



## Article

# Scandinavian Studies in Germany with a Special Focus on the Position of Old and Modern Icelandic

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**Abstract:** Scandinavian Studies today are divided into (at least) three areas, which should ideally also be represented by their own chairs at the universities, if one wants to cover the subject as broadly as possible. Likewise, the four languages, Danish, Icelandic, Norwegian and Swedish, should be offered to a certain extent. Scandinavian Studies, however, belong to the so-called “small subjects”, and financial and personnel resources are often limited. In addition, the federal states (Bundesländer) have an influence on the equipment of the universities. The subject of Scandinavian Studies can therefore be structured very differently at the individual universities. It is largely undisputed that foreign language skills are an important factor in promoting international understanding. As well, language skills are an absolute foundation in all aspects of a philological subject. Nevertheless, language teaching at universities is generally under pressure, and questions arise about its justification. This is true for both modern and ancient languages. In our article, we mainly describe the positions of Old and modern Icelandic within Scandinavian Studies, which differ greatly. This is mainly due to traditions within Scandinavian Studies and the institutions at which they are taught. Considerations are made regarding the legitimacy of these areas and their connections with other parts of the subject.



**Citation:** Kupferschmied, Irene, and Magnús Hauksson. 2022.

Scandinavian Studies in Germany with a Special Focus on the Position of Old and Modern Icelandic.

*Humanities* 11: 107. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h11050107>

Received: 13 July 2022

Accepted: 25 August 2022

Published: 29 August 2022

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**Keywords:** Scandinavian Studies; Old Norse; Old Icelandic; Modern Icelandic; language teaching; medieval studies

## 1. Introduction

At many German universities, the subject of Scandinavian Studies is threatened by cutbacks, which have a clear impact on the range of courses that are offered in the medieval field of study. This not only endangers the anchoring of Old Icelandic in the subject, but also that of modern Icelandic. First, this is because at most universities, it plays a subordinate role alongside Danish, Norwegian and Swedish, and cannot be chosen as the main language. Second, the cuts in the older subject area also affect modern Icelandic, because teaching in modern Icelandic has also received a certain legitimacy through its proximity to Old Icelandic.

In this article, we want to present the situation of Old and modern Icelandic at universities in Germany in more detail.<sup>1</sup> We refer mainly to examples that we know well and which can illustrate our statements. We do not claim to give a complete overview of the topic in every detail. Inevitably, the legitimacy of dealing with the language and culture of such a small language community (there are only roughly 350,000 native speakers) at German universities must be addressed. This raises the question of the universities' obligation to give a rather small circle of interested people the opportunity to acquire both practical skills and academic training in a peripheral area that does not enjoy much demand on the labour market.

## 2. Scandinavian Studies Today

Without going into further detail about developments at individual German universities here, Scandinavian Studies in its ideal form at the second half or towards the end of the 20th century featured three subject areas, as follows:<sup>2</sup>

- Medieval Scandinavian Studies, which deal with medieval literature, culture and language;
- Modern Scandinavian Studies, which deal with Scandinavian literature from the early modern period to the present and also include cultural studies issues;
- Linguistics, which deal with both synchronic and diachronic aspects.

The best possible equipment of the subject also includes courses in all Scandinavian languages, Danish, Norwegian and Swedish, as well as Icelandic. Likewise, teaching Old Icelandic is not only extremely rich in tradition, but is also an indispensable prerequisite for the study of medieval sources.

