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Changing Migration Patterns: Long-Term Trends in International Migration in Iceland from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present

HUGVÍSINDASVIÐ

Looking/ longing back or and planning ahead (Statue of Karl Oskar and Kristina, characters of Vilhelm Mobergs books on the Emigrant)



International migration – Foreign influence
Iceland from an international perspective

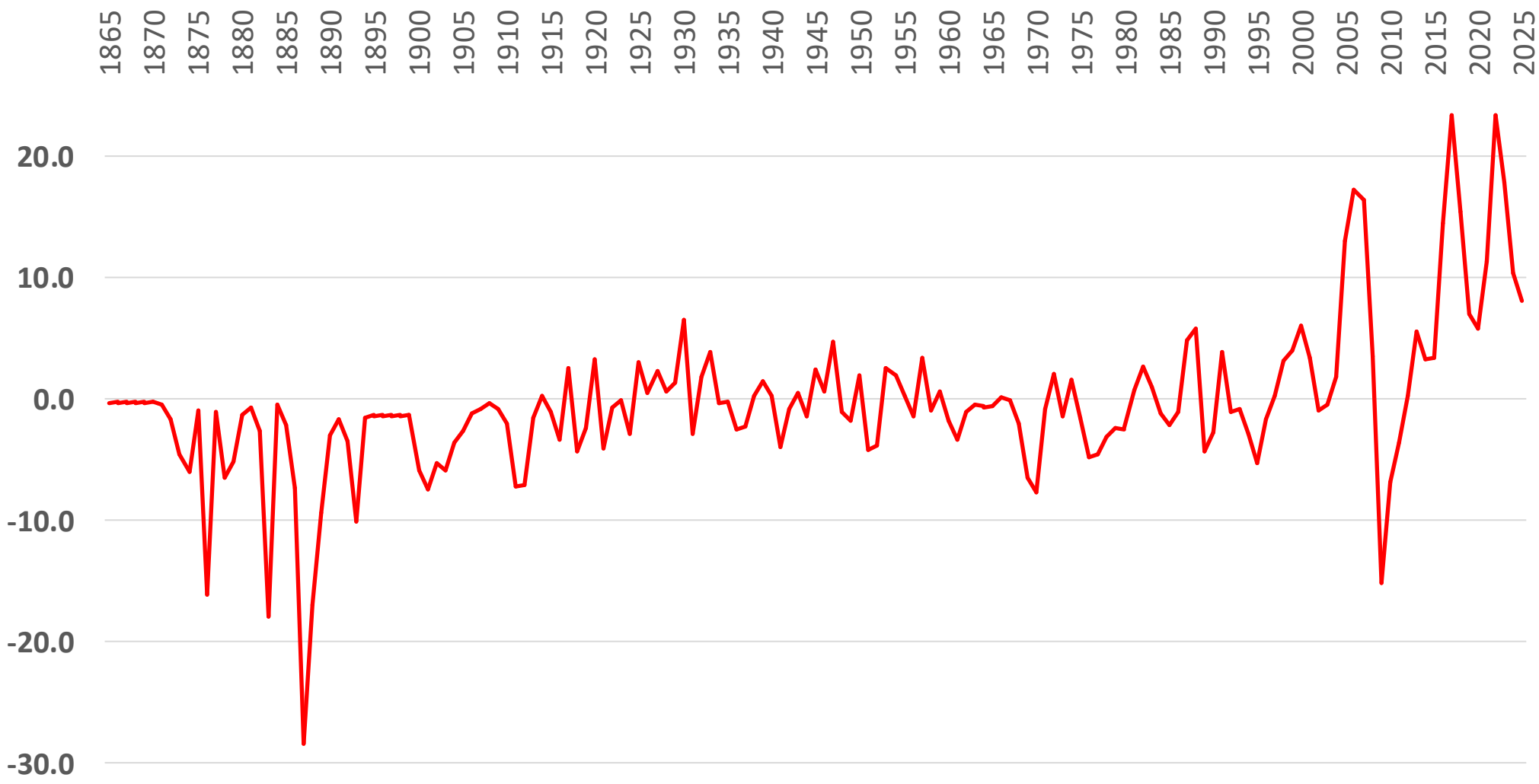
- Immigration of little importance in Iceland until the 1990s – Proportion of immigrants low in Iceland until 2000.
- Other counties in Western Europe facing large immigration flows after 1950
- The story: Iceland remained homogenous until the late 1990s. Immigrants counted for less than 5% of the population until 2000.
- Now the proportion of immigrants is higher than in most other European societies

- This is all true but I would like to argue that story is more complicated.

