

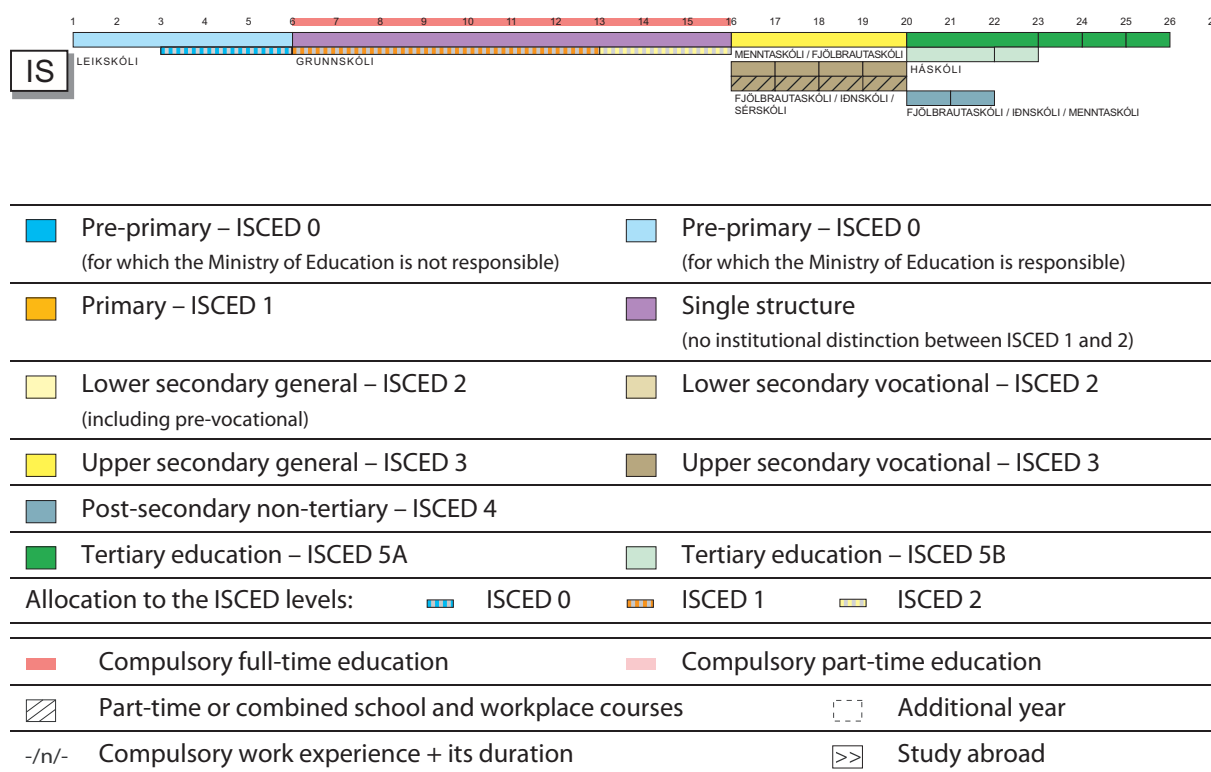
Organisation of the education system in

Iceland

2009/2010

5. Upper Secondary and Post-Secondary Non-Tertiary Education

Organisation of the education system in Iceland, 2009/10



Source: Eurydice.

This chapter deals with upper secondary education. Lower secondary education is dealt with in chapter as compulsory education covers both primary and lower secondary education in a single structure.

Upper secondary education is not compulsory, but the Upper Secondary School Act stipulates that anyone who has completed compulsory education, has had equivalent basic education or has reached the age of 16 is entitled to enrol in upper secondary school. Those that have the right to enroll in upper secondary school, also have the right to study until the age of 18.

All schools at that level, like other schools in Iceland, are co-educational. Pupils may complete their upper secondary education in a single institution. Education at this school level is generally provided on a full time basis. However, schools may accept individual pupils on a part-time basis.

Although upper secondary education is generally divided into general and vocational education with some artistic programmes of study as well, it is mainly organised in a single structure with a variety of options.