Some institutes have achieved this ideal state, or at least have come very close to it. For example, these three subject areas were (and are) covered at the universities of Kiel, Greifswald, Berlin and Freiburg, although not in all cases by three professorships. Berlin has a quite long tradition for a fourth subject area: Scandinavian cultural studies, which is represented with its own professorship. Many other institutes cover at least two areas, mostly Medieval and Modern Scandinavian Studies, such as the institutes in Munich, Frankfurt or Göttingen. (For an overview of the locations of Scandinavian Studies in Germany and the fields of study offered, see [Scheel 2022](#), p. 2 (Table 1) and ("[Fachverband Skandinavistik](#)" n.d.). In Kiel, Greifswald, Freiburg and Flensburg (just Danish Studies) it is possible to study Scandinavian languages as part of the grammar school teacher training programme (cf. "[Dänisch \(Zwei-Fächer-Bachelorstudiengang, Profil Lehramt an Gymnasien\)](#)" n.d.; "[Lehramt Dänisch, Norwegisch oder Schwedisch in Greifswald studieren](#)" n.d.; "[Skandinavische Sprachen als Ergänzungsfach](#)" n.d.; "[Studium am Dänischen Seminar](#)" n.d.).

If we look at the languages that are offered, the universities of Berlin, Greifswald, Kiel and Munich stand out because they had four full lectureships, at least for a long period, and were thus able to put Icelandic on an equal footing with the other languages—this still applies to Kiel and Munich. At many other institutes, only two or three of the languages were (and are) equipped with full posts. In most cases, attempts are made to offer the remaining languages through other (part time) positions or through teaching assignments (Lehraufträge).

In Germany, the financial resources and the range of subjects offered by individual universities also depend on the political considerations of the federal states (Bundesländer), which can have a decisive influence. In addition, Scandinavian Studies is not one of the major subjects of the humanities, as German Studies or history (for example) can claim to be in Germany. This is related to the problem of limited financial and personnel resources. When cost-cutting measures are pending, they often have a greater impact on the smaller than the larger subjects. The position of Scandinavian Studies is therefore often not easy within the universities (cf. [Würth 2008](#), pp. 107–8, 112).

The institute in Göttingen can serve as an example here. Budget cuts have been imposed on the university by the state of Lower Saxony. These cuts have had a particularly strong impact on the Faculty of Philosophy, where the Scandinavian Seminar is located. Last year (2021), the continuation of the entire subject area was up for debate. After the departure of the director in 2020, the only professorship was vacant, and many of the other positions were also only temporarily filled or will become vacant in a few years, as the holders retire. The temptation to simply not fill these positions again and to burden only one subject with job cuts was thus present in the faculty. However, the protest of many institutions and academics from Germany and other countries was successful. Because Scandinavian Studies are only taught in Göttingen in Lower Saxony, the federal state urged the university to retain the subject. The closure of the subject in Göttingen was averted for

the time being, but not without having to endure job cuts. Scandinavian Studies thus seem to be able to continue in Göttingen with both fields of study. However, modern Icelandic, which has been taught regularly since 2008 with four consecutive courses, will probably no longer be offered in the next semesters.

As can be seen from this example, the equipment and orientation of the subject depends on coincidences and internal considerations at the university. On the other hand, the holders of the professorships decide how the subject is structured in concrete terms. They also decide to what extent language teaching can be covered by teaching assignments if no lectureships are set up. Nevertheless, the question also arises as to whether one wants to use this highly problematic instrument. Unfortunately, it plays far too large a role in the German university landscape, and often means that highly qualified academics have to work freelance at precarious wages and without social security.