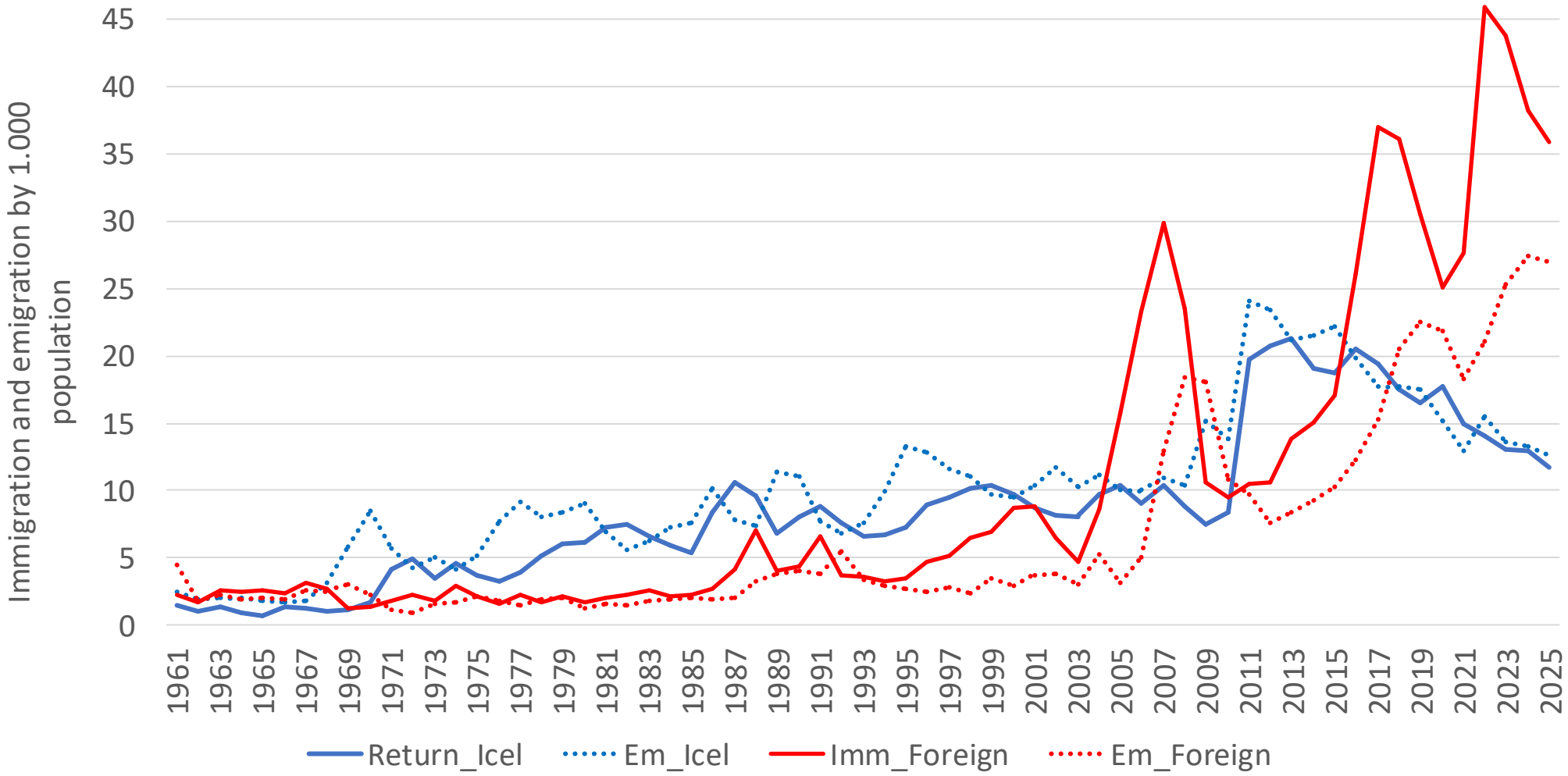
International migration and international influences have always been of large importance for Icelandic society.

We tend to underestimate the important ties we had with other countries during the 20th century.

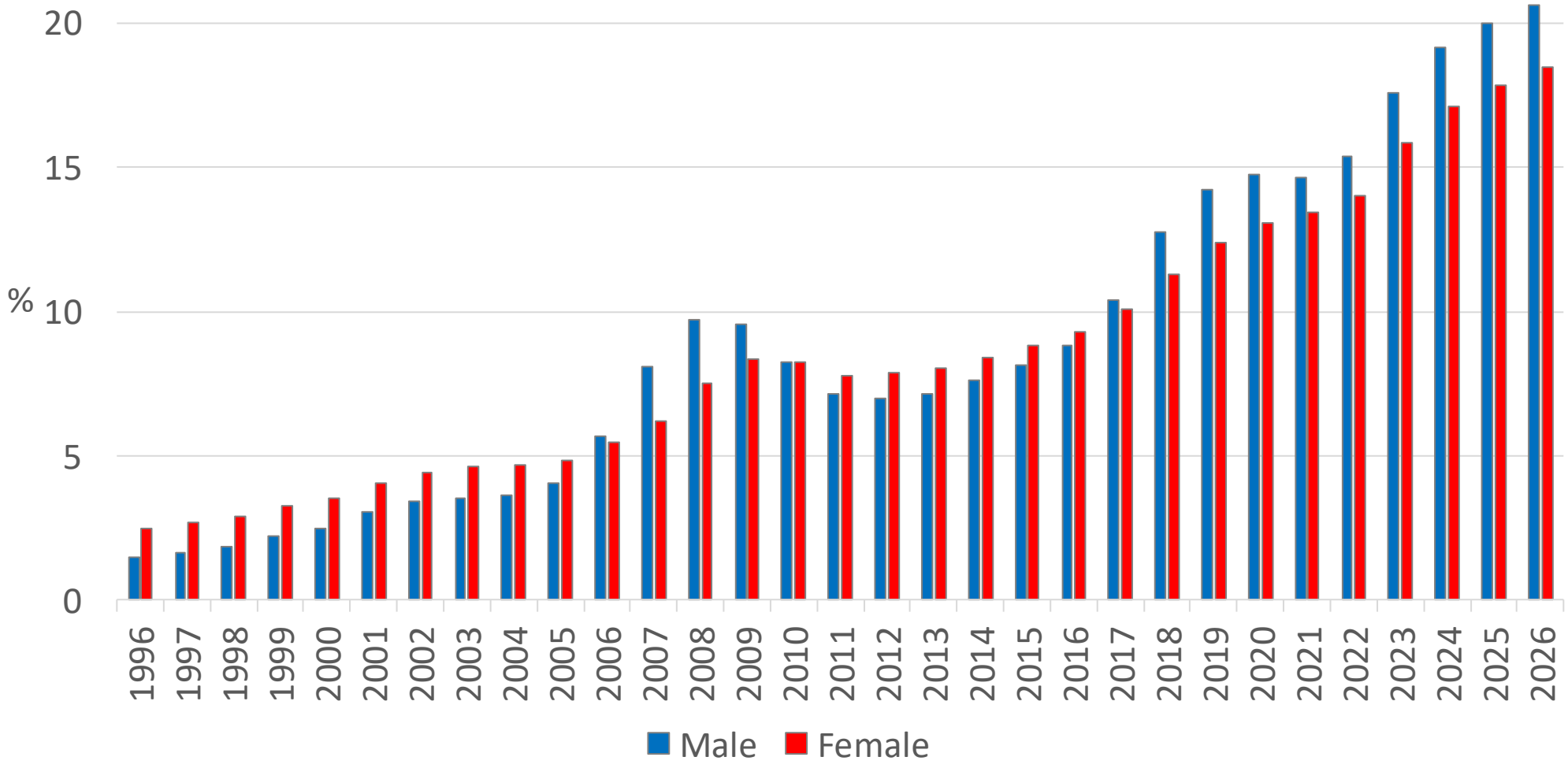
Net international migration. Iceland 1865-2026 (per 1.000 population)