The Upper Secondary School Act of 1996 stipulated that there should be four types of branches of study: academic branches of study leading to matriculation, vocational branches of study, fine arts branches of study and a short general branch of study. The branches of study are of differing lengths, from one to eight semesters, though most of them are four-year branches of study. A new Act on Upper Secondary Education

came into effect on 1 August 2008. Schools, however, have three years from the entry of the Act into force to comply with the chapter, Curriculum and Branches of Study, as well as the chapter Study organisation, Study completion. During the school year 2009/2010 most schools thus run the same study programmes according to the National Curriculum Guide of 1999 and 2004 (general part).

The organisation of teaching and studies may be different from one upper secondary school to another. Schools either have traditional classes or forms where all the pupils of a class follow a particular programme of study or they operate according to a unit-credit system with no rigid form structure, i.e. the pupil groups vary according to their choice of course units. The unit-credit system is the most common form of upper secondary education, both in general academic studies and vocational training. The National Curriculum Guide is in force for all schools, irrespective of their organisation.

On-the-job training is in most cases included in vocational study. In the certified trades, for example, an apprenticeship agreement is made between the pupil and a master craftsman or an industrial firm. See [5.11.2.](#)

Post-secondary non-tertiary education is mainly provided by a few industrial vocational schools and comprehensive schools at the upper secondary school level.

[The Educational System in Iceland](#)

[National Curriculum Guide for Upper Secondary Education](#)

[Upper Secondary School Act 2008](#)

5.1. Historical Overview

The Icelandic upper secondary school has been moulded by two strong traditions, on the one hand the educational legacy of the Latin schools, and on the other by traditions in training for the certified trades.

[Iceland 1986, handbook](#)

[Skólar á Íslandi \(sérprentun úr Ísland, atvinnuhættir og menning\)](#)

5.1.1. Grammar Schools

Grammar schools in Iceland have a tradition that goes back to the Middle Ages, to the schools that were operated at the bishoprics at Skálholt and Hólar. Around the middle of the sixteenth century, after the Reformation, the State took over the operation of these schools and from that point onwards they were referred to as Latin schools. These schools remained largely unchanged until the nineteenth century. Their role was first and foremost to educate the clergy, and the subjects of instruction were mostly theology, Latin and Greek.

Around 1800, the schools at Skálholt and Hólar were moved to Reykjavík and united into a single institution. Shortly after that, the school was moved to Bessastaðir, in the vicinity of Reykjavík, and there it remained until 1846 when it was again moved back to Reykjavík and called the Learned School of Reykjavík. During the late nineteenth century, social changes and new waves in education brought about some changes in the school's curriculum. New subjects were introduced, among other things, such as Icelandic and more modern

languages. Also, greater emphasis was placed on history, nature studies and mathematics. In 1904, radical changes were made in the operation of the school through an ordinance. The name was changed from Learned to General and the school was now called the General Grammar School of Reykjavík, later changed to the Reykjavík Grammar School. At that time, it was divided into upper and lower departments. In 1946, the lower department was abolished. The Reykjavík Grammar School was for a long time the only school in the country that prepared pupils for university studies, but in 1930 another grammar school was founded in Akureyri.

[Frá einveldi til lýðveldis](#)

[Iceland 1986, handbook](#)

[Saga Reykjavíkurskóla](#)

[Skólar á Íslandi \(sérprentun úr Ísland, atvinnuhættir og menning\)](#)

[Akureyri Grammar School](#)

[Reykjavík Grammar School](#)

5.1.2. Training for the Certified Trades

In Iceland, formal training for the certified trades began in the nineteenth century. It is the oldest form of organised vocational training, with the exception of the training of the clergy.

Although a system of guilds never really existed in Iceland, training for the certified trades was originally formulated according to the traditions of the Danish trade guilds which included a few years of training with a master craftsman.

In 1869, master craftsmen in Reykjavík instituted a few theoretical courses for vocational trainees. A law concerning training for the certified trades was passed in 1893 and in 1904 The Reykjavík Technical School was founded. In the next few decades, industrial vocational schools were also established outside Reykjavík but they tended to be small. In the beginning, industrial vocational schools were evening schools which the trainees attended alongside an apprenticeship with a master craftsman. Theoretical training did not become obligatory until the law concerning training for the certified trades was revised in 1927.