Another component that has led to changes, and thus to sometimes considerable differences in the subject's study regulations, was the Germany-wide restructuring of the former Magister programmes into BA and the consecutive MA programmes as part of the Bologna process. Although comparability of study achievements was a major goal of the Bologna process, the conversion did not lead to a greater uniformity or consistency in the course of studies. Although this is not the place to compare the study regulations of all institutes in Germany, we will mention just a few examples: Scandinavian Studies can be studied as a two-subject BA (with equal scope of both subjects) in Göttingen for 66 credits, or in Kiel for 70 credit points. In Berlin, Munich and Freiburg a combined degree programme is offered as a core subject for 120 or second subject for 60 credit points, but in Berlin, it is also possible to choose a mono degree programme for 180 credit points ("[Fachspezifische Bestimmungen—Studienfach 'Skandinavistik'](#)" n.d.; "[Studienverlaufsplan für den 2-Fächer-Bachelor of Arts 'Skandinavistik' \(70 LP\)](#)" n.d.; "[Skandinavistik/Nordeuropa-Studien](#)" n.d.; "[Bachelor of Arts Skandinavistik](#)" n.d.; "[Prüfungs- und Studienordnung der Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München für den Bachelorstudiengang Skandinavistik](#)" 2010; "[Prüfungsordnung der Albert-Ludwigs-Universität für den Studiengang Bachelor of Arts \(B.A.\). Anlage B. I. Fachspezifische Bestimmungen für die Hauptfächer. Skandinavistik](#)" n.d.; "[Prüfungsordnung der Albert-Ludwigs-Universität für den Studiengang Bachelor of Arts \(B.A.\). Anlage B. II. Fachspezifische Bestimmungen für die Nebenfächer. Skandinavistik](#)" n.d.). What is behind a Scandinavian Studies degree programme only becomes clear by consulting the study regulations and module lists from the individual institutes.

The courses that are considered essential had to be integrated into the core curriculum (i.e., the area that is compulsory for all students) of the BA programme—in Göttingen, they had to be fitted into the tight corset of 66 credit points. Consequently, not all courses could be continued in the same form, and there was a debate about whether or not some courses should have a place in the core curriculum. In particular, in the institutes where there are three or perhaps even four fields within Scandinavian Studies, there is often competition between those responsible for fitting their own courses into the core curriculum as well as possible.

Another relatively recent development has had an impact on the way in which teaching in Scandinavian Studies can be carried out, and on the requirements imposed on the students. Increasingly, courses in Scandinavian Studies (not only the language courses) are being opened up to students from other subjects for the elective area (Optionalbereich, Schlüsselkompetenzen) in the BA and MA programmes, or they may even be imported from other subjects. In Göttingen, for example, this is achieved with the subjects of comparative literature and world literature, who regularly use courses on medieval as well as modern Scandinavian literature for their own modules. In principle, this development is welcome because these subjects can cooperate and benefit from each other in this way. In particular, the small subjects with fewer students are able to achieve a better utilisation of their courses as a result of this cooperation. On a positive note, students from other subjects can enrich the Scandinavian courses because they bring their explicit knowledge of literary studies. However, it is more difficult to deal with the fact that they often do not have the necessary

skills to read the literature being discussed in the original language—this applies to modern and Old Icelandic, as well as the other Nordic languages. Accordingly, they often do not have access to secondary literature in these languages when writing term papers. One may accept this deficit—for that is what it is, if one is honest—for a broad knowledge of literatures from different countries. Within world literature and comparative literature, the lack of language proficiency may be compensated for by specialisations and by acquiring other skills during the course of studies. However, this should not lead to the language requirements for Scandinavian Studies students being lowered as well.

### 3. Old Icelandic

The recent restructuring and the economisation of studies, which are to be completed as quickly as possible, have resulted in many problems—not least for Old Icelandic. A wide range of questions have had to be solved. For example, in which semester should Old Icelandic lessons best take place? Additionally, to put it somewhat casually, how much Old Icelandic should there be? How much Old Icelandic can and should the students be burdened with?

Given that Old Icelandic represents a basic language skill that will be used in subsequent courses, it must be acquired as early as possible. However, it is also clear that not all introductory courses can be attended in the first semester. Experience also suggests that students find it somewhat easier to cope with Old Icelandic in the second semester or later, when they have become accustomed to the demands of a degree programme and have already become somewhat familiar with the subject. Likewise, the knowledge of the main Scandinavian language acquired in the first semester, but especially the knowledge of modern Icelandic, can support the acquisition of Old Icelandic. Therefore, this course is, in many cases, scheduled for the second semester, as in Kiel and Göttingen (for example).

