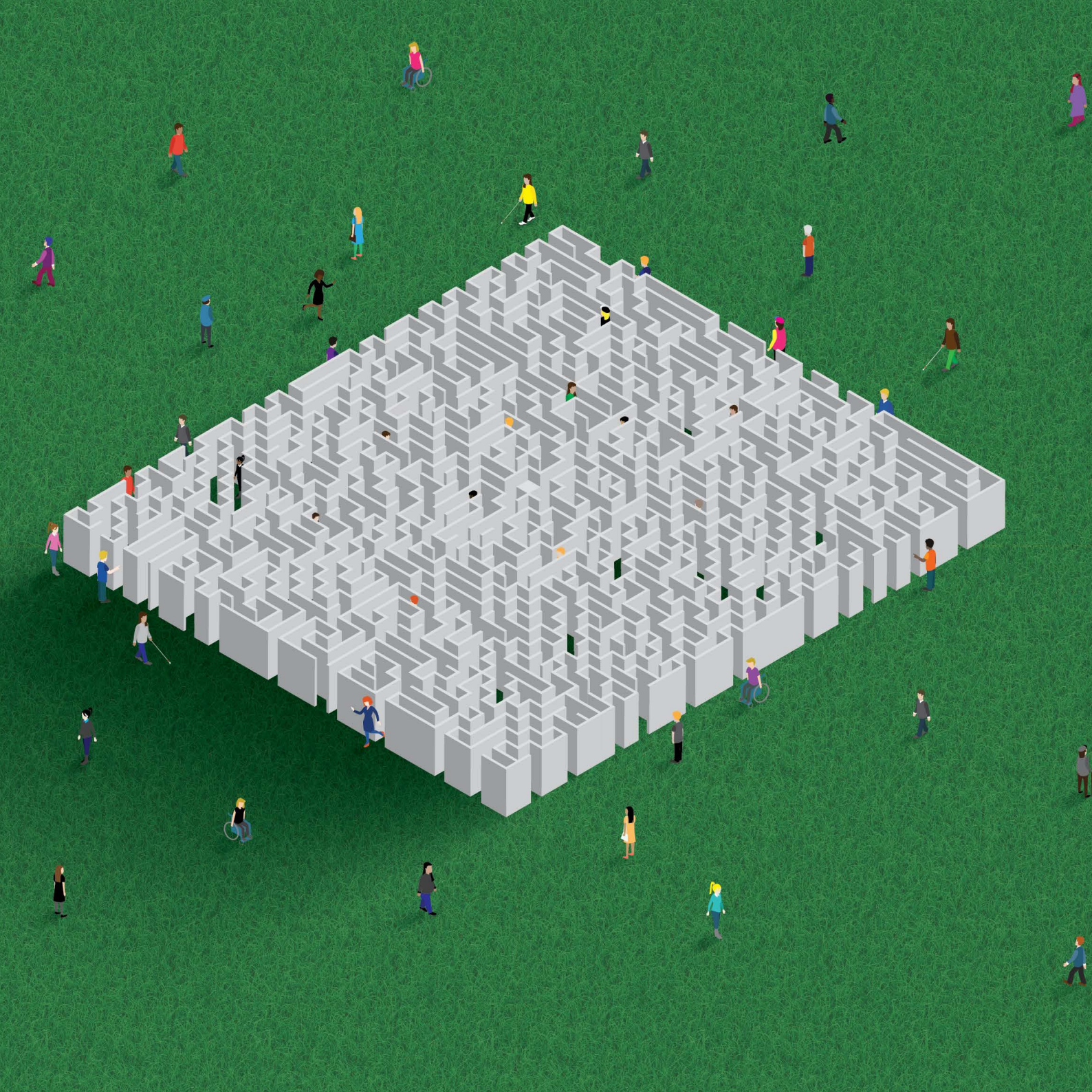




UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND



NON-/DISABILITY
– THOUGHTS ON A BETTER
UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY



Equality is one of the three core values at the University of Iceland. University policy dictates that equality is a guiding principle in all operations and that diversity within the University community is systematically promoted.

This booklet was published on the initiative of the University of Iceland Council for Disability Rights in order to educate the University community on equality, disability, privilege and access.