Immigration and emigration by nationality 1961-2025



Immigrants in Iceland 1996-2026 (%)
(People born abroad with both parents born abroad)



Population in Iceland by age and background 1996 and 2026

	0-19 years		20-49 years		50 years +	
	1996	2026	1996	2026	1996	2026
Immigrants	0,5	7,5	3,0	32,2	2,2	12,0
Second generation immigrants	0,2	7,9	0,1	0,4	0,0	0,1
Mixed background (one parent born abroad)	5,3	12,6	2,2	4,7	0,6	1,8
Born abroad, both parents born in Iceland	2,6	2,4	0,9	2,1	0,3	0,7
No foreign background	91,3	69,6	93,8	60,5	96,9	85,4

Mobile population – Seasonal migration common
Does this make the decision to emigrate easier?

- Urbanizations started late (1901: 10% lives in towns with more than 1,000 inhabitants)
- Population extremely mobile
  - 95% tenant farmers
  - Seasonal migration to fishing site
- South and west versus east.





Saltfiskverkun á Seyðisfirði á fyrri hluta 20. aldar.
Ljósm.: Ljósmyndasafn Austurlands

Example of Seyðisfjörður in the Eas– The choice between long distance internal migration and emigration?

- Population more than doubled in just a few years towards the end of the century 900 in 1901
- More than 10% of household headed by foreigners, fishermen and servants coming from Norway, Faroe islands, and distant places in Iceland
- Women more numerous than men
- Long distant migration common

(from fishing areas in the south-west)

- Economic depression after 1900
- Emigration intensified



Geographical background of emigrants living in Seyðisfjörður – 1902-1904. Migration before emigration

Backround	Number	%
Born in Seyðisfjörður	12	14,0%
Born in other places in Múlasýslur, migrated to Seyðisfjörður from Múlasýslur.	27	31,4%
Migrated from to Seyðisfjörður from other places in Múlasýslur, but born outside the area	12	14,0%
Born outside Múlasýslur and migrated to Seyðisfjörður from distant places (outside Múlasýslur).	35	40,7%
Total	86	

What impact did the emigration to the Americas in the late 19th and early 20th century have on Icelandic society?

- The emigration more pronounced than in most other European countries.
- Return migration less pronounced than in the other Nordic countries.
- Return migrants bringing innovations to Icelandic society? (Sweden: Return of innovation).
- The impact of people who returned widely unresearched in Iceland!

But other foreign influences

- Iceland part of Denmark util 1918/1944
- Icelandic elite stayed in Denmark for their education and many of them moved permanently to Denmark.
- Important collaboration between the Nordic countries at an early date after 1910.
    - Family law, child welfare, education in the Nordic countries (Nordic family commission)
- After 1960s Nordic agreements regarding movements between the countries (the possibility to move, work and study within the area)
- Growth in the number of students studying abroad after 1960s.
- European Economic Area (EEA) in 1992

World War II – Occupation by British Forces
Postwar period – Bilateral treaty with USA

- Occupation in May 1940 (arrival of American soldiers 1941)
- Bilateral treaty in 1951. USA base in Keflavik