[Frá einveldi til lýðveldis](#)

[Iceland 1986, handbook](#)

[Þróun starfsmenntunar á framhaldsskólastigi](#)

[The Reykjavik Technical School](#)

[Lög um iðnaðarnám/ Law on Vocational training](#)

5.1.3. Other Upper Secondary Schools

During the nineteenth century there was a general movement towards public education and an interest in educational affairs. Social and economic changes were accompanied by needs and demands for increased education. However, little was done towards this effect in Iceland and secondary schools for the general public were almost non-existent. Only a small number of well-to-do pupils graduated from the Learned School of Reykjavík.

For a long time, education for general public was not carried out at school but in the home. It was only towards the end of the century that changes began to occur. A school for girls was established in Reykjavík in 1874 and in its wake further schools for domestic science were founded throughout the country.

Around 1880, two secondary schools gagnfræðaskóli were founded, one in the north, Möðruvallaskólinn, and the other in the south, Flensborgarskólinn. In the beginning of twentieth century, two schools that operated in the spirit of the Scandinavian public school movement were also founded, but later these schools were changed to general secondary schools.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, more vocational schools were also founded, for example an agricultural college and a fishermen's and seamen's college. Various other schools were founded during the first decades of twentieth century, such as a commercial school, a marine engineering school, a school of nursing and an art college.

[Frá einveldi til lýðveldis](#)

[Iceland 1986, handbook](#)

[Þróun starfsmenntunar á framhaldsskólastigi](#)

[Reykjavík Grammar School](#)

5.1.4. The Development of Upper Secondary Schools after 1946

New educational legislation passed in 1946 marked a turning point in educational affairs in Iceland. In the new law, compulsory schooling was lengthened from seven years to eight (from 7-14 to 7-15) and a new national coordinated entrance examination landspróf miðskóla to the grammar schools was introduced. The rationale for the new examination was to bring about greater equality with regard to grammar school places and to make it easier for young people to have access to a grammar school education. General secondary programmes were also strengthened and practical courses within these programmes were introduced. The decades that followed saw great social and economical changes and as a result the number of young people who completed secondary education and other forms of further studies increased. However, not many new schools were established, and during the mid-sixties there were only four grammar schools in the country.

New law concerning industrial vocational schools was passed in 1955. At that point the State took over the operation of such schools which had previously been run by the associations of master craftsmen. Industrial vocational schools then became day schools.

During the sixties, demands for different forms of education at the upper secondary level which would bring about greater educational opportunities for young people began to be voiced. A new legislation for education for the certified trades was passed in 1966 and in its wake, or around 1970, one-year basic training

programmes were started at the industrial vocational schools. Later, training programmes in advanced classes were set up for some trades in industrial vocational schools. This opened another avenue in vocational training, i.e. training for the certified trades could be begun at school and without a formal contract with a master craftsman.

However, it was not until after 1970 that it became commonly accepted that general education for young people should be extended beyond the age of fifteen. Education at the upper secondary level went through great changes in the seventies and enrolment at upper secondary schools increased steadily as well. After the national co-ordinated entrance examination *landspróf miðskóla* and the secondary school-leaving examination *gagnfræðapróf* were abolished in 1976 and 1977, entering the upper secondary level was a good deal easier. Educational reforms in the seventies at the upper secondary level were mainly aimed at integrating general education and vocational training by establishing comprehensive schools, and co-ordinating a basic programme of academic studies intended for all pupils.

Law that permitted the establishment of upper secondary comprehensive schools was passed in 1973. New types of schools, comprehensive schools, came into being and were established in various places throughout the country. Most of the comprehensive schools came into being with the merging of general secondary schools *gagnfræðaskóli* and industrial vocational schools. The new schools were intended to provide traditional grammar-school education, as well as general and more specialised forms of vocational training and a variety of new branches of study, all in the same school. At the same time the number of traditional grammar schools grew. A new legislation concerning grammar schools was passed in 1970.

In the seventies, many of the upper secondary schools in Iceland adopted a unit-credit system, which since then has been the prevalent form of organisation for schools at this level. All comprehensive schools, for example, operate on a unit-credit system.