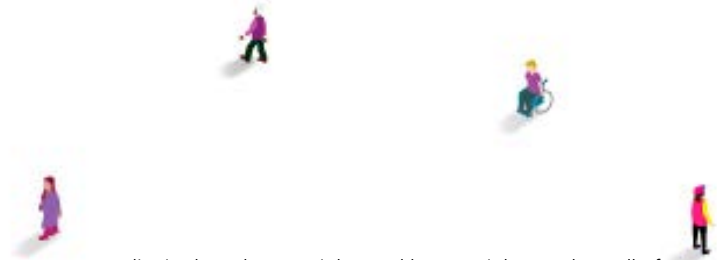




**The University of Iceland Equality
Action Plan is available at equality.hi.is.**

Direct and indirect discrimination:

If an individual or group is treated unfairly compared to others in comparable situations on the basis of mental or physical traits, this is an example of direct discrimination. Indirect discrimination, however, refers to circumstances that appear to be neutral but which create barriers for people belonging to a certain group. People in marginalised groups are significantly more likely than other people to experience discrimination. Discrimination can have a serious impact on the lives and wellbeing of those affected.



Equality is about human rights and human rights apply to all of us. Equality should ensure that we all enjoy the same opportunities and that appropriate measures can be taken to eradicate discrimination. Equality in the broad sense refers to the fact that many factors can form the basis of discrimination – these may be innate, social, economic, cultural or of another kind. Equality in the broad sense emphasises the interplay of different factors and involves more than just gender equality – such as disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, origin and religion.

If individuals do not receive the same or equal treatment as others on the basis of disability, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, origin or religion, to name a few examples, this is discrimination. The word 'intersectionality' is used when causes of discrimination overlap or when people belong to more than one marginalised group, e.g. disabled women of foreign origin.



Disabled people are the largest minority group in the world and also one of the most marginalised. This is a large, diverse group, both in terms of disability and social circumstances. The nature and severity of impairments differ. Impairments may be innate or the result of an accident or illness. They may also be visible or invisible. Disability has been a part of all societies throughout history and just like other people, disabled people are first and foremost people with all kinds of interests, views, sexual orientations and gender identities.

Disability is often seen as a flaw and disabled people as victims of their own bodies or circumstances, for example when people say that someone is 'wheelchair bound' or does well 'despite their disability'. The British campaigner Paul Hunt has described the way in which disabled people frequently have to deal with non-disabled people seeing them as unfortunate, useless, oppressed and ill, as well as different because they are 'not normal'.¹

There are more ways to understand disability than from a purely biological perspective. Instead of analysing individuals and their limitations, it is possible to analyse the environment and how it affects the opportunities and participation of disabled people. Negative attitudes and conventional thinking have prevented many disabled people from having equal access to society compared to non-disabled people. By changing our understanding of disability, emphasising equal rights and removing social and attitude-related barriers, the opportunities for disabled people to participate in society have increased significantly. This is reflected in the fact that numbers of disabled students at the University of Iceland have risen dramatically in response to improved services and accommodations.

¹ From the book *Fötlan og menning: Íslandssagan í öðru ljósi*, ed. Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir, Ármann Jakobsson and Kristín Björnsdóttir, 2009.

I think it's been long enough now that I can say that you always have to prove yourself. I can learn! Disabled people are constantly having to prove themselves, that is just the attitude they face from society.²

If you're going to study for one and a half hours, walking into a packed room where there's barely room to sneeze and you're wandering around for two or three minutes looking for a table. Touching people's backs and hair, it's no fun and you simply avoid the situation.

² These and other comments are taken from the report *Málefni fatlaðs fólks við Háskóla Íslands 2010-2013* (Disability Rights at the University of Iceland), carried out by the UI Social Science Research Institute in 2014.



Education is a human right and throughout history, disabled people have not had the same opportunities to receive an education as other people. Access is crucial if people are to receive an education, learn and belong to the University community. The word 'access' probably makes most people think first of steps and thresholds, but there is a lot more to the concept.