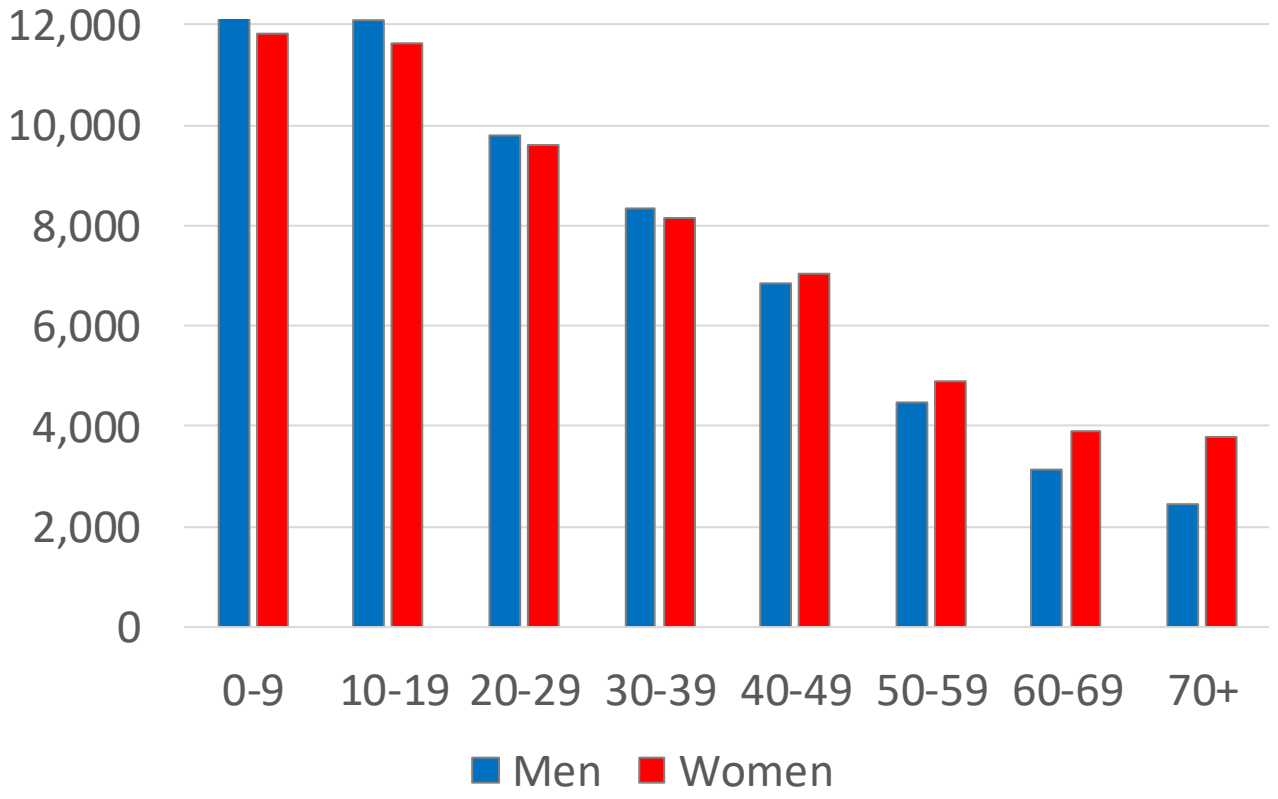




Icelandic population in 1940 by sex and age group
British occupation: Economic boom and Moral panic?

- Total population of Iceland 120,000
- Population of Reykjavík 38,000
- British and American troops B
  - between 30,000 and 50,000
  - mainly stationed in Reykjavik and vicinity

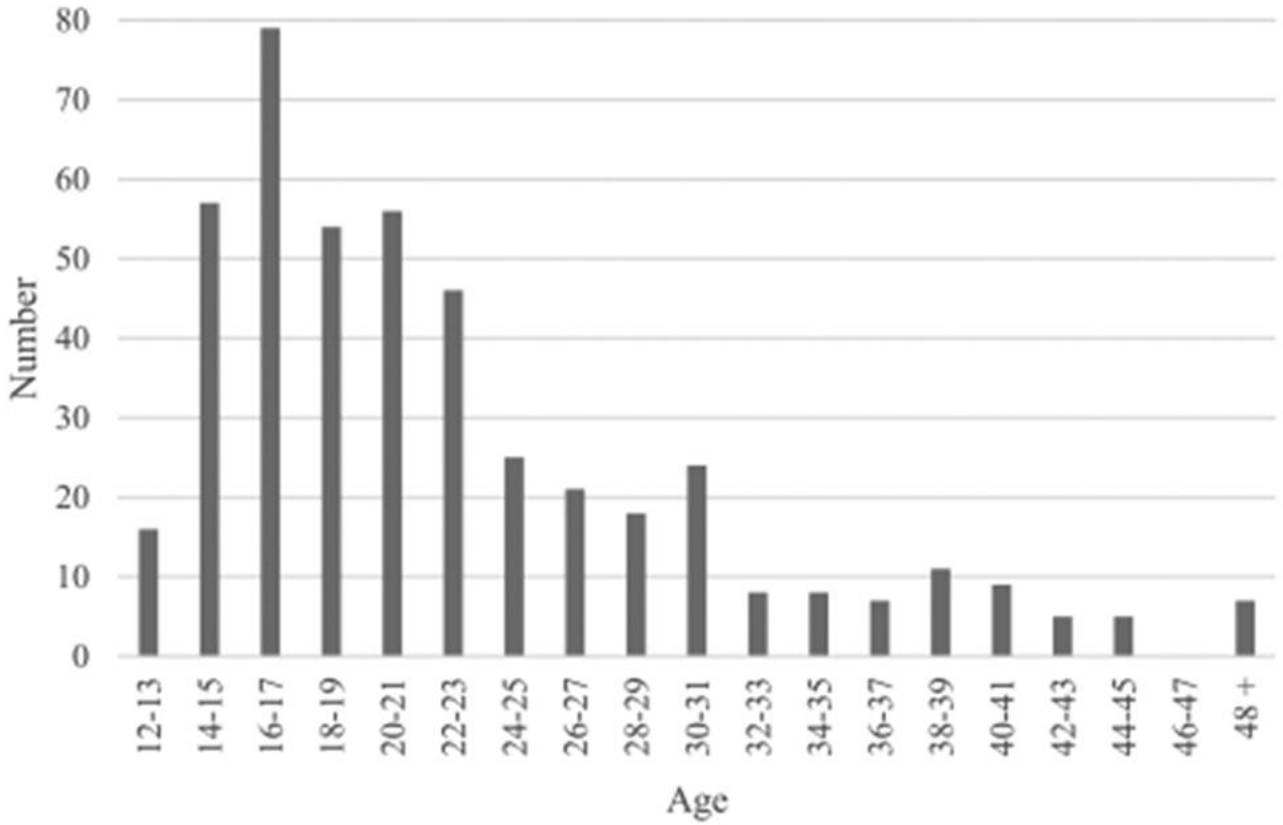




Number of Icelandic females, who according to police reports had sexual relatkons with British soldiers Ólöf G. (2020)

Figure 1. Number of Icelandic females who, according to police reports, were seen as likely to have had sexual relations with British soldiers in 1941.