During the seventies and eighties, a few bills concerning the upper secondary school level were submitted to Parliament but despite repeated attempts no new comprehensive legislation concerning this level was passed until 1988. The Upper Secondary School Act of 1988 replaced older laws concerning grammar schools, vocational schools and comprehensive schools. A new Upper Secondary School Act came into effect on 1 August 2008. It replaced the Upper Secondary School Act of 1996. See [5.3](#).

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture first issued a curriculum guide for upper secondary schools in 1986, and to begin with they were primarily intended as a framework for the schools to take note of in their work. Before that, individual schools or groups of schools had produced their own study guides. The latest National Curriculum Guide issued by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture were published in 1999 and 2004 (revised general part).

[Iceland 1986, handbook](#)

[The Modern Icelandic School System in Historic Perspective](#)

[Próun starfsmenntunar á framhaldsskólastigi](#)

[Althingi, the Parliament of Iceland](#)

[The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture](#)

[National Curriculum Guide for Upper Secondary Education](#)

Lög um framhaldsskóla. /Upper Secondary School Act.

Lög um framhaldsskóla. /Upper Secondary School Act.

Lög um heimild til að stofna fjölbrautarskóla / Law on permission to establish comprehensive upper secondary schools

Lög um Iðnnám/Law concerning vocational education

Lög um iðnskóla/ Law concerning vocational schools

Law on grammar schools 1970

Lög um skólakerfi og fræðsluskyldu /Law on the education system and the state's obligation to provide schooling

Upper Secondary School Act 2008

5.2. Ongoing Debates and Future Developments

The Upper Secondary School Act passed in June 2008 introduced broad changes in the organisation of that school level. Step is taken towards increased decentralisation of the curriculum and course development and more flexibility is introduced in the organisation of teaching and learning. Upper-secondary schools shall formulate descriptions of their study programmes and submit for Ministry approval. This regards both general academic studies and vocational education and training as well as art studies and special education. Upper secondary schools have three years from the entry of the Act into force to comply with provisions in two of the chapters of the Act: 1. Study Organisation, Study Completion and 2. Curriculum and Branches of Study. The upper secondary school level is thus in a transition phase in the period 2008-2011 with regard to study programmes, curriculum and organisation of study. The Act opens possibilities of shortening general academic studies leading to matriculation examination as well as vocational studies from four to three years. All school work carried out by pupils shall be evaluated in standardised credit units and every credit unit shall represent about the same amount of pupil contribution.

The National Curriculum Guide for upper secondary education issued in 1999 and 2004 (revised general part) is currently under revision. This revision of the curricula for upper secondary education as well as for pre-primary and compulsory education is based on a national development of the eight key competences recommended by the European Union in 2006. This work started in 2008 after the adoption of the Act of 2008, and will be in line with the EU recommendation. The key competences will be a fundamental part of the Iceland's lifelong learning strategy and will mirror the main emphasis and objectives of the educational system.

National Curriculum Guide for Upper Secondary Education

Námskrá handa framhaldsskólum/ National Curriculum Guidelines for Upper-Secondary Schools.

Upper Secondary School Act 2008

5.3. Specific Legislative Framework

Education at the upper secondary level is governed by the Upper Secondary School Act from 2008. Schools, however, have three years from the entry of the Act into force to comply with provisions in chapters IV and V of the Act: 1. Study Organisation, Study Completion and 2. Curriculum and Branches of Study.

The Upper Secondary School Act primarily defines the framework for education at that level, its objectives, the role and responsibility of the State and local municipalities as well as other parties that are involved in providing education at this level.

More detailed provisions regarding the implementation of upper secondary education are to be found in the regulations which the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture issues on the basis of law that is in effect. In addition, the Ministry issues National Curriculum Guidelines which, among other things, describe the objectives and contents of individual branches of study. The National Curriculum Guidelines are equivalent to a ministry regulation.

The National Curriculum Guide for upper secondary schools in accordance with the legislation of 1996 was published in a series of booklets in spring 1999 and came into effect on 1 June 1999. The guide was to take full effect no later than five years after they were first implemented. A revised general part of the guidelines was published in 2004. The National Curriculum Guide from 1999 and 2004 is currently under revision.