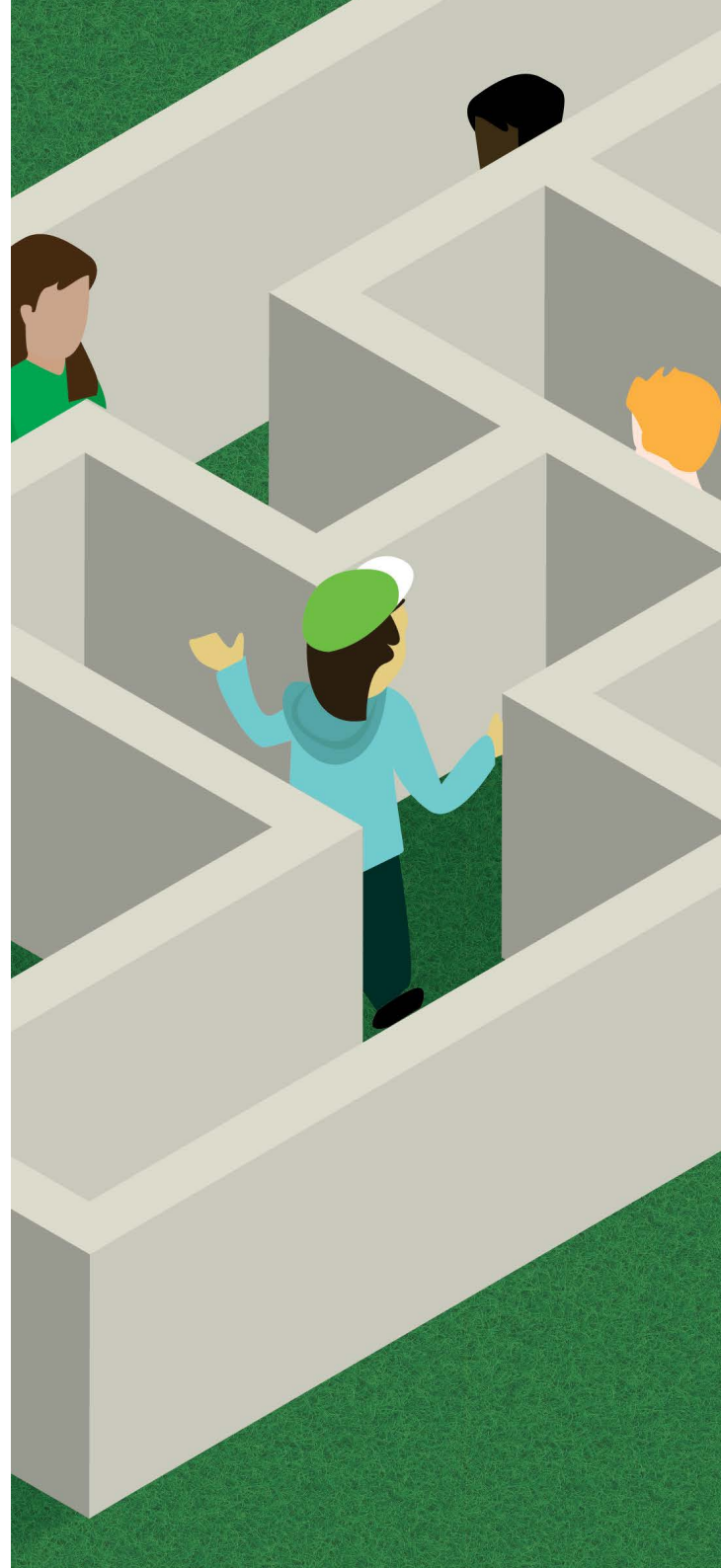
Access to studies means that course material is in an accessible format, syllabuses and reading lists are published well in advance and disability services for students that require them are tailored to their needs.