It is even more difficult to decide how many hours and how many credit points should be allotted to Old Icelandic during the BA, and to which extent advanced courses (which are usually designated as reading courses) should be offered on top of this. All this depends on a number of factors; for example, on the teaching staff available and also on the will of the institute to give weight to the courses of Old Norse literature in general, and to Old Icelandic in particular, within the core curriculum. At most institutes, Old Icelandic is now taught in courses of two hours weekly, with one teaching lesson usually lasting 45 min. Three- or four-hour courses are rather rare, but Freiburg (for example) offers a four-hour course (cf. [“Prüfungsordnung der Albert-Ludwigs-Universität für den Studiengang Bachelor of Arts \(B.A.\). Anlage B. I. Fachspezifische Bestimmungen für die Hauptfächer. Skandinavistik”](#) n.d.).

The offer of advanced (reading) courses and the obligation to attend such courses also varied greatly in the former Magister programmes. Many institutes required a translation from Old Icelandic in the intermediate examination (Zwischenprüfung) after approximately the fourth semester, at least from the main subject students. It was therefore expected that students would maintain, and if possible, expand their knowledge after the Old Icelandic course. Given that a similar examination is no longer envisaged in or after the BA programme, the demands on the students' knowledge of Old Icelandic were significantly reduced.

It is very difficult to obtain an exact overview of the range of Old Icelandic courses offered at German universities, since Old Icelandic is also taught irregularly; for example, in linguistic or German Studies departments. Nevertheless, at least all institutes of Scandinavian Studies that offer more extensive instruction in medieval literature and culture and allow a certain focus in it—for an overview, (cf. [Scheel 2022](#), p. 2 (Table 1))—still have Old Icelandic in their module lists as compulsory courses.<sup>3</sup> After all, a genuine academic engagement with Old Norse literature is only conceivable if the primary sources can be read in the original language. This should be the claim of every philological degree programme, and must also be unmistakably conveyed to the students as a learning and educational goal.

Establishing further instruction in Old Icelandic beyond the introductory course as a compulsory part of the core curriculum is certainly not necessary for students who are primarily interested in modern Scandinavian literature. Yet, it would be desirable if advanced courses were offered for those who want to specialise in Medieval Scandinavian Studies (e.g., in a subsequent MA programme, or even in a doctorate). These students must acquire the competence to work independently with scholarly editions of Old Norse texts, a matter of fact that Stefán Karlsson already pointed out in 1970 (cf. [Karlsson 2016](#) (lecture from 1970)). It is insufficient to rely only on editions for the common reader. Many editions (e.g., in *Íslensk fornrit*) mix texts from different manuscripts and give only partially different readings or variants. Even less information about the variability of medieval texts in manuscripts is provided by translations that are not based on scholarly editions, but on texts that are prepared for a wide readership. The language competence of prospective scholars is a key factor when it is important to take account of textual variability and the adaptation of texts to the particular readership at a given time and in different cultural settings.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, it can be pointed out that a solid knowledge of textual relations and variations, especially in the field of mythological and heroic literature, is important in the academic world's confrontation with right-wing movements and their appropriation of Old Norse texts (cf. [van Nahl 2022](#), pp. 11–12; [Scheel 2022](#), pp. 7–8).

The new organisation of degree programmes, shorter time frames for defined parts of the degree and greater diversity of the subject compared to the time when Old Norse Studies was the only or the dominant field of Scandinavian Studies, are challenging factors for the teaching of Old Icelandic. The circumstances may have changed and the individual institutes may have a slightly different focus—some institutes of Scandinavian Studies emphasise especially the linguistic aspects, while others do not. The traditions of the institutions, the professional environment (cooperation with other disciplines, such as historical linguistics) and the interests of the teachers thus have a certain influence on which direction is taken. Yet, the ability to translate Old Icelandic texts, the development of reading comprehension and the acquisition of necessary grammatical knowledge so that dictionaries and other tools can be used independently remain the basic goals of teaching Old Icelandic. Even though digital media provide many useful tools (e.g., translation programs), these skills will still be necessary for independent academic work.

