

The Minister of Industry, Energy and Tourism Katrin Juliusdottir's speech at the NORDREGIO congress on the effect of regional universities and colleges on regional development and economic growth, held in Reykjavik, 24. June 2009.

Chairman, ladies and gentlemen

Good morning and welcome to the conference. Many of you have travelled a long distance and we appreciate your participation.

As most of you know, Iceland is chairing the Nordic Council of Ministers this year. –

As regards regional development, the Nordic countries share similar problems.

Common to all is that sparsely populated areas in each country that are isolated from the capital region or the core areas of major cities have been struggling.

This outmigration has resulted in a cultural and economic decline . Efforts to stop this and turn the development around have not had the desired effect.

In particular, the proportion of women has decreased in rural areas, with gender disparity leading to even further population decline.

This problem of outmigration is just as serious in Iceland as anywhere else. Iceland is therefore focusing on two main regional development tasks:

- one is investigating how entrepreneurship and innovation can be stimulated in rural areas, with an emphasis on encouraging women and young entrepreneurs, and
- the other is studying the impact that universities and other higher education institutions can have on development trends.

I would also like to mention that the government has begun the necessary preparations and consultation needed to formulate a progressive employment and industry policy for Iceland.

An important part of this task is to evaluate the strengths and possibilities in each region of the country.

The contribution of the universities and university centers around the country will be of great value in this important task.

Education indisputably serves as a propelling force for progress, which makes it crucial for anyone to be able to obtain the education they want.

On the other hand, it is also important that the education provided be such that those graduating prove attractive to employers and have the ability and desire to work for the good of society and the private sector.

Collaboration between higher education institutions and the private sector is thus another key factor.

Where such collaboration has occurred, a great deal has been accomplished.

In recent years, the government has emphasized higher education in rural development that has led to tremendous growth in education at the university level.

My ministry has in particular stressed the importance of triple helix collaboration between - universities, - governmental research and development and innovation activities and - the private sector, in particular small and medium sized enterprises.

University education and research will evidently be the backbone of such collaboration but the strength will be based on our success in establishing and participating in a widespread international clustering and networking.

Today it makes no difference where you are located as long as you can build up the required critical mass to accomplish your task.

That critical mass does not have to be all at the same place at the same time. But it needs to be a dedicated group of capable individuals that share the same vision and are eager in succeeding in their undertakings.

The Icelandic university system has recently undergone a thorough evaluation by two independent groups of experts.

It is generally accepted that the university system has gradually become too fragmented and needs to be consolidated.

I am not going to express any particular views on that, as it is more a question on administrative matters than on content - but the triple helix collaboration that is similar to the Finnish – or should I say Nordic - Centers of Expertise is a concept that my ministry believes in and hopes to be able to promote further in the future.

In order for that to become a reality a strong university participation is an absolute must.

Today's conference is a valuable contributor to our evaluation on the best way forward in our rural and economic development.

We are now struggling through a financial recession and confronted by many challenging tasks.

Our resilience must be pragmatic and well focused and I believe that this conference will be a contributor to that, as it will give us an opportunity to hear many views on how universities and other institutions of higher education can work to strengthen the foundations of the society in which they operate.

Therefore, I would like to thank all those who have worked hard to arrange this conference.

The Nordregio staff who performed the research that will be presented here shortly deserve our special gratitude, as well as the presenters who are about to speak to us.

I anticipate that this will be an informative and constructive gathering, and I wish you a fruitful day.

Ladies and gentlemen:

It gives me a great pleasure to declare open this conference on the effect of regional universities and colleges on regional development and economic growth.

<http://eng.idnadarraduneyti.is/minister/speeches/nr/2733>