Source: Magnúss, *Virkið í norðri*, vol. 1., 626–27



Influence of the British and later the American forces and the Base in Keflavik – Controversies

- Anti-occupation movement strong – Was postwar Iceland being occupied or defended?
- Cultural sovereignty: Would the presence of the American forces weaken the Icelandic language and culture.
- Popular culture
- Keflavik becoming the town of rock
- American TV and the decision to

establish Icelandic TV in 1965

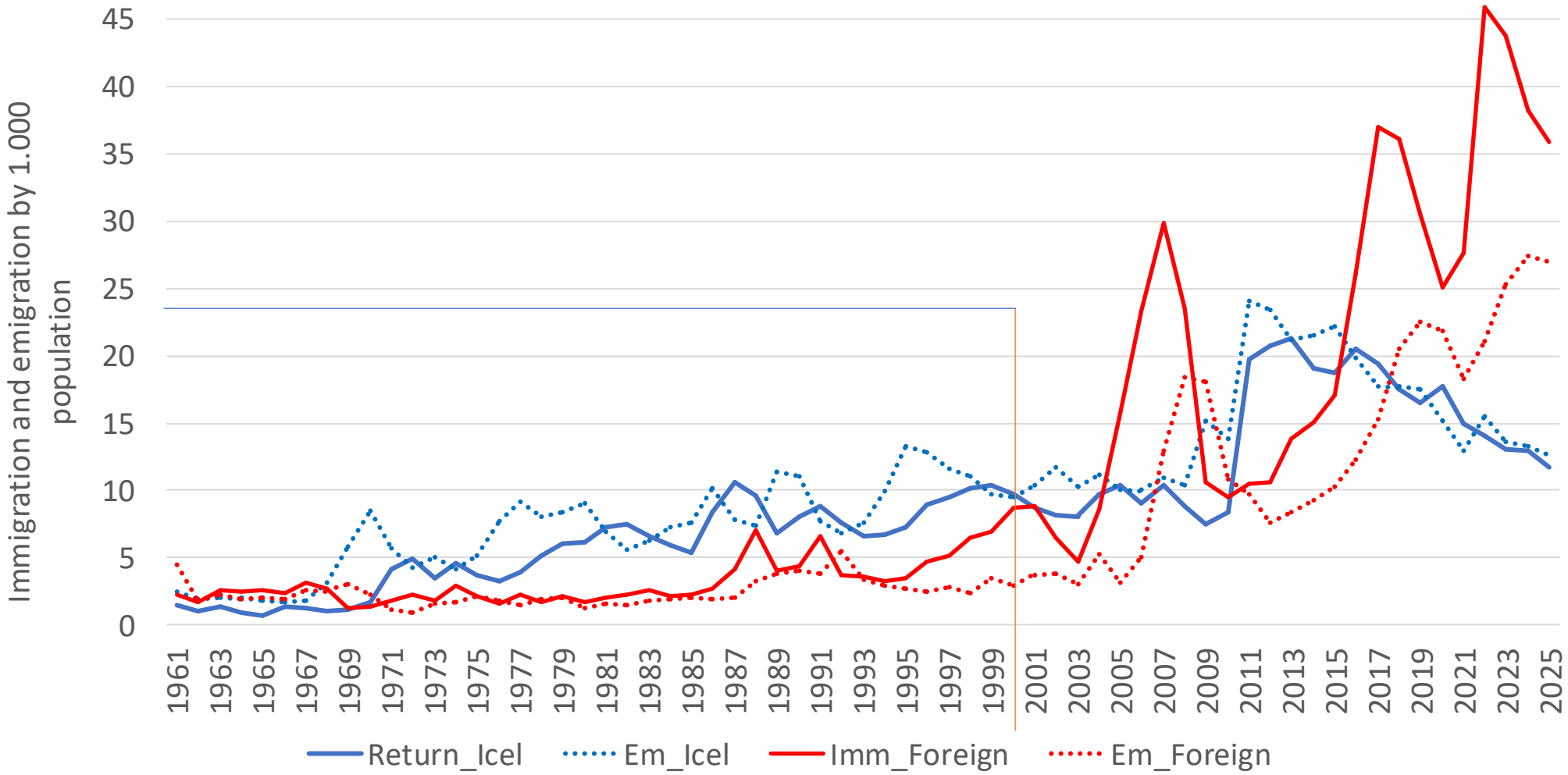
Other American influences. Many

Icelanders studied in USA