It is important to respond to the requirements of the present time. New teaching materials that meet the students' needs should be created, so that they can expand upon and practise their knowledge independently. Methods and developments in the teaching of other old languages should be applied more often than has been the case so far.<sup>5</sup> However, the development of new material is hindered by the employment conditions of many teachers. They mostly work on a temporary basis and/or do not teach Old Icelandic as their main task. Often, the Icelandic lecturers are entrusted with it, or the courses are given by non-permanent assistants/early-career researchers.

#### 4. Modern Icelandic

In Scandinavian Studies, language teaching usually aims to bring students to a high level of language proficiency as quickly as possible, so that both primary and secondary literature can be read in the source language. Given that students of Scandinavian Studies mostly begin without any knowledge of the language, the progression must be quite fast and the language teaching has to be very intensive at all levels.

To learn Icelandic, more time and work must be spent to reach a similar level as in the other languages. Whereas in Danish, Swedish and Norwegian, students can understand quite a lot after a relatively short time, in Icelandic, this level is only reached after a much longer time—especially after a stay abroad. The university goal of achieving a very high degree of competence, understanding even complex primary texts effortlessly and being able to follow demanding discussions, is thus harder to achieve for Icelandic than for the other three languages. Icelandic is also ungrateful in the sense that it has fewer similarities to the other languages than they do have to each other, and so knowledge of Icelandic



does not automatically enable or at least facilitate the understanding of the other Nordic languages. This means that the choice of Icelandic always entails learning another language to be able to read the primary literature in the seminars of Modern Scandinavian Studies (which is mainly not in Icelandic). For students who choose Danish, Norwegian or Swedish, learning a second language is recommended, but this is not compulsory at most institutes. Consequently, Icelandic can only be chosen as the main language at a few institutes (e.g., in Kiel or Munich). The permanent positions of the teachers at these institutions also guarantee continuous teaching of the language.

Nevertheless, Icelandic has its place within Scandinavian Studies. It complements and supports the teaching of Old Icelandic, especially where there are no further reading courses after an introductory course. It also enriches the linguistic field of Scandinavian Studies, where it is found. Moreover, classes in Icelandic extend and complete the range of courses offered by the Scandinavian institutes. Icelandic has the charm of the exotic, even more so than the other Nordic languages. It is the icing on the cake, so to speak, in the curriculum. In this respect, it contributes significantly to the attractiveness of the degree programme and the respective institute, even if not all students actually (want to) learn this language.

It can be assumed that this view is shared by most scholars of Scandinavian Studies. However, in the field of modern Scandinavian literature, Icelandic often plays a rather subordinate role. This fact and its impact on the teaching of modern Icelandic should not be underestimated at a time when Modern Scandinavian Studies tend to win out over Medieval Scandinavian Studies. In addition, financial resources are, of course, decisive. Icelandic is probably the language that is most likely to be cut if funds are lacking, if only because fewer students are affected by its discontinuation and because it cannot be chosen as the main language at most institutes anyway. However, there is a certain fluctuation in the entire range of languages offered by the institutes, and (of course) lecturer posts for the other languages are also affected by budget cuts.

At individual universities in Germany, instruction in contemporary Scandinavian languages was offered early in the 20th century. Modern Icelandic was only taught to a very limited extent. Courses were held at the University of Greifswald and at Humboldt University in Berlin for a short time in the 1930s and 1940s. In the second half of the 20th century, modern Icelandic became established at German universities. The peak of this development was the simultaneous existence of four full Icelandic lectureships in Berlin, Greifswald, Kiel and Munich in the 1990s (cf. the list of Icelandic teachers abroad, compiled by (Hauksson et al. n.d.; Hauksson 2019, pp. 75–80)).

