**Short Term Scientific Mission Report**

**“Exploring public health and social activism approaches to**

**promoting body image and appearance diversity”**

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**Host Details:** Sigrun Danielsdottir, Directorate of Health, Reykjavik, Iceland

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**COST Action:** IS1210

**Background and Purpose of the Short Term Scientific Mission (STSM):**

The purpose of my STSM to Iceland was to explore two fundamental vehicles for sociocultural change regarding body image and appearance issues: public health approaches and social activism.

My host during this stay was Sigrun Danielsdottir, who is the Project Manager for Mental Health Promotion in the Division of Health Determinants. This Division sits within the Icelandic Government’s’ Directorate of Health, and is responsible for public health promotion in Iceland. During my stay I also visited the Icelandic Association for Body Respect, which is an activist organization dedicated to changing sociocultural views and norms regarding body weight and appearance.

This report outlines the work carried out during my STSM in direct relation to the objectives of my visit.

**Description of the work carried out during the STSM and the main results obtained.**

*Objective 1:*

*To learn about a Health At Every Size approach to public health promotion at the Directorate of Health and understand how similar practices might be applied to public health government departments in other EU countries.*

I visited the Division of Health Determinants within the Directorate of Health, which is responsible for public health promotion in Iceland. They have adopted an approach to public health that is sensitive to body image and weight bias and explicitly aims to take these issues into account in their work. During my visit at the Directorate I learned about how they have incorporated a health-focused, rather than a weight-focused approach to health promotion that aims to remove the emphasis on appearance and weight, and instead focus on health and healthful behaviours..

At the Directorate we discussed some of the challenges of implementing a weight neutral approach to health promotion when weight bias (i.e., stigmatisation and prejudice towards higher weight individuals) is prevalent in western societies. We discussed multi-level strategies to overcome weight bias, including social activism, health promotion campaigns and acknowledging biases in Government guidelines and recommendations in relation to obesity prevention. This discussion was particularly useful and gave me insights to apply in my own advocacy and policy-related work in the UK.

I also learned about past successful health promotion activities in Iceland, including efforts to reduce alcohol consumption and smoking among adolescents. We discussed how health promotion initiatives might have greater, or speedier, chances for success in Iceland than other countries because of its relatively small population, whereby the ‘tipping point’ for influence is more readily achieved. We discussed how a lot of Icelandic health promotion efforts are community driven, and how community-focused approaches may work to promote a HAES approach in other EU countries, such as the UK.

*Objective 2:*

*To learn how body image and weight bias prevention have been incorporated as a part of universal health promotion in Iceland within Health Promoting Schools and the potential impact of this on population body image concerns and attitudes.*

At the Directorate, I learned about how they work to promote mental health and well-being in schools specifically. I learned about the work being done in relation to body image within the “*Health Promoting Schools*“ approach. A third of Icelandic primary and lower secondary schools and 100% of Icelandic upper secondary schools have adopted this approach. One part of Health Promoting Schools is mental health promotion, where the Directorate has developed guidelines outlining steps and approaches that schools can take to promote mental health and well-being among students and staff. Uniquely, these guidelines include references to the need for schools to promote positive body image, acceptance of diversity in appearance, and avoid weight bias and stigmatization.

We discussed the practicalities of assessing and supporting schools using these guidelines, with the view to gain insights into how this might be implemented in other countries. Interestingly, the Directorate provides a list of recommended actions for schools to consider, but does not recommend specific programs and curricula. This is mostly due to the fact that a lot of evidence-based programs relating to mental health have not necessarily been evaluated in Iceland. This presents a challenge to promoting evidence-based practice in Icelandic schools, when funding and resource for research is finite. This discussion was particularly useful in relation to my own work, which involves developing and evaluating evidence-based body image programs for delivery across countries on a global scale.

*Objective 3:*

*To learn about the processes involved in implementing a body image program in Icelandic upper secondary schools and explore potential research collaborations.*

Sigrun Danielsdottir and I had several in depth meetings to discuss work that is being done in preparation for the implementation of a body image intervention in Icelandic upper secondary schools. This initiative is being funded by the Dove Self-Esteem Project and will be implemented in collaboration with members of the Icelandic Body Respect Association. This will involve the delivery of an evidence-based cognitive dissonance body image program to girls in secondary schools throughout the country. The program is being delivered by psychologists and trained members of the Body Respect Association.