The National Curriculum Guide related to some vocational branches of study is continually being revised by the different occupational councils. See [2.7.2.3.](#)

[The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture](#)

[National Curriculum Guide for Upper Secondary Education](#)

[Upper Secondary School Act 2008](#)

5.4. General Objectives

According to the Upper Secondary School Act of 2008, the objectives for all pupils are as follows:

The objective of the upper secondary school is to encourage the overall development of all pupils and encourage their active participation in democratic society by offering studies suitable to the needs of each pupil. The upper secondary school prepares pupils for employment and further studies. It shall strive to strengthen its pupils' skills in the Icelandic language, both spoken and written, develop moral values, sense of responsibility, broadmindedness, initiative, self-confidence and tolerance in its pupils, train them to apply disciplined, autonomous working methods and critical thought, teach them to appreciate cultural values and encourage them to seek further knowledge. The upper secondary school shall strive to communicate knowledge and train pupils in a way that provides them with skills to carry out specialised work and with solid foundations to pursue further education.

The general part of the National Curriculum Guide issued by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture shall further specify objectives and operations of the upper secondary school.

[The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture](#)

National Curriculum Guide for Upper Secondary Education

Upper Secondary School Act 2008

5.4.1. General Upper Secondary Education

General academic branches of study shall provide preparation for higher education study. See also general objectives in [5.4.](#)

5.4.2. Vocational Upper Secondary Education

Vocational study shall further the general education of pupils, prepare them to carry out specialised work and give them an understanding of the role of enterprises and workers in industry. At the same time, the study is intended to encourage pupils to extend their knowledge and provide them with skills to pursue further study. See also general objectives in [5.4.](#)

Upper Secondary School Act 2008

5.5. Types of Institutions

The main types of schools offering upper secondary education are as follows:

- Grammar schools, which offer four-year general academic branches of study which conclude with a matriculation examination. Pupils who complete the course satisfactorily are entitled to enter higher education institutions in Iceland.
- Comprehensive schools, which offer an academic course comparable to that of the grammar schools, concluding with a matriculation examination. These schools also offer theoretical and practical courses, as in the industrial vocational schools (see below) and, in addition, some other courses providing vocational education. A few of the comprehensive schools also offer post-secondary non-tertiary programmes, such as programmes to educate master craftsmen.
- Industrial vocational schools, which offer theoretical and practical branches of study in the certified and some non-certified trades. These schools also offer post-secondary non-tertiary programmes to educate master craftsmen.

Upper secondary schools vary in size; the largest schools have around 2,000 pupils in day schools and the smallest less than 100. For the relative size of the various branches of study, see [5.21.3.](#)

The Educational System in Iceland

5.6. Geographical Accessibility

Outside the capital area 18 schools offered upper secondary education in the school year 2009-2010, some of them relatively small, out of a total of around 35 schools offering education at this level. It is however not uncommon that pupils who live out in the country attend schools in the capital area. Most of the upper secondary schools outside the capital area have boarding facilities and school transport.

5.7. Admission Requirements and Choice of School

All pupils who have completed compulsory education have equivalent education or have reached the age of 16 have the legal right to upper secondary education, regardless of their results in the 10th and last grade of compulsory school. Those that have the right to enroll in upper secondary school, also have the right to study until the age of 18.

Each upper secondary school shall be responsible for admission of pupils. The obligations of each upper secondary school regarding pupils' enrolment and the requirements for admission made by the school shall be prescribed in an agreement between the upper secondary school and the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. The upper secondary school may place specific demands for enrolment in individual branches of study in the upper secondary school regarding preparation and study results.

A regulation on the enrolment of pupils in upper secondary schools is in force.

It is relatively easy for pupils to transfer from one branch of study to another.

Pupils can apply to any school they wish, regardless of their legal residence. Thus the pupil's and/or parents' choice of an upper secondary school is unrestricted. The admission of pupils to individual schools is the responsibility of the head teacher who is to state the reasons for exclusion if asked.

