

**EXCHANGE REPORT****Name**Amanda Christianson**Year and semester for exchange**2026 Spring**Exchange university**University of Iceland**Degree programme**MSc Computer Science

A semester of hiking, cyber and machine learning

Before departure

I knew from the beginning of my studies that I wanted to do an exchange. However, I changed my mind about which master's programme to apply to last minute, and with that the recommended semester for an exchange changed. Therefore, I missed the application window and instead applied in the late application round during the fall before my exchange. I chose to go to Iceland to explore how the Nordic culture there compared to Sweden's. Additionally, they had some interesting technical courses. Moving to Iceland was easy, especially as a Nordic national. The only thing I prepared before leaving was applying for a kennitala or system ID number. This was done by sending a quick email with a filled-out form to Skatturinn. Note that this number is not the same as a personal identification number (also called kennitala). Some Swedish students applied for the latter instead, by visiting an office in Iceland. The personal identification number allows you to apply for housing benefits, but does require you to register a legal domicile in Iceland.

Upon arrival

The spring semester started on the 12th of January, and I arrived on the Thursday the week before. The time before the start of the semester was spent getting the keys to my room, buying any needed furniture and opening an Icelandic bank account. Opening a bank account was very easy to do since I had already gotten by kennitala. To open my account, I booked a time online and then went to the office where they guided me through the account setup. Any invoices are then sent automatically to your bank account since it is connected to the kennitala. I also had to register with the university to get my login to the university network, e-mail and Canvas. This was done at the University Centre and only took a couple of minutes. I recommend coming to Iceland at least one weekday before the start of the semester to set this up. This way you have access to your schedule and your courses on Canvas ahead of time. The semester started right away with courses the 12th of January. During the afternoon and evening of the first three days, the university held orientation days for us international students. There were also some Erasmus (ESN) events going on in connection with these. The orientation days consisted of speeches, mentor mingles, speed-friending, a 90-minute crash-course to Icelandic, karaoke and a pub-quiz. I really appreciated the orientation days and found friends there that I spent my exchange with.

University and studies

University of Iceland, or Háskóli Íslands, offers courses within many different subjects including non-technical subjects. I was able to find enough computer science courses that fitted into both my program and my interests. However, the number of such courses was limited. Many of the courses are labelled as "Undergraduate and Graduate" with a higher minimum grade requirement for the

advanced level. All my courses were taught in English, and I never had a problem with a lecturer changing into Icelandic. There are many international students at Háskóli Íslands and I was never the only non-Icelandic speaker. The schedule was not too different from the one at KTH. The main difference was that they use set schedules so that the same course has the same time slots each week. This is something to keep in mind if you are considering choosing courses with overlapping schedules.

Destination and valuable tips

Iceland is in many ways very similar to Sweden. The grocery stores are filled with Swedish foods so you never have to miss Swedish sweets such as Frödinge kladdkaka or kexchoklad. Especially the grocery store Kronan has many Swedish brands, as does the small Krumbúðin close to campus. The language is similar to Swedish in writing, but not similar enough that I could understand full sentences. A surprising number of Icelanders that I met have also lived in Sweden for some time and are happy to test out their Swedish with you! Despite the country being very similar to Sweden, there are some differences. In stores, employees are very friendly but will generally only speak to you if approached. At the university, both administrative staff and lecturers are more relaxed than at KTH. I experienced less of a “professional barrier” between me and the Icelandic staff. This is reflected in the teaching, where it is normal (and encouraged) for students to interrupt the lecturer to add their own thoughts on the subject. Icelanders, and in particular Icelandic students, can be very blunt and matter-of-fact. They don’t do it to offend, and it is usually directed at themselves, but don’t expect them to sugarcoat things. When it comes to the weather, be sure to bring clothes suitable for rain, snow and lots of wind. The weather in Iceland is unpredictable. It can quickly turn from sunny to hail in a matter of minutes. This is especially important to keep in mind if you go exploring Iceland in a car or hiking. Always check the weather and the road conditions on the app SafeTravel. It is not uncommon that the roads close overnight or even while you are driving to your destination.