We discussed plans to evaluate this program in a controlled study. More specifically, we collaboratively designed a research study to evaluate the impact of this program among a sample of approximately 140 Icelandic young women. We discussed research design, identified outcomes and validated measures to assess these, the procedure for obtaining ethics and the practicalities of recruitment. This research project will likely commence in September/October 2015.

I also played an active role in a 1-day training event for members of the National Body Respect Association to deliver this program. We had an interesting discussion of adaptations that will need to be made to the program to make it acceptable and relevant in Iceland.

*Objective 4:*

*To learn about and take part in the varied types of social activism practiced by the Icelandic Association for Body Respect.*

I had meetings with the board of directors from the Icelandic Body Respect Association. I learned about their grassroots activism work, including their campaign to have body weight included as a protected class in Iceland‘s new constitution that is currently being drafted. We discussed the challenges in activism work and fostering collaborations and awareness raising within the mass media, particularly when the media are not always consistent in their messaging around body image and weight.

I also attended their annual social activism event “Body Respect Day“ on March 13th, where the Association offered free mini seminars for the Icelandic media on body image and weight bias in an effort to promote a more responsible presentation of news, stories and images in mainstream media. Specifically, I visited a national newspaper, [*Fréttatíminn*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fr%C3%A9ttat%C3%ADminn), where members of the Body Respect Association provided journalists with training in weight stigmatization and encouraged them to avoid weight stigma in their reporting.

I also attended a panel presentation at the University of Reykjavik, which discussed the ethics and effectiveness of popular television program, *The Biggest Loser*. *The Biggest Loser* is currently in its second season in Iceland. Panellists included a sports psychologist, a representative from the National Body Respect Association, Iceland’s Biggest Loser Personal Trainer and the 2014 Iceland Biggest Loser winning contestant. The panel discussed the effectiveness of weight loss techniques, relationship between weight and health, and ethics of television shows like The Biggest Loser. There was ongoing media coverage of this topic in the days following the event, and hearing the various perspectives of the contestants, psychologists and staff from the television and production company provided an interesting insight into the current state of understanding regarding weight stigma and health at every size approaches in Iceland.

**Future Collaboration**

As a result of this STSM, Sigrun and I will continue to collaborate on the research study we designed during this visit. This will involve collaboration through the design, implementation, analyses and dissemination phases of the research. This study will be written up for publication in a peer-reviewed journal. We will also continue to share insights and best practice in relation to disseminating evidence-based body image programs in schools and through public policy initiatives in our respective countries.

We hope that Sigrun will be able to visit the Centre for Appearance Research in Bristol in the coming year to further advance our study and collaborative works. Furthermore, we will continue to collaborate over Skype, email and future COST events.

**Final Comments**

This STSM provided a fantastic opportunity for me to gain new insights and knowledge in relation to public health and social activism approaches to promoting positive body image and reducing weight bias. I was fortunate to experience a breadth of meetings and events during my stay, and to gain ‘insider’ knowledge on Icelandic policy and activism approaches to promoting mental health that would have been otherwise difficult to learn without this visit and in-person meetings. I look forward to applying these lessons in my own work in the UK and to ongoing collaboration with my host.

**Confirmation by the host institute of the successful execution of the mission.**

Phillippa Diedrichs came to Iceland for a short-term scientific mission in March. The purpose of her visit was threefold: 1) To learn about the work being carried out in relation to body image and weight diversity in Icelandic schools at the Directorate of Health in Iceland, 2) To learn about body-related activism within the Icelandic Association for Body Respect, and 3) To discuss potential research collaborations. The week we had together was extremely productive as we manage to cover a wide territory in a very short time. Not only was Phillippa able to get a close look at the work being done in Iceland in relation to body image and stigma at both the public health and activist levels, but we were able to lay the foundation for a collaborative research project that is scheduled to begin in the fall of 2015. The STSM provided a venue for us to meet, exchange ideas and experiences, and foster a collaboration that would not otherwise have been possible. I am looking forward to a continued research collaboration with Dr. Diedrichs and am very grateful for the support the COST Action provides for such trans-European collaboration. This is especially valuable for those of us who live in geographically isolated areas with limited opportunities for research collaboration in the field of body image.