expository essay (Prinz & Arnbjörndóttir, 2012, p. 6)

The chapters follow a predictable pattern that begins with a description of the chapter's focus and a presentation of the learning objectives. Each chapter includes the following components:

- Focus – introduces the learning objectives of the chapter
- Content – presents a discussion of the concepts
- Relevance – relates the topic to students' writing
- Reflection – develops self-awareness as a writer
- Practice – scaffolds the use of new strategies and content
- Production – assigns writing tasks for grading.

Chapter one lays the groundwork for academic writing and explores the nature of academic language. Chapter two introduces the concept of discourse communities and describes expository writing. Chapter three explores the architecture of the academic essay and introduces strategies for different stages of writing. Chapter four teaches students to support a thesis with primary sources.

The following samples illustrate the explicit instruction and scaffolded practice presented in *The Art and Architecture of Academic Writing* program (Prinz & Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2012, pp. 9–20).

### **Public v. Private Writing**

The section on exploring academic discourse develops a context for understanding expository writing. Students begin by examining examples that distinguish private writing (text messages, diaries, private letters, and e-mails) from public writing (books, newspaper articles, and academic essays). Through these examples, students explore how the shared knowledge of content and context in private writing makes it easier to understand than public writing. Then students examine how the lack of shared knowledge and intentions between writer and audience make public writing more difficult to produce and understand. Public writing, because it is context reduced, demands greater clarity in language and organization to help the reader understand the writer's message. Looking at differences in public and private writing provides the background knowledge that students need to become aware of variation in style and structure in public texts across cultures and languages. With this awareness, students begin to explore the two types of public writing that they will encounter most often in their academic careers: literary and expository texts. Practice and production activities guide students to read, discuss, and identify short texts to ensure that they recognize the characteristics of each.

### **Expository Writing**

In this program, students learn that expository text is the primary genre of academic writing. They explore the types of expository texts that will be practiced in the book and develop an awareness that each follows a unique organizational pattern. Students are periodically asked to consider the relevance of this information to their own writing. They also learn that the structure and purpose of the different types of text help to convey the message the writer wants to relate.

### **Academic Language**

As discussed in previous sections, Icelandic secondary school students are likely to have developed a level of fluency in conversational English. Therefore, a primary objective of *The Art and Architecture of Academic Writing* program is to develop students' formal academic language and literacy skills. To that end, the beginning chapter also sets the stage

for academic writing by examining the differences between formal and informal language (Prinz & Arnbjörnsdóttir, 2012, p. 12).

**Content:** Students are introduced to the concept of language registers. Distinct from informal conversational English, academic English is a formal register. This difference between formal and informal language applies to all languages. General academic language is characterized by specific vocabulary, distinct style, and complex grammatical constructions. Academic language can also vary between different academic disciplines. Students then begin to explore the differences between formal and informal language and examine the characteristics of academic language.

**Relevance:** Students are reminded that grades for content are often affected by the quality of the writing, and that informal language is not effective in conveying the complex, abstract ideas of academic content.

**Reflection:** Students are directed to reflect on the differences between informal and formal language by examining tone and word choice in texts.

**Practice:** Students complete a series of exercises on the use of conversational language vs. academic language based on Coxhead's list of the most common academic words (Coxhead, 2000).

**Production:** Students are asked to apply the concepts they have learned by producing texts that require the use of different levels of formality and then analyze the different characteristics of the texts

The sequence that leads students from awareness exercises to practice and to production is used to teach all topics in the program. Topics include prewriting, developing thesis statements, cohesion, revision, and so on. Step by step, the activities guide students through the writing process, through several drafts, culminating in a short academic essay which strictly follows English academic writing conventions and formatting.

## The Study

*The Art and Architecture of Academic Writing* textbook for secondary schools was pilot tested in the spring of 2012, at a Reykjavík area comprehensive school. Students in three sections of English 303 took part. English 303 is a third semester course. At this point, the students have had at least seven years of English in primary school and two semesters in secondary school. This is the last compulsory English course for all students regardless of their area of concentration at secondary level.

Sixty-six secondary school students in English 303 took part in this study. Surveys were administered to students at the end of the semester. Surveys consisted of 18 questions, including four concerned with writing tasks related to the new academic writing emphasis. Another three open ended questions asked about the time and effort invested in course. Other questions asked about other aspects of the curriculum, such as the movies they watched and the reading materials they read. In response to each question, students indicated whether the task was fun or not fun, and whether it was useful or not useful. The options were:

*This was fun -This was not fun*

*This will be useful in the future --- This will not be useful in the future*

These categories were chosen based on recurrent themes found in previous studies which show that students found English classes enjoyable, but didn't find them very use-

ful (Anna Jeeves, 2010). These findings parallel Prinz's (1998) findings that ESL students recognized the effectiveness of learning reading strategies to comprehend expository text but found more familiar activities more enjoyable but less useful.

The four writing related questions were:

*How do you rate the following?*

*Working on creating better transitions in text*

*Writing an essay*

*Activities on planning an essay*

*Other writing tasks in preparation for the essay.*

Additionally, students were asked to answer three open ended questions:

*How hard did you work in this course?*

*What would you have liked to do more of in this course?*

*What would you have liked to do less in this course?*

The two course teachers administered the surveys in class at the end of the semester.