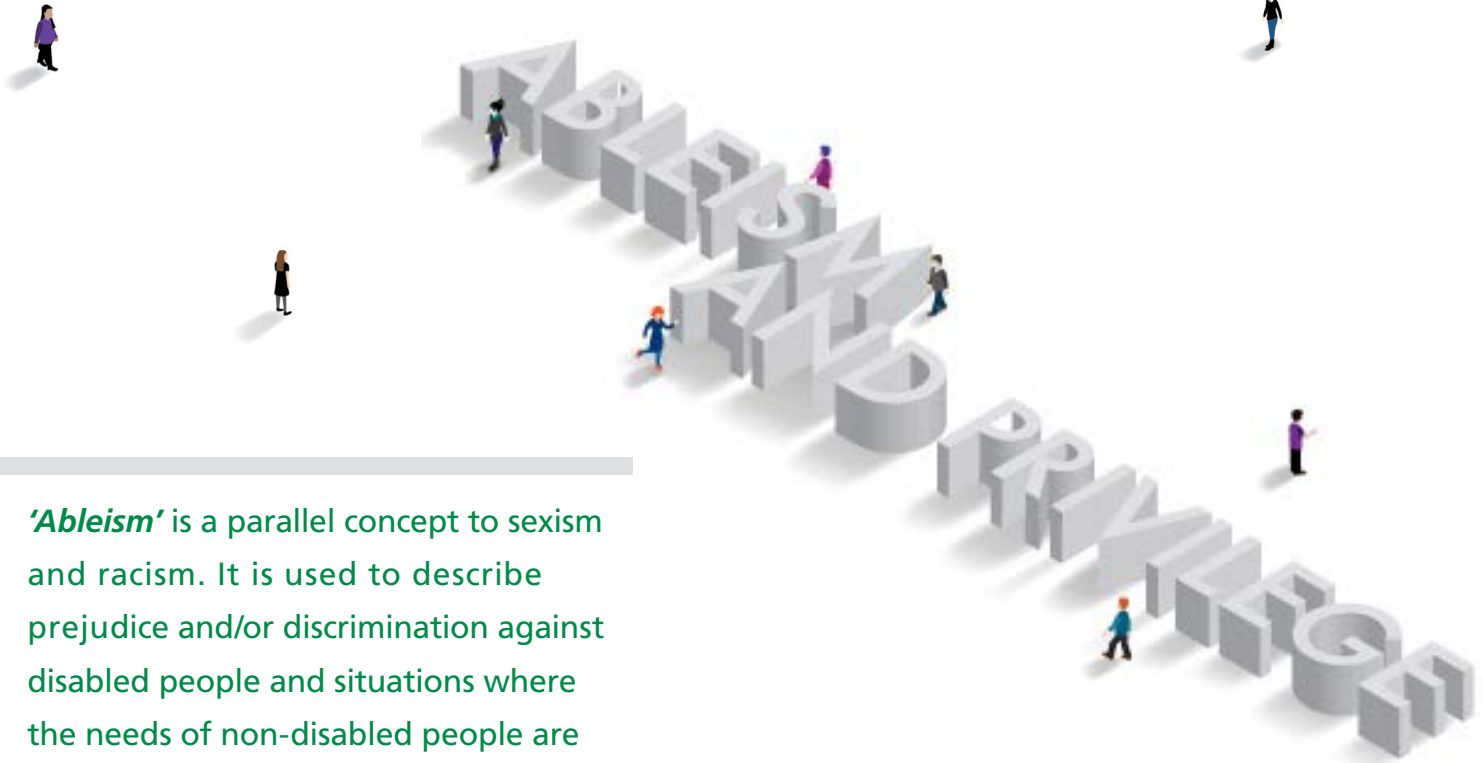
People sometimes misunderstand disability services, thinking that students who receive them are given an advantage in their studies, that less stringent demands are made of them or even that disability services lower the quality or value of studies. Equal rights in education does not mean that all students receive the same, but rather that the different needs of all individuals are taken into account. Disability services are intended to remove barriers and create equal opportunities for education.

One factor in removing barriers is creating, shaping and designing environments and services with the different needs of different people in mind. Design with the aim of ensuring that as many people as possible can use it as well as possible is called universal design. Article 2 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states that "[u]niversal design" means the design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.



There was a very steep slope in the room and I had to be right at the top because I couldn't get down the steps, they were so steep. The teacher came in and asked everyone to come to the front. I couldn't do what he asked.





'Ableism' is a parallel concept to sexism and racism. It is used to describe prejudice and/or discrimination against disabled people and situations where the needs of non-disabled people are prioritised.

What is privilege? Privilege can be defined as some kind of advantage. The privilege of non-disabled people includes not having to define themselves, not having to explain themselves, having good general access to all areas of society and conforming to society's standards.

I always find it weird every time I have to explain myself and my impairment in class, many times over the semester on the same course.



Most societies are organised with the goal of meeting the needs of non-disabled people. We do not generally consider access if we are used to living our lives without barriers. Very few people, therefore, notice stepping over a threshold, walking up or down a few steps or when information is written in small font. In this way it is possible to be completely oblivious to your privilege, which involves living in a society designed around the needs of the non-disabled majority. A society which is organised solely with the needs of non-disabled people in mind and which does not meet the demands of individuals with different needs can be called an 'ableist' society.

