

How Do You Like Iceland? A View from a Foreign Academic

Luca Aceto
Reykjavík University

Reykjavík, 4 May 2007

The question: What is Iceland's standing in the scientific job market?

Disclaimer: I am solely responsible for the opinions aired in this talk!

Why Me?

Reasons for

- I am Italian.
- I have worked in Italy, England, France, Denmark before coming here.
- I have experience of several other countries via my network of collaborators and visiting positions.

Reasons against

My wife, Anna Ingólfssdóttir, is Icelandic, and an academic to boot! Familiarity can cloud my judgement.

My approach: I will purposefully exaggerate in describing my view of the status of Iceland amongst foreign scientists.

Why Me?

Reasons for

- I am Italian.
- I have worked in Italy, England, France, Denmark before coming here.
- I have experience of several other countries via my network of collaborators and visiting positions.

Reasons against

My wife, Anna Ingólfssdóttir, is Icelandic, and an academic to boot! Familiarity can cloud my judgement.

My approach: I will purposefully exaggerate in describing my view of the status of Iceland amongst foreign scientists.

Why Me?

Reasons for

- I am Italian.
- I have worked in Italy, England, France, Denmark before coming here.
- I have experience of several other countries via my network of collaborators and visiting positions.

Reasons against

My wife, Anna Ingólfssdóttir, is Icelandic, and an academic to boot! Familiarity can cloud my judgement.

My approach: I will purposefully exaggerate in describing my view of the status of Iceland amongst foreign scientists.

What This Talk is About

- 1 The present situation as I see it
- 2 How can one attract high-calibre scientists to Iceland?
- 3 A look at my crystal ball
- 4 Conclusions and questions

A Personal Snapshot

- Icelandic academic institutions can offer good working conditions and competitive salaries.
- Iceland can offer a high quality of life.
- Very few high-class academics in the world know about scientific work from Iceland and would consider relocating to Iceland, alas...

Why?

- “Our currency is reputation” (Moshe Vardi), and research is the playing field where reputations are made. What is our standing in the reputation game?
- Competition is **very** hard and growing.

A Personal Snapshot

- Icelandic academic institutions can offer good working conditions and competitive salaries.
- Iceland can offer a high quality of life.
- **Very few high-class academics in the world know about scientific work from Iceland and would consider relocating to Iceland, alas...**

Why?

- “Our currency is reputation” (Moshe Vardi), and research is the playing field where reputations are made. What is our standing in the reputation game?
- Competition is **very** hard and growing.

A Personal Snapshot

- Icelandic academic institutions can offer good working conditions and competitive salaries.
- Iceland can offer a high quality of life.
- **Very few high-class academics in the world know about scientific work from Iceland and would consider relocating to Iceland, alas...**

Why?

- “Our currency is reputation” (Moshe Vardi), and research is the playing field where reputations are made. What is our standing in the reputation game?
- Competition is **very** hard and growing.

A Biased View: Foreigners in Computer Science, Mathematics and Engineering

- Six “permanent” staff members (at least three with Icelandic wives, one woman)
- Three postdocs (France, Iran and Italy)
- Two of the three PhD students in Computer Science

In addition, physics at the University of Iceland hosts three foreign postdocs.

My question to you: Is this enough? What is the brain drain/brain gain ratio for Iceland?

Why Should Iceland Recruit Foreign Talent?

THES World University Ranking for 2004

1. Harvard University,
2. University of California, Berkeley,
3. MIT,
4. California Institute of Technology,
5. Oxford University,
6. Cambridge University,
7. Stanford,

Based on the following indicators of quality: [Peer Review Score](#), [International Faculty Score](#), [International Student Score](#), [Faculty/Student Score](#) and [Citations/Faculty Score](#).

In the US more than 50 percent of the science faculty are from abroad.

The percentage is **higher** in high-tech companies.

The Gain in the Brain

Why is this valuable?

- Fresh blood, new ideas, alternative viewpoints foster a lively research environment.
- Success breeds success. High quality international staff will make it easy to recruit more talent.
- Brain gain! Iceland did not pay a penny for the education of these people, but can exploit all their know-how.
- Brain gain contributes to reversing the brain drain! (Look at Computer Science at RU for an example.)

The Gain in the Brain

Why is this valuable?

- Fresh blood, new ideas, alternative viewpoints foster a lively research environment.
- Success breeds success. High quality international staff will make it easy to recruit more talent.
- **Brain gain! Iceland did not pay a penny for the education of these people, but can exploit all their know-how.**
- Brain gain contributes to reversing the brain drain! (Look at Computer Science at RU for an example.)

The Gain in the Brain

Why is this valuable?

- Fresh blood, new ideas, alternative viewpoints foster a lively research environment.
- Success breeds success. High quality international staff will make it easy to recruit more talent.
- Brain gain! Iceland did not pay a penny for the education of these people, but can exploit all their know-how.
- Brain gain contributes to reversing the brain drain! (Look at Computer Science at RU for an example.)

My Tenet: The Time is Now!

Why?

- Iceland is exotic and hip **now!**
- There is critical mass and international-level research strength in selected areas **now!**
- The country happens to be “rich” **now!** If it does not invest in research talent now, when should it do so?
- We should exploit George W. Bush's restrictive immigration policies **now!**

Spoiler Warning and Question

Brain gain won't happen unless determined efforts are made by everybody involved in research policy.

Ask yourselves: Why should an established/promising scientist come to Iceland instead of going elsewhere?