The results of the surveys revealed a striking contrast between what students thought was useful and what they considered fun. Responses to all eighteen items on the survey indicated that the writing project ranked in 15th place for fun, but in 4th place for usefulness. 70% of the 66 respondents thought that the writing activities were useful. The responses were consistent across the four writing related questions. Most useful, according to students, was the instruction on how to use transition words and practicing other writing activities. Least useful was watching films and doing group work based on film viewing. Close to 47% said they worked very hard in the course and 31% would have liked to do less writing even though they found the writing activities useful.

However, only 26% of the students thought that writing was fun. Students reported that watching the two films and reading the two novels were the most fun. They indicated that studying prefixes and transition words was the least fun.

## Discussion

The results of this pilot study support findings of previous research that found that Icelandic secondary school students enjoy English classes and find them easy but do not consider English classes very useful (Anna Jeeves, 2010, 2013; Ásrún Jóhannsdóttir, 2010). Surveys and in-depth interviews consistently show that Icelandic students develop informal, receptive language skills outside school and that secondary classroom instruction reinforces these informal skills. As a result, students do not find the type of instruction provided in a typical secondary school classroom challenging (Anna Jeeves, 2013; Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir & Hafdis Ingvarsdóttir, 2010).

The results reported here are consistent with previous research on Icelanders' perception of secondary English classes. Anna Jeeves (2013) studied three different groups' perceptions of their experiences in secondary school English classes. She interviewed university students, young people in the workforce and secondary schools students. While all three groups recognized the value of knowing formal academic English, they were also aware that they did not learn formal English from the media. Secondary students were less able than the other two groups to recognize the relevance of proficiency in the formal registers of English to their future academic and professional pursuits nor were secondary

school students able to relate the need for formal English to their current educational context.

The emphasis on making teaching/learning fun and entertaining bears further discussion. While students enjoy English instruction based on content they perceive as “fun”, students in this study recognized the usefulness of the formal writing taught in the *The Art and Architecture of Academic Writing* text. They also recognized the limited usefulness of the “fun” curriculum after they had been exposed to formal academic English. Fun without useful content does not lead to learning. It should be recognized that fun and learning and usefulness are not mutually exclusive. However, the usefulness of “fun” activities and their relevance to students’ future needs should be a guiding factor in curriculum development.

The findings of this study suggest that classroom instruction needs to be aligned with the National Curriculum Guidelines (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 2007) that call for the teaching of academic language skills. Studies in Iceland and elsewhere in Northern Europe have demonstrated students’ need for formal academic English skills, both in tertiary education and in the workforce. At the same time, a review of school curriculum guidelines indicates that very few English courses at secondary level focus adequately on formal and academic language skills.

This shift is not likely to be achieved by adopting textbooks written for populations with very different needs from those of Icelandic students. While the majority of required reading at university is based on expository text, traditional instruction in advanced secondary school English classes relies on the reading of literary sources. Familiarity with literary discourse may not be the most appropriate way to prepare students who will be required to read other genres at university and in professional contexts. Nor is it likely that adding academic content to existing courses that teach primarily informal receptive skills will help students develop the academic language and literacy skills. English language teaching should be goal driven and relevant to students’ needs, which requires a reexamination of the curriculum.

Academic language skills in a second language are strongly tied to academic skills in the first language. There is no research available that measures Icelandic secondary students’ ability to use their first language in academic pursuits. Further research is necessary both at secondary and tertiary level, specifically studies that measure students’ actual proficiency in Icelandic and in English, rather than their perceptions of their proficiency. Most Icelandic students acquire informal receptive English skills outside the classroom. This provides an opportunity for developing curricula and instruction that builds on those skills and broadens and deepens students’ language proficiency to better meet their needs later in life.

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#### **About the authors**

Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir (birnaarn@hi.is) is a Professor of Second Language Studies in the Faculty of Foreign Language, Literature and Linguistics, School of Humanities at the University of Iceland. She has a Ph.D. in Linguistics from the University of Texas at Austin. She is the project leader for the longitudinal research project, *The Status of English in a New Linguistic Environment*, funded by RANNÍS.

Patricia Prinz (pprinz@mercy.edu) is an Associate-Professor of Literacy and Multilingual Studies at Mercy College in New York. She holds an Ed.D. in Developmental Studies with a Concentration in Literacy, Language, and Cultural Studies from Boston University. Patricia has lectured extensively on second language literacy, served as a Fulbright scholar and a consultant to the Department of English at the University of Iceland.

#### **Key words**

*academic writing – students' perceptions – writing instruction*

#### **Um höfunda**

Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir (birnaarn@hi.is) er prófessor í annarsmálsfræðum við Deild erlendra tungumála, bókmennta og málvísinda á Hugvísindasviði Háskóla Íslands. Birna lauk doktorsprófi í almennum málvísindum frá Texasháskóla í Austin í Bandaríkjunum. Hún stýrir rannsóknarverkefninu,

*Enska í nýju íslensku málumhverfi, sem stutt er af RANNÍS og Rannsóknasjóði Háskóla Íslands.*

Patricia Prinz (pprinz@mercy.edu) er dósent í læsi og fjöltkynngisfræðum við Mercy College í New York. Hún lauk doktorsprófi í uppeldisfræði með áherslu á læsi, tungumál og menningarfræði frá Boston-háskóla. Patricia hefur einnig starfað sem ráðgjafi og fyrirlesari á vegum Fulbrightstofnunarinnar víða um heim. Hún hefur aðallega haldið fyrirlestra um læsi og akademíska ensku, meðal annars við námsbraut í ensku við Háskóla Íslands.

### **Efnisorð**

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