Throughout history, societies have operated on the principle of 'fixing' the needs of disabled people and the idea that they are not part of society. It is common for people to hold low expectations of disabled people and even to believe that they are unable to achieve the same things as other people. This attitude is still with us today despite many individuals demonstrating the opposite, e.g. Albert Einstein, Frida Kahlo, Stephen Hawking, F. D. Roosevelt, Hellen Keller and Ludwig van Beethoven. When disabled people succeed, people speak about it as if they have 'conquered' their disability.

The fact that the majority of people are so used to going about their business unhindered and having good general access means that access is often forgotten in the organisation of events, e.g. science trips, annual festive balls, field trips and symposiums. When disabled people are excluded from attending events due to a lack of access or preconceptions about their lack of interest, this is one manifestation of ableism. Failure to ensure access leads to discrimination and exclusion.

Ableism may be invisible and takes many different forms, both amongst non-disabled and disabled people. People who do not personally experience prejudice and discrimination may find it difficult to recognise the prejudice, marginalisation and discrimination that many disabled people experience in their daily lives. Cooperation between disabled people and non-disabled people is therefore one of the conditions required to eradicate ableism.



I received excellent services and the student counsellor was fantastic. She was really good at finding and offering me the services I had a right to. Some of them didn't suit me but others did, which I accepted.

Did you know that disability studies is one of the subjects taught at the University of Iceland?

Disability studies is a young, interdisciplinary subject which has grown rapidly in recent years. Academic development in this field reflects a growing interest in disability as a social phenomenon and an important factor in all our lives. Further information on disability studies at UI can be found in the course catalogue at english.hi.is. Interesting information on the academic field is also available on the Centre for Disability Studies website at fotlunarfraedi.hi.is.

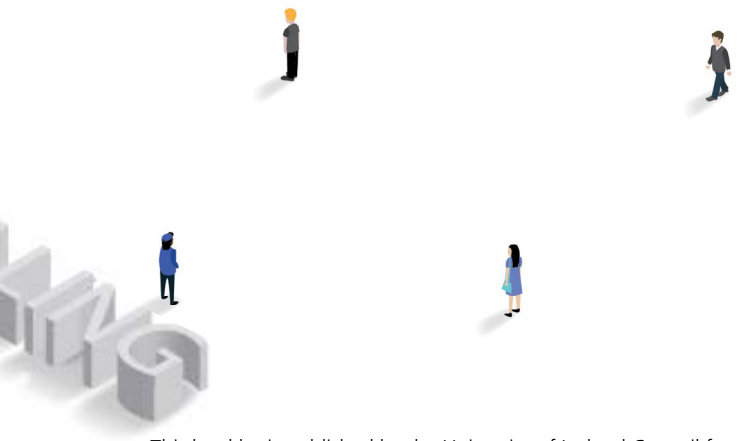


People considering higher education are often unsure of what they want to study. The University of Iceland Student Counselling and Career Centre provides students with advice on choosing a programme and also offers surveys to evaluate areas of interest.

Students who require disability services also wonder how they will be received on their programme, what kind of rights they have, whether they can receive assistance and support and, if so, of what nature. The Student Counselling and Career Centre oversees the provision of disability services for students and offers an introductory talk for students at the beginning of each academic year. This talk introduces available options, including the process for accessing these services.

Students requiring assistance or support due to disability, illness or learning difficulties should contact the Student Counselling and Career Centre. Services are tailored to the individual and efforts are made to meet the needs of every individual as far as possible. Students requiring specific services in their studies are responsible for submitting the requisite documents from an appropriate specialist, attending an interview at the Student Counselling and Career Centre and signing a written agreement on the services.

Information on available services, including Icelandic sign language interpreting for students, can be found on the Student Counselling and Career Centre website at english.hi.is/student_counselling_and_career_centre. Their email address is radgjof@hi.is.



This booklet is published by the University of Iceland Council for Disability Rights. The Council oversees the affairs of disabled people at the University as well as students with learning difficulties, under the authority of the rector and the University Council. The University equality officer (jafnretti@hi.is) chairs the Council for Disability Rights.

