



**Opening address
by the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the conference
“Molecular biology – the position and vision of the
discipline”
Conference in honour of Dr. Guðmundur Eggertsson
University of Iceland
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Kæri Guðmundur

Distinguished professors, scientists and researchers

Ladies and gentlemen

Just over thirty years ago the University of Iceland was still traditionally Icelandic in spirit; its main faculties were confined to training for specific professions: clergymen, lawyers, teachers – and also doctors, engineers and business administrators. The research dimension was acknowledged, admittedly, but did not have priority.

The establishment of the university had been in its day the product of the campaign for national independence and the impressive main building on Suðurgata, carved in the spirit of the rocks that give Icelandic nature such majesty and character, was a confirmation that Iceland had achieved equal status to that of other nations.

Thirty years ago, the global challenge created by scientific cooperation around the world was not a decisive element in the university's activities. But around that time a turning point was reached. Young scientists, trained at many of the world's most renowned establishments of learning, returned to the country of their birth and began building up courses in new disciplines, determined to be guided solely by the most stringent criteria observed by the international scientific community.

Dr. Guðmundur Eggertsson proved to be a man of outstanding achievements in this respect, not only an original and brilliant scientist

and intellectual, but also an innovator and an entrepreneur in his field. He blazed new trails and I can assure you that it was not always an easy task to launch new disciplines at the University of Iceland during that time. I know this from my own experience, because I too had to break new ground at the university in the early 1970s.

I have sometimes cited as an example of the situation at that time, that when I searched through the university library, a week before giving my first lecture, for works on the subject I was to begin teaching, only three copies were found in the whole library. The authorities' ideas about teaching new subjects were clearly that nothing more was needed than to appoint a lecturer who would turn up twice a week and talk for two hours at a time, then go home and think to himself. I had to converse with my students in the cafeteria of the Nordic House, which admittedly had the advantage of offering very nice cakes, albeit not very wholesome ones. We had no offices, no facilities for the first years, and when I asked for a room for tutorial groups I was assigned, after a complicated bureaucratic dialogue, one of the largest lecture theatres on the campus.

The University of Iceland in the early 1970s was clearly not ready to fulfil the requirement that came with a new generation of scientists and researchers.

I relay this personal experience to you here today in order to give you a sense of how outstanding and extraordinary an achievement it was for Dr. Guðmundur Eggertsson to succeed in those years in building up both teaching and research in molecular biology at a university, which in many respects was still at that time a 19th century phenomenon.

The success of his endeavours not only transformed the Icelandic scientific community but also laid the groundwork for wide-ranging international scientific contributions, a groundwork which enabled Iceland to become at the outset of the 21st century one of the world's most fascinating centres for research and scientific discoveries in this field, paved the way for a new dimension in treating many of the most difficult diseases of our times and also contributed to engaging our entire nation, our democratic institutions and the political leadership in an urgent and profound debate on how to combine civilised society, a community based on solid human rights and a profound respect for universal ethical values with the burning need for scientific progress in biology, medicine, biotechnology and other related fields.

It has been said that the clearest illustration of the importance of molecular biology in our day and age is that in terms of science and technology, this new century will probably be known as "the age of molecular biology". It is no small achievement for a small nation to be a

pioneer and decisive participant in such advances – and in this respect Dr. Guðmundur Eggertsson has played one of the greatest roles. His life's work has taken us to the forefront and on behalf of the people of Iceland I would like to express my gratitude to him, on this great occasion when international and Icelandic scientists gather to honour Dr. Guðmundur Eggertsson and discuss some of the most burning and fascinating issues in this field of science and discoveries, a field which is also a testing ground for what kind of human society we desire to be in the future.

Molecular biology constitutes in many ways the crossroads where the essence of scientific progress, the fundamental questions of classical philosophy, the profound nature of our democracy and civilised community come together, where we are urged to become universal in our approach, our thinking, our conclusions and our direction – in this sense we are witnessing a new renaissance where the comprehensive nature of human existence and our complete understanding of our future direction replaces narrow specialisation as the core of scientific dialogue, a dialogue which cannot be restricted to one particular field alone but must also embrace those fundamental issues which relate to our very existence both as individuals and as a society, and indeed as the human race.

It is a fascinating destiny for the small Icelandic nation to have become both the testing ground and the battleground for this debate, a destiny that has brought us the task of creating new laws and regulations, which constitute a framework for scientific research, a debate that has tested the essence of how we combine democracy and human rights with the force of scientific progress.

Other nations might have been more hesitant in such endeavours but for the descendants of those Vikings who a thousand years ago both discovered America and founded the first democratic parliament in the world this has indeed been a fascinating and welcoming task, akin to the spirit of discovery which inspired our ancestors in earlier times.

The people of Iceland will with great interest follow closely the results of your deliberations and research in the years to come; and we are indeed deeply grateful to all who have made this journey possible. There, Dr. Guðmundur Eggertsson has been indeed both a pioneer and an innovator, a leader and a visionary, and it is with a profound pride that we honour him here today.