My Tenet: The Time is Now!

Why?

- Iceland is exotic and hip **now!**
- There is critical mass and international-level research strength in selected areas **now!**
- The country happens to be “rich” **now!** If it does not invest in research talent now, when should it do so?
- We should exploit George W. Bush’s restrictive immigration policies **now!**

Spoiler Warning and Question

Brain gain won't happen unless determined efforts are made by everybody involved in research policy.

Ask yourselves: Why should an established/promising scientist come to Iceland instead of going elsewhere?

My Tenet: The Time is Now!

Why?

- Iceland is exotic and hip **now!**
- There is critical mass and international-level research strength in selected areas **now!**
- The country happens to be “rich” **now!** If it does not invest in research talent now, when should it do so?
- We should exploit George W. Bush’s restrictive immigration policies **now!**

Spoiler Warning and Question

Brain gain won't happen unless determined efforts are made by everybody involved in research policy.

Ask yourselves: Why should an established/promising scientist come to Iceland instead of going elsewhere?

An example from Paris: The “Mathematical Sciences of Paris” foundation

SMP offers distinguished lectureships, posts by invitation, PhD and postdoc positions, 2–3 month visiting professorships.

Some initial figures from their announcements:

- 500 research scientists, including 4 Fields Medallists, 14 Academicians and 120 recipients of national and international awards. (Read: [Potential collaborators galore](#))
- 100 post-docs and 360 PhD students. (Read: [Potential for PhD students and young researcher support galore](#))
- Organization of 55 weekly seminars. (Read: [A stimulating research environment](#))

Fact: Any ambitious scientist will look for options like these before relocating to Iceland.

What Needs to Be Done (IMHO)

- Make the funding of scientific research via competitive funds a priority for policy makers. (Rannis is doing a very good job, but its funds are peanuts! Science and Engineering funding for 2007 was roughly 0.4EJ!)
- Differentiate the funding outlets, and richly fund centres of excellence with associated PhD schools for long-term periods (5 to 10 years). (Size matters and one must play to one's strengths)
- Increase the collaboration between universities. For example, the SMP involves 6 institutions. (The recent cooperation between RU, HI on energy research is a first good step)

What Needs to Be Done (IMHO)

- Make the funding of scientific research via competitive funds a priority for policy makers. (Rannis is doing a very good job, but its funds are peanuts! Science and Engineering funding for 2007 was roughly 0.4EJ!)
- Differentiate the funding outlets, and richly fund centres of excellence with associated PhD schools for long-term periods (5 to 10 years). (Size matters and one must play to one's strengths)
- Increase the collaboration between universities. For example, the SMP involves 6 institutions. (The recent cooperation between RU, HI on energy research is a first good step)

What Needs to Be Done (IMHO)

- Make the funding of scientific research via competitive funds a priority for policy makers. (Rannis is doing a very good job, but its funds are peanuts! Science and Engineering funding for 2007 was roughly 0.4EJ!)
- Differentiate the funding outlets, and richly fund centres of excellence with associated PhD schools for long-term periods (5 to 10 years). (Size matters and one must play to one's strengths)
- Increase the collaboration between universities. For example, the SMP involves 6 institutions. (The recent cooperation between RU, HI on energy research is a first good step)

What Needs to Be Done (IMHO), continued

- Overall, create a stimulating research environment that rewards excellence in all its forms. (This is the responsibility of us scientists, but we do need some help to establish visiting professorships, and distinguished lecturer programmes)
- Reduce the red tape for high-class researchers wanting to work in Iceland, e.g., by establishing a fast-track researcher visa and treating EU researchers as Nordic ones. (Look at Australia and Canada.)

Wishful thinking

Entice rich people to support scientific research and university life via appropriate legislation. Tax rebates? It works for the US.

What Needs to Be Done (IMHO), continued

- Overall, create a stimulating research environment that rewards excellence in all its forms. (This is the responsibility of us scientists, but we do need some help to establish visiting professorships, and distinguished lecturer programmes)
- Reduce the red tape for high-class researchers wanting to work in Iceland, e.g., by establishing a fast-track researcher visa and treating EU researchers as Nordic ones. (Look at Australia and Canada.)

Wishful thinking

Entice rich people to support scientific research and university life via appropriate legislation. Tax rebates? It works for the US.

What Needs to Be Done (IMHO), continued

- Overall, create a stimulating research environment that rewards excellence in all its forms. (This is the responsibility of us scientists, but we do need some help to establish visiting professorships, and distinguished lecturer programmes)
- Reduce the red tape for high-class researchers wanting to work in Iceland, e.g., by establishing a fast-track researcher visa and treating EU researchers as Nordic ones. (Look at Australia and Canada.)

Wishful thinking

Entice rich people to support scientific research and university life via appropriate legislation. Tax rebates? It works for the US.

My Message

- Iceland **can** attract high-quality researchers from abroad. It is already happening, but in a rather ad hoc fashion.
- A systematic approach supported by political will is needed to make the next step since the competition for talent is exceedingly hard.
- Politicians **must** put an increase in peer-review based funding on their agenda, and funding agencies will need to support centres of excellence and to differentiate their funding outlets.
- Rewards for excellence in research must be based on peer-review.

That's All, Folks!

The advice we give others is the advice we ourselves need.

Thank You!
Any Questions?

Subliminal Ad

Support ICE-TCS! (See <http://www.icetcs.ru.is/> for more information.)