The role of the Council includes:

- › coordinating the work of those involved in the field
- › gathering information on the status of disabled people within the University
- › initiating education on disability rights within the University community
- › providing advice on the design of new University buildings

Further information on equal rights at the University of Iceland can be found at equality.hi.is.

Published by: Council for Disability Rights

Editorial team:

Alma Ýr Ingólfssdóttir, Editor

Arnar Gíslason

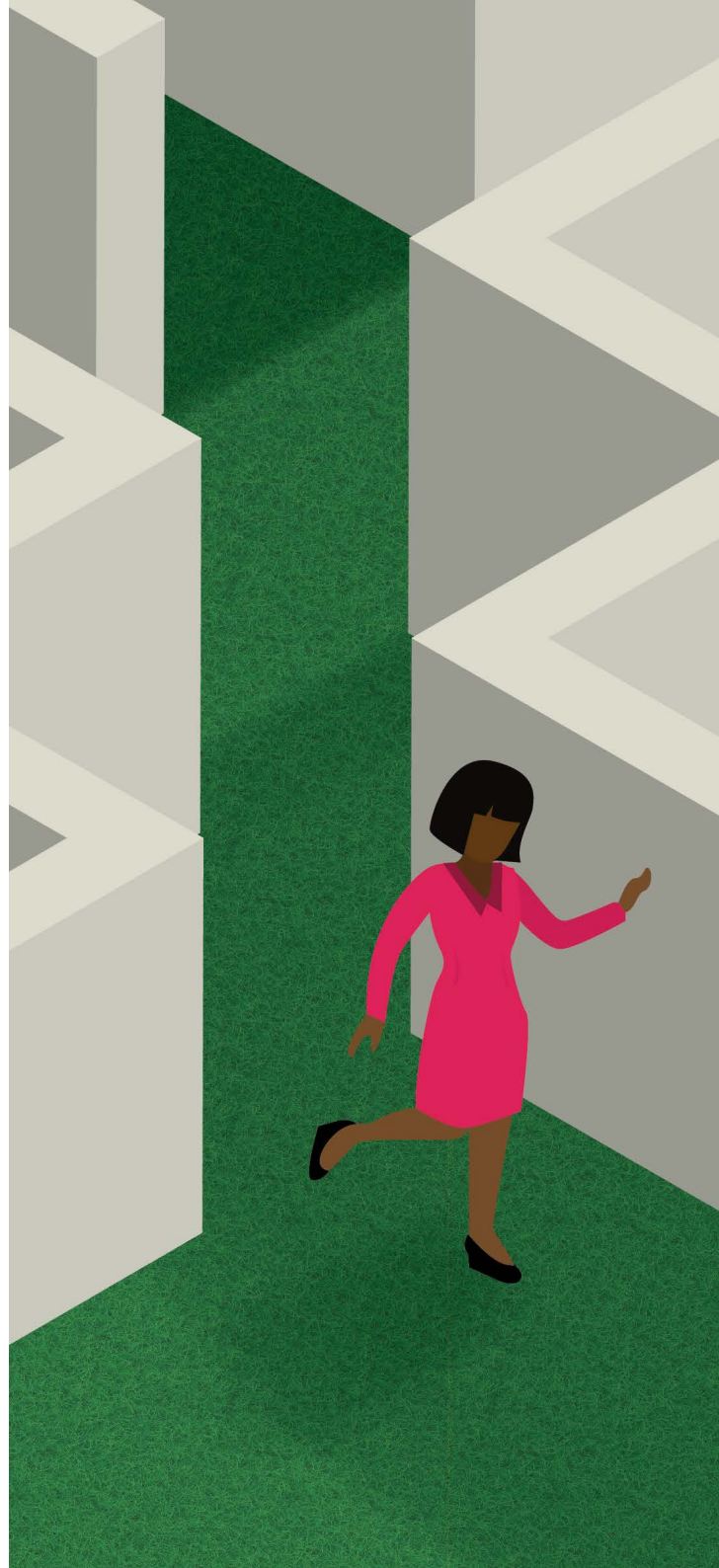
Bergvin Oddsson

Hanna Björg Sigurjónsdóttir

Hrafnhildur V. Kjartansdóttir

Ingólfur B. Aðalbjörnsson

Design: Arna Rún Gústafsdóttir





UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND

Council for Disability Rights

jafnretti@hi.is
equality.hi.is