While the situation in Kiel and Munich remains unchanged, the post in Berlin was reduced by 50% a few years ago. Fortunately, Iceland will co-finance the position at least in the next years, as it did some years ago. This will enable Icelandic to be learned again to the same extent as Finnish: Both languages can be chosen as a second language (with Danish, Norwegian or Swedish as the main languages) and more advanced courses can be offered. In Greifswald, instruction in Icelandic was discontinued entirely a few years ago, even though it had a very long tradition for the study of the modern Icelandic language and literature. This was marked above all by Bruno Kress (from 1956), who served as a professor of the Old Norse and Icelandic language, literature and culture. After the retirement of Bruno Kress in 1972, a full lectureship in Icelandic continued for a long time, but the position of the Icelandic lecturer Hartmut Mittelstädt was not filled again after he retired a few years ago (i.e., 2018). Icelandic in Germany has thus lost a location that was for a long time important, not only for language teaching, but also for broader topics of Icelandic culture, literature and linguistics.

At many other institutes, attempts have been made to maintain courses in Icelandic through teaching assignments or other solutions (at least to a certain extent). At these institutes, Icelandic seems to be integrated into the Scandinavian Studies programme only to a limited degree. Beyond the language courses, Icelandic topics are covered to a lesser extent. As far as can be seen from the course catalogues, Icelandic is currently offered to

varying degrees in Bonn, Cologne, Erlangen, Frankfurt, Freiburg, Göttingen and Mainz (cf. [“Aktuelles Lehrangebot im Sommersemester 2022” 2022](#); [“Lehrveranstaltungsangebot” n.d.](#); [“Isländisch II. Frankfurt” n.d.](#); [“Vorlesungsverzeichnis Freiburg” n.d.](#); [“Isländisch II. Göttingen” n.d.](#); [“Sprachen Nordeuropas und des Baltikums” n.d.](#)). Here, too, some locations have been lost or will soon be lost. In Göttingen, the post that was previously available for Icelandic will probably have to be used for teaching Medieval Scandinavian Studies, as mentioned. Icelandic is not offered in Tübingen at the moment. The subject has recently suffered drastic restrictions there, and can now only be chosen as a minor subject with a focus on medieval studies. Old Icelandic is therefore still taught there (cf. [“Skandinavistik” n.d.](#)).

In Erlangen, Icelandic courses are offered at the language centre of the university. They do not seem to have a close connection to the subject of Scandinavian Studies. Similar to Greifswald, this seems particularly unfortunate, because under the direction of Hubert Seelow, it was considered as an Icelandic centre within Scandinavian Studies in Germany. Icelandic literature and culture had a high status here, and there were regular courses in Icelandic that were integrated into the curriculum. Even though there was no lectureship, instruction in Icelandic was provided by teaching assignments for most of the period over 1991–2016. After Hubert Seelow’s retirement in 2016, this focus on Icelandic literature and culture was lost (cf. [“Studiengang Skandinavistik” 2021](#)).

Similar circumstances can be found at the institute in Cologne. Language teaching is (and was) mainly covered by teaching assignments. During the tenure of Gert Kreutzer (until 2005), a certain number of events on Icelandic literature were also offered there, in addition to pure language teaching. His editorial work and research, like Hubert Seelow’s in Erlangen, had a strong focus on Icelandic culture. At present, the teaching of Icelandic in Cologne does not seem to have the same integration in the subject as it had in former days.

The tasks of language lecturers at Scandinavian institutes, as at other philological institutes, are varied and the courses are directed at a wide audience. A distinction must be made between language teaching aimed at the Hörer aller Fakultäten (listeners of all faculties) and language teaching within philological subjects (e.g., Scandinavian Studies). In the former case, the goal is to develop skills independently of further academic training—people should be able to understand and express themselves in the respective language. In the latter case, language teaching is part of the academic training in the corresponding philological discipline, and is the basis for dealing with language and culture (including literary texts and products of the media) under academic requirements. It is shaped by the framework in which it is embedded, because first of all, it has responsibility towards the philological institution where it takes place. The aim of this kind of language teaching is therefore necessarily different from that of the aforementioned, at least in the advanced language courses.