Financials

I received the Erasmus Scholarship but applied for no further stipends. Iceland is expensive, both when it comes to housing and food. If you want to find cheap(er) groceries, Bonus is a good option. For furniture, there is a Jysk a 15-minute bus ride from the university which often has sales. There is also an IKEA a bit further away. If you get a student card from the university, you get discounts at some stores and at the student pub. The university gym is very affordable and less crowded than the World Class gyms. For clothing, there are a lot of second-hand stores in downtown Reykjavík. Thinking back, it would have been worth putting some effort into applying for scholarships.

Accommodation

The university does not guarantee housing for the students. I initially found a private rental sharing an apartment with a couple of roomies on HousingAnywhere, which the university suggested. However, I also signed up to the Student Housing, or Stúdentagarðar, waiting list in the beginning of October. In mid-November, I got an offer for a room in a dorm with private bathrooms and a shared kitchen. After a few emails with HousingAnywhere, my landlord was kind enough to let me cancel my private rental. The downside to the Student Housing room was that I had to pay rent for December as well, since the previous student had already ended their lease. This also happened to other people at the dorm due to the gap between the fall and spring semester. Note that, if you get your own apartment (not just a room) through Student Housing, it will likely be non-furnished with the option to rent a bed. This means not kitchen utensils, no table and no chairs. The rent for my room with a shared kitchen was around 130000 ISK or 10.000 SEK.

Courses

RAF622M Machine Learning for Earth Observation powered by Supercomputers (6 ECTS): This course consisted of a midterm and a large project which we worked on the entire semester. The project aimed to give us practical experience training a simple model (or fine-tuning a foundation model) on satellite data for land cover classification. The course is a great opportunity to see if this is a subject

you would like to continue working with, as it is taught in collaboration with the Jülich Supercomputing Centre in Germany. This course will count towards my course specialization.

MAS202M Applied data analysis (6 ECTS): This course is taught in a flipped-classroom style following the book “An Introduction to Statistical Learning” and accompanying YouTube videos. You are free to choose if you want to use Python or R. I found the course interesting, especially as it provides hands-on experience with more foundational data analysis methods. This course will count towards my course specialization.

TÖL213M Applied Cryptography (6 ECTS): This course presents some foundational cryptographic methods and allows you to compare the security and performance of different methods by implementing them yourself. The department is very active regarding cryptography, and many lectures and workshops are held outside of the courses. These are advertised by the lecturer of the course. This course will count towards my elective credits.

MEX020G Icelandic Nature and Cultural Legacy (10 ECTS): I highly recommend this course! You are given lectures on Icelandic history, literature, geology and biology. It was a great way to get a thorough introduction to the country. Note that, even if the course is not difficult, it does require some work in the form of multiple assignments and a mandatory final exam.

Leisure and social activities

I spent my spare time either hiking or visiting the pools. Icelanders have a strong tradition of going to outdoor pools all year-round. The pools are a great way to immerse yourself in the culture, and they are especially nice when it is below zero. Despite having never hiked before coming to Iceland, it became a recurring event and a new hobby for me during my exchange. There are WhatsApp groups for students that want to hike together. As a bonus, many of the hikes have thermal hot springs!



Sustainability

There is no other option than to fly to Iceland during the winter. During the summer months there is a ferry from Denmark. There are no trains in Iceland, instead the public transit consists of buses. There are plenty of second-hand stores and many group chats for students selling or giving away their furniture, books and clothes. Household waste is always separated to be recycled in Iceland, with different bins for paper, plastic, metal and organic waste.

Other recommendations and observations

I highly recommend renting a car and exploring Iceland! Take the opportunity to go hiking. If I were to redo my exchange, I would have attended more of the department's open lectures and workshops in cyber security and supercomputing. Even if the courses require effort, I felt that it was easier to get higher grades (and to pass) than at KTH. So take the opportunity to network and expand your subject knowledge outside of the courses as well!