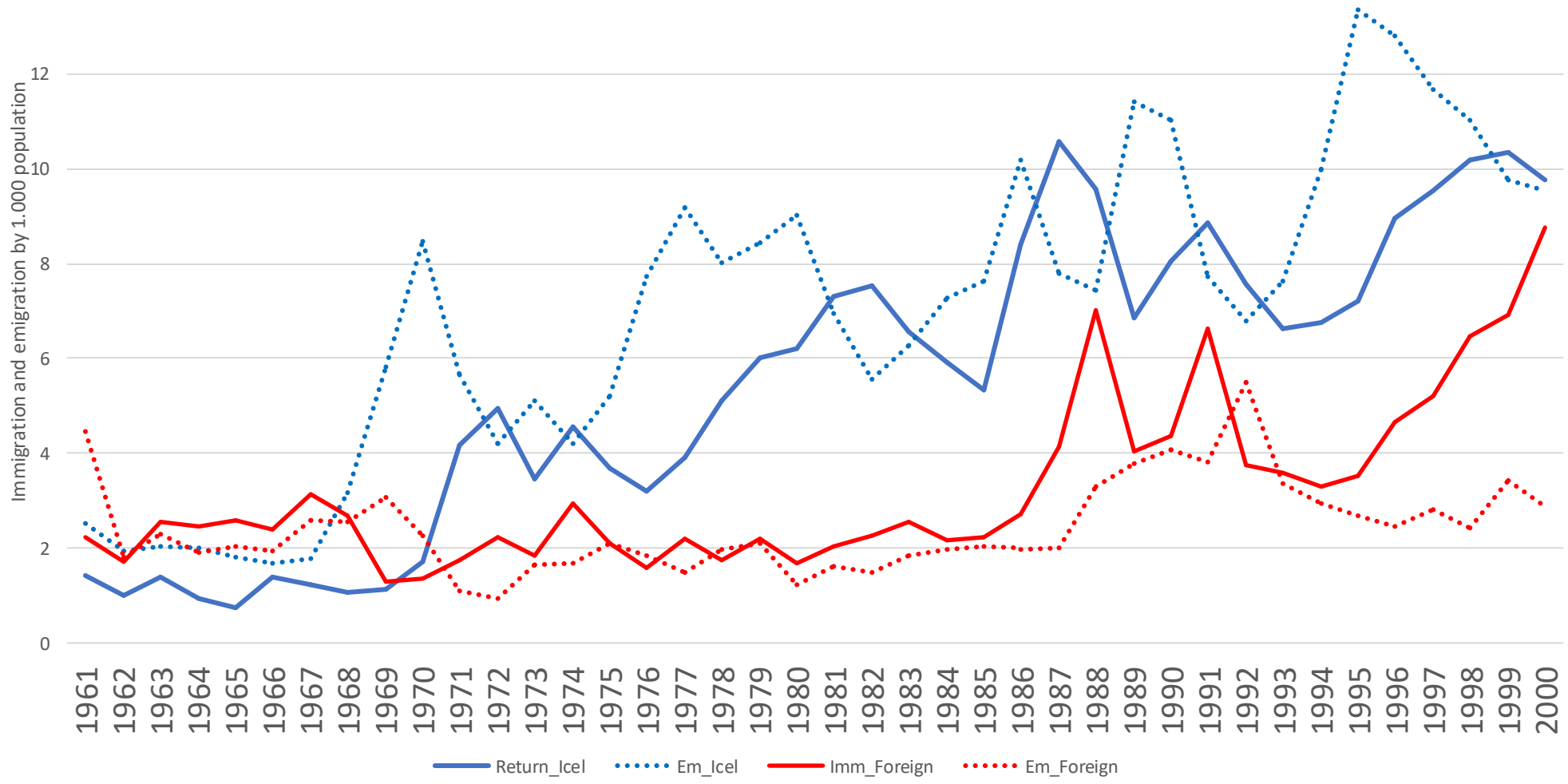
Influence on tertiary education in Iceland



Immigration and emigration by nationality 1961-2025



Immigration and emigration by nationality 1961-2000



Economic recession in the late 1960s – Changes in migration patterns

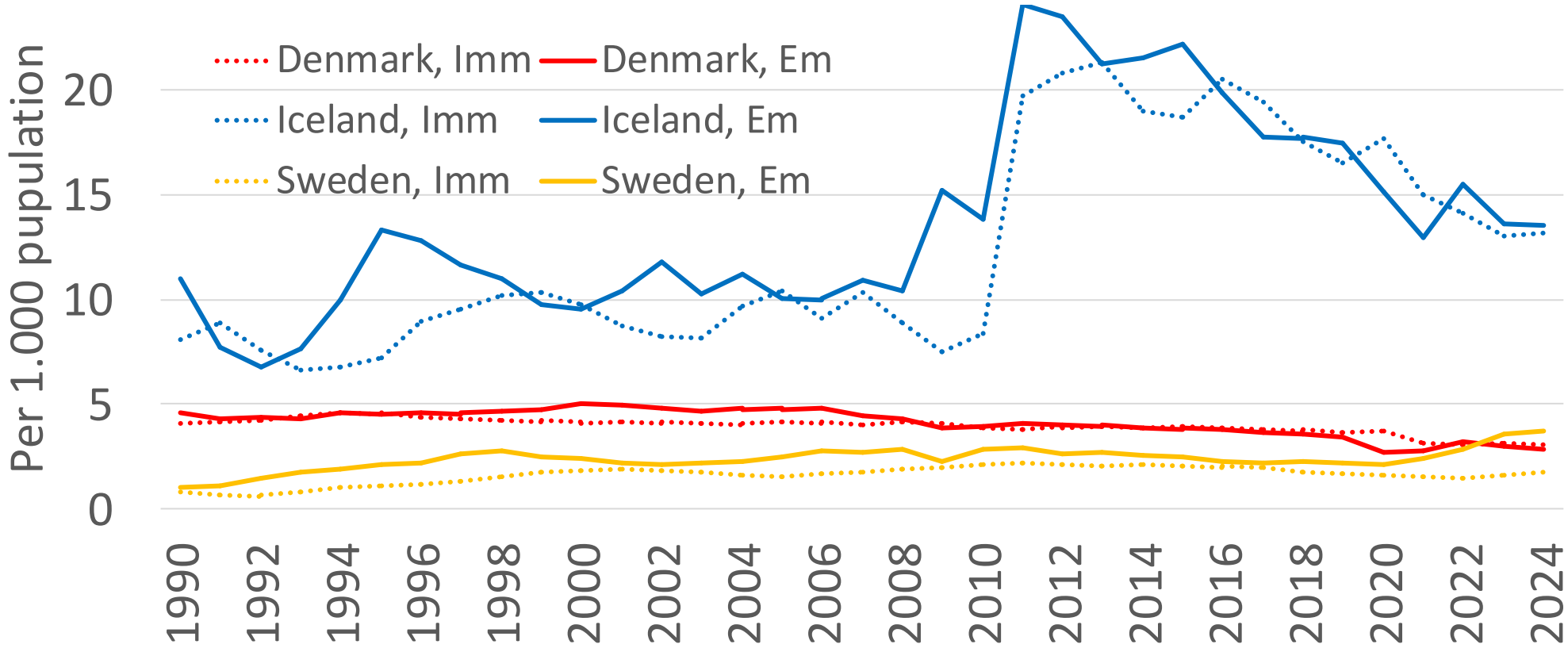
- Collapse of the herring industry in 1967
- Increasing unemployment rates
- Economic boom in other countries, need for labor
- Changing profile of Icelandic emigrants (diversity)
- Return rates high (70% returning within 7 years)
- Boom in tertiary education