Some universities have set up language centres that teach courses that are open to all students. This solution is certainly favourable when it comes to facilitating access to language courses for the most diverse groups of students. However, it cannot be expected that a university always offers both ways of learning a language (i.e., independent or embedded in a subject). This is all the more true when the language is smaller and fewer people are interested in it. Icelandic and other minor languages are rarely located at these language centres (as mentioned, this is the case in Erlangen). Courses offered through the Scandinavian institutes, not at least the Icelandic classes, are thus often open to all students at the university. This situation of having to serve students with different backgrounds and needs is well-known in the context of teaching Nordic languages at universities in German-speaking countries. This is a challenge, but experience shows that it strengthens rather than burdens the subject and the teaching of the language in question.

We would like to emphasise that the language lecturers (and also other language teachers) at the institutes of Scandinavian Studies not only offer language courses, but also provide cultural mediation, which is important and should not be underestimated. First, because many of them come from the Nordic countries, they naturally have a first-hand

knowledge of the contemporary culture and society of their home countries. This is a value in itself and an important “capital” of the institutes. Through it, the institutes are provided with experience, knowledge and networks that enrich their activities. Meanwhile, lecturers and language teachers often organise cultural events (e.g., visits by authors, readings, conferences, exhibitions, etc.), which complement everyday teaching and also reach audiences other than the students of the subject. This cultural mediation is often performed in good cooperation with other institutions and organisations in the lecturer’s home country and in Germany (e.g., with various cultural institutes, publishers, embassies and the joint committee of the Nordic countries, which support the work of the lecturers).

### 5. Why Is Language Teaching at Universities Still Relevant Today? Some Comments

Language teaching at universities is generally under pressure. The reasons for this are (for example) that other options have emerged for those who want to acquire foreign language skills rather than studying them as university subjects. These include: (1) the provision of language teaching at institutions other than universities at home, abroad and on the Internet have become more varied; (2) travel (including study or work visits) has become easier, more affordable and more common; (3) access to foreign media and cultural materials has become easier and more plentiful due to the Internet; and (4) contact with people abroad has likewise become easier and more intensive due to the rapid development of new media.

Other circumstances stand in the way of a diverse range of language courses at universities. It is significant, for example, that scientific material is, to a very large extent, published in English. Therefore, the role of English in this area is growing at the expense of other languages. Universities are also offering more and more courses taught in English. This makes it easier for exchange students to take advantage of the teaching provided by the host universities. However, this concession to foreign students does not encourage them to learn the language and become acquainted with the culture of the host country as well as they would if they had to cope with the language and attend courses in the national language.<sup>6</sup>

Questions then arise regarding the justification of language teaching at universities. There are a few things to consider. It is largely undisputed that foreign language skills are an important factor in promoting international understanding. Mastering a foreign language creates better conditions for communication and friendship between people of different nationalities. Similarly, language learning broadens horizons, and allows access to cultural and scientific material that would otherwise be inaccessible to those who have no knowledge of the language in question. At the same time, it opens up direct access to the views of those who speak out on a topic. It is important that individuals are able to use a variety of media, and everyone should have the opportunity to learn about other nations’ views on various topics in an unmediated way. This applies equally to academic discussions.

Language skills are an absolute foundation in all aspects of a philological subject. This is true for both modern and ancient languages. The social and technological innovations that have arisen in recent years (e.g., translation programmes) do not make these skills obsolete. In the undergraduate courses, students must therefore continue to be enabled to use texts in the original language. Translations are important and are certainly helpful, but when dealing with a text academically, it is inevitable to be able to read the sources in the original language. The importance of teaching Old Icelandic has waned in recent decades, and with it (not least), the acquisition of this skill has been somewhat lost sight of. It is not satisfactory for MA students to specialise in Medieval Scandinavian Studies without further developing the limited knowledge of Old Icelandic that they acquire in an introductory course in the first year of study.

Teachers of Icelandic and other Nordic languages, apart from language teaching in the narrow sense, do cultural promotion work that is not only important and respected within Scandinavian institutes, but also extends to a wider group of consumers outside



them. In times when efficiency, economic benefit and profit seem to be the highest precept, the Scandinavian institutes (among others) are eminently important because of their role in promoting culture. Culture and economic profit are, after all, interdependent: “Culture sells the fish”—“Menningin selur fiskinn”, as the former Icelandic president, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, used to say.

Finally, we would like to recall that cultural diversity is a goal of international policy that some organisations support and have put on their agenda. For example, ([United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples 2007](#)), cf. in particular, articles 13, 14, 15 and 16) and ([“European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages” n.d.](#)) mention efforts to preserve and promote language and cultural diversity. If taken seriously, universities have a great obligation to pursue and support this cultural and linguistic diversity. As can be seen from the examples that we have gathered in this article, it is most certainly a challenge for universities to do this within the limited financial means at their disposal. In addition, they have to take into account the needs of business and politics in terms of the efficiency and usefulness of the study programmes and research. Unfortunately, this does not always create a favourable framework for the cultivation of diversity and the flourishing of small subjects.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, I.K. and M.H.; methodology, I.K. and M.H.; writing—original draft preparation, I.K. and M.H.; writing—review and editing, I.K. and M.H. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Scandinavian study programmes are also offered at the University of Vienna, Austria, and at the universities of Zurich and Basel, Switzerland; classes in both Old Icelandic and modern Icelandic are taught at these universities. Given that we are not familiar with the university policies in these countries, we have decided not to analyse the conditions for teaching Icelandic there.
- <sup>2</sup> For an overview of the history of the subject in general and at individual universities, see e.g., [Henningsson and Pelka \(1984\)](#) and [Scheel \(2022\)](#); Berlin: [Hoffmann \(2010\)](#); Bochum: [Ruhr-Universität Bochum \(2005\)](#); Bonn: [Uecker \(2011\)](#); Göttingen: [Paul \(1985\)](#) <http://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/91592.html> (accessed on 17 August 2022); Greifswald: [Frieze \(1993\)](#); Kiel: [Walker \(2017\)](#); Leipzig: [Kößling \(2003\)](#), [Zernack \(2013\)](#); München: [Bödl and Kauko \(2005\)](#); see also the following websites: Berlin: ([Hube n.d.](#)); Freiburg: ([Behschnitt et al. n.d.](#)); Köln: ([Baumgarten n.d.](#)).
- <sup>3</sup> In Erlangen, there are modules that introduce into medieval literature. Courses in Old Norse seem to be offered (irregularly), but they are not compulsory according to the module catalogue, (cf. [“Studiengang Skandinavistik” 2021](#)).
- <sup>4</sup> As an example of a recent research project dealing with the variance of textual transmission, the publication *New Studies in the Manuscript Tradition of Njáls saga* can be mentioned ([Lethbridge and Óskarsdóttir 2018](#)).
- <sup>5</sup> With the books by [Egerer and Bauer \(2014, 2016\)](#), there are already examples on the German market that take these new requirements into account.
- <sup>6</sup> With regard to language diversity at universities, the study by [Höder and Petersen \(2019\)](#) can serve as an example. From the material collected, the desire of staff and students for both more English at Christian-Albrechts-Universität (more English language courses, access to all kinds of information in English, English-language study programmes and courses) and more German (improvement of German language skills (foreign students), promotion of German as a language of communication and science) can be identified (cf. Chapters 3.7.2 und 3.7.3).

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