Until 1990s, post-graduate studies exclusiv Abroad. Most university teachers have studies outside Icland

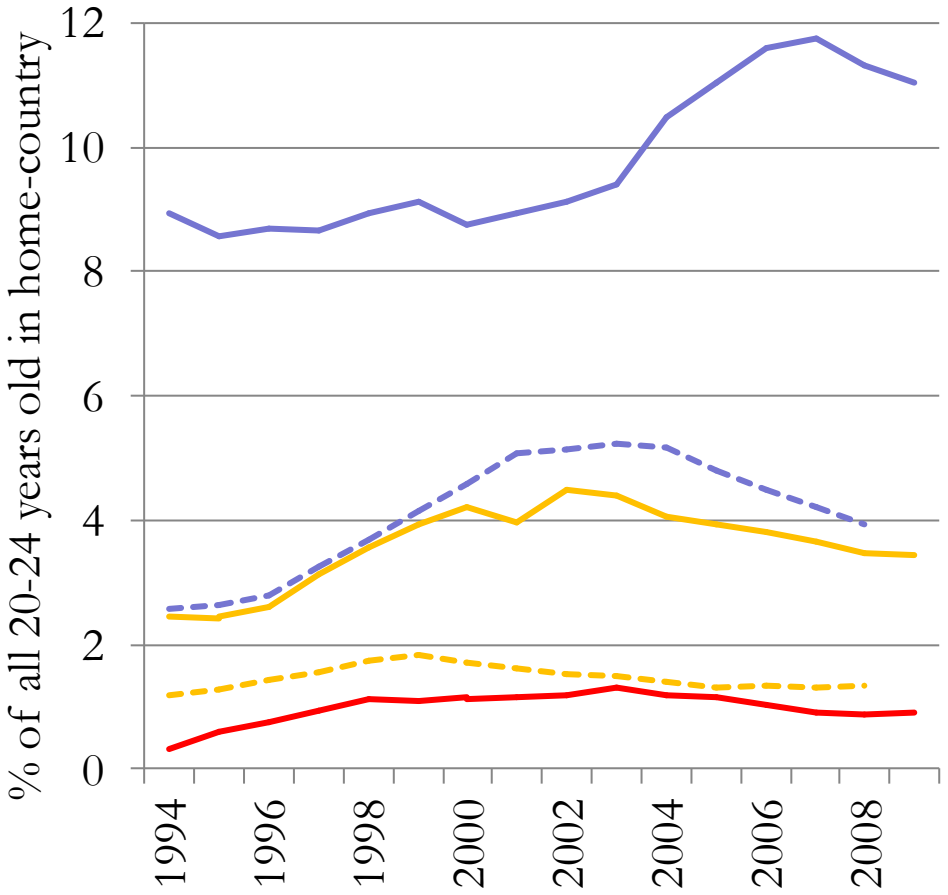


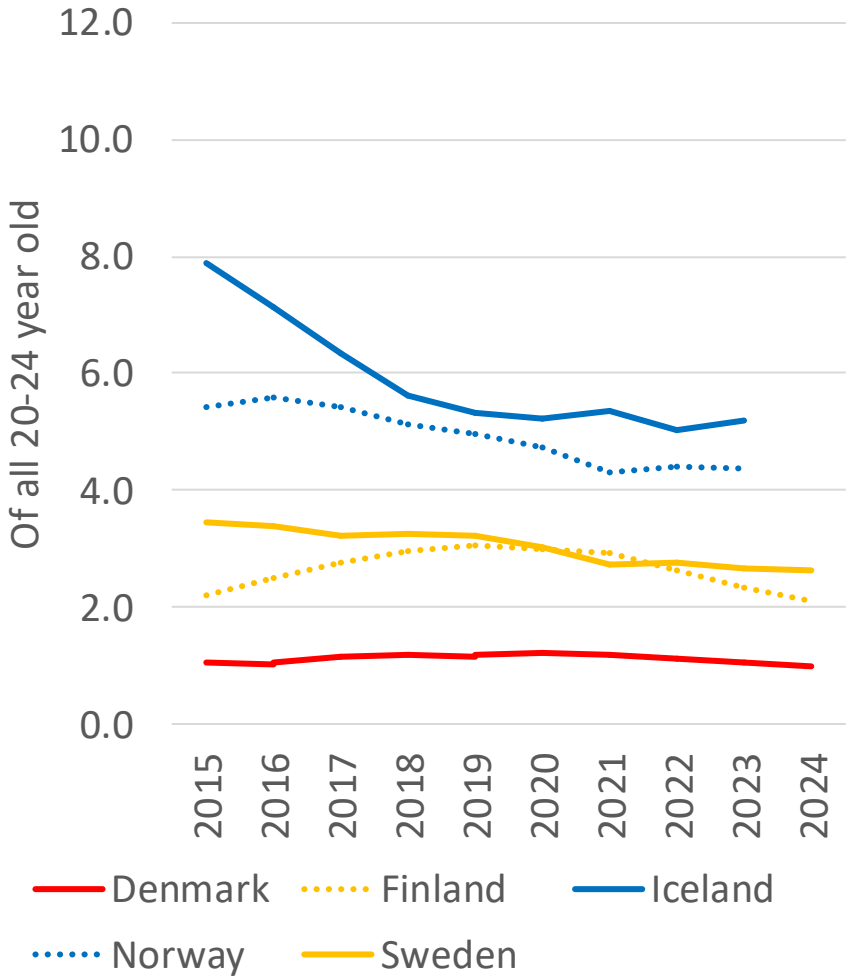


Emigration and immigration of nationals. Denmark, Iceland and Sweden 1990-2024



University students from the Nordic countries studying abroad

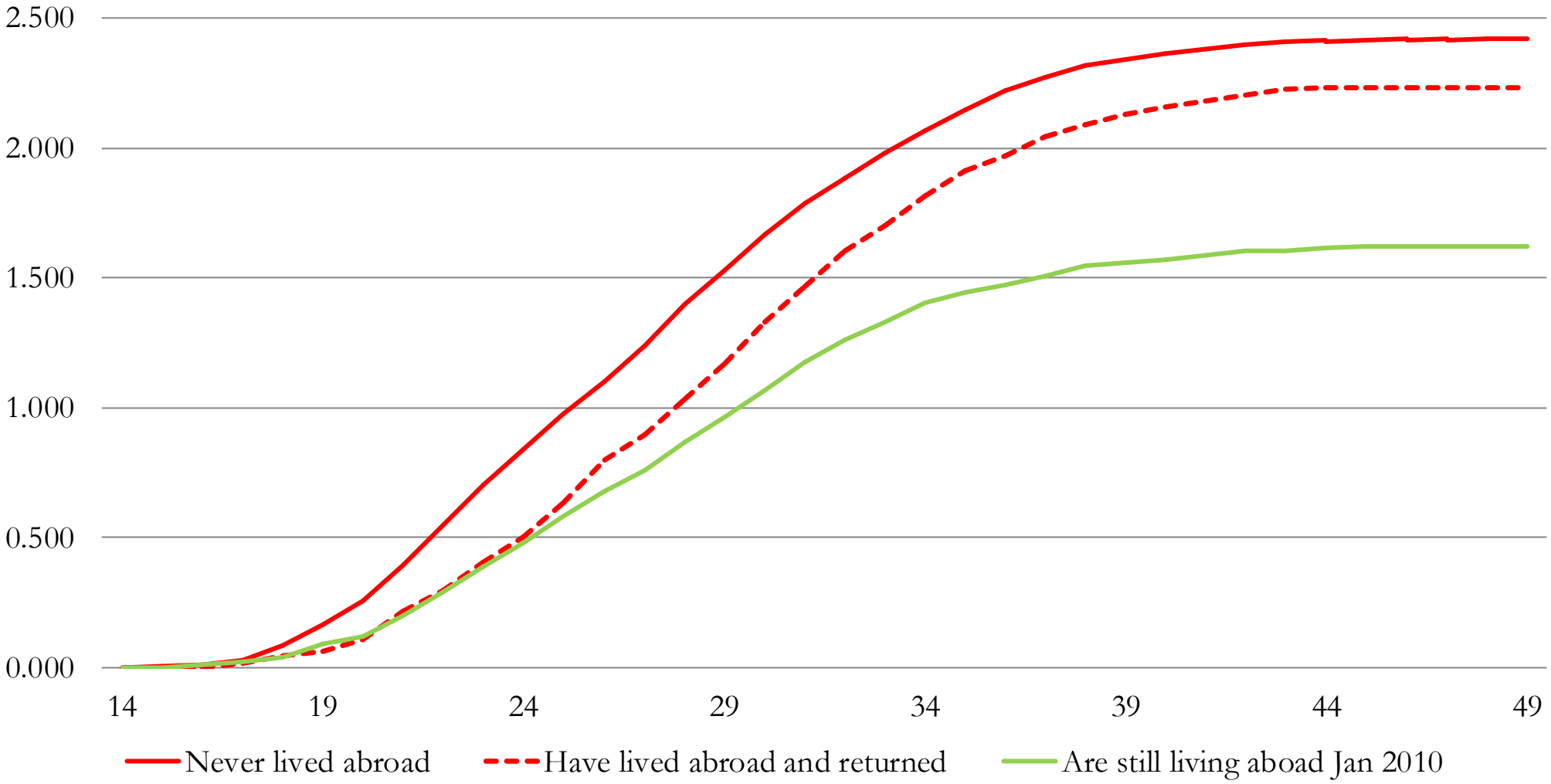




Migration experience. Three Icelandic female birth cohorts

Female birth cohorts (year of birth)	1962	1972	1982
Never lived abroad	69,1%	67,7%	63,7%
Lived abroad, returned before 40	18,4%	21,6%	23,2%
Lives abroad at 40	12,5%	10,7%	13,1%
N	2.097	2.123	1.992

Female Icelandic birth cohort 1962 – Cumulative fertility.



Conclusions

- Iceland – Has always been a nation of migrants
- Icelanders more mobile than their neighbors
- High return rates
- Profited from international relations at an early date
- Professional preparation in different countries (university teachers, health care)
- Multicultural society of today – Exclusion – Inclusion
  - Immigrants overqualified for their jobs
  - Negative views towards immigrants increasing?