[Regulation on the enrolment of pupils in upper secondary education](#)

[Upper Secondary School Act 2008](#)

5.8. Registration and/or Tuition Fees

Education at the upper secondary level is, as such, free, but pupils pay enrolment fees to the school. Pupils in vocational education pay part of the costs of materials. The head teacher decides the amount of these fees. However, the limit of enrolment and material fee is prescribed in a ministry regulation. Financial contributions to pupils' organisations are optional. The upper secondary school and the local health care centre shall make an agreement regarding organisation of the health care service provided to pupils.

[Upper Secondary School Act 2008](#)

5.9. Financial Support for Pupils

Pupils who have to leave their legal residence for the purpose of studying have the right to non-refundable grants to cover expenses in this respect. This right is defined in a law and a regulation on study grants issued by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. In addition, pupils in the certified trades and in some other vocational branches of study have the right to receive study loans from the Icelandic Government Study Loan Fund.

Exemptions are not made from the payment of enrolment fees.

Family allowances are related to the number of children and are paid until the age of 16. They are paid according to family income, i.e. there is a maximum amount that may be decreased or abolished if the family income exceeds a certain amount.

Tax reliefs to parents to pay the cost of educating their children do not exist.

The Icelandic Government Student Loan Fund

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture

5.10. Age Levels and Grouping of Pupils

Schools that have traditional classes or forms base the structure of their education around the academic year, whereas schools using the unit-credit system base theirs on the semester. In schools based on classes or forms, the pupils in a given class tend to be of the same age. In a unit-credit system, it is the pupil's rate of progress in a given subject which determines the group he or she goes into, and it is common that pupils between the ages of sixteen and twenty and even older are together in a group.

In schools which operate according to a class or form system, it is possible for a teacher in a given subject to continue with the form for more than one year, although this varies from school to school and within subjects. In the unit-credit system, a group is only functional for one semester, therefore teachers only teach that particular group for one semester.

The number of pupils in a group varies greatly, especially in schools which function according to the unit-credit system. The official recommendation and norm for the number of pupils in a class or a group is 25 in general academic education and 12 in practical and theoretical subjects in vocational education. For the general short branch of study, the norm is 15 pupils in core subjects. Some variants of these norms exist.

5.10.1. Age Levels and Grouping of Pupils in General Academic Education

Most pupils enter an academic branch of study in the year they turn sixteen. A pupil who progresses through the system of education at the upper secondary level at a normal rate is therefore between sixteen and twenty years old.

5.10.2. Age Levels and Grouping of Pupils in Vocational Education

Relatively few pupils enroll in vocational branches of study at the end of their compulsory schooling at the age of sixteen. There are no available statistics concerning the average age of pupils registered in vocational training programmes, but it is clear that the age is considerably higher than the average age of pupils registered in general academic branches of study. Many pupils first enrol in general academic branches of study at the upper secondary level, complete those studies or drop out, and then begin their studies in vocational branches of study. Besides, a small part of the student population drops out temporarily at the end of compulsory education and goes out to work before resuming their studies in vocational branches of study at the upper secondary level.

5.11. Specialisation of Studies

Branches of study are of differing lengths, from one to eight semesters, but most of them are four-year branches of study. General academic education at the upper secondary level is primarily organised as a four-year course leading to a matriculation examination. Vocational education is divided between the school and the workplace or takes place exclusively in the school. A general short branch of study is intended for pupils who need further preparation for academic or vocational studies or for those pupils who are undecided as to what to do after compulsory education. There is also a three-year fine arts branch of study.

The Act on Upper Secondary School from 2008 allows for a greater flexibility and freedom for schools to formulate descriptions of their branches of study. Schools, however, have three years from the entry of the Act into force to comply with the chapter Curriculum and Branches of Study. During the school year 2009/2010 most schools run the same study programs according to the National Curriculum Guide of 1999 and 2004 (revised general part). As upper secondary schools in the above mentioned school year generally operate their branches of study in accordance with the legislation of 1996, former descriptions of the specialisation of studies are maintained in sub-chapters. As upper secondary schools in the school year 2008-2009 generally operate their branches of study in accordance with the legislation of 1996, former descriptions of the specialisation of studies are maintained in sub-chapters.

Upper secondary schools may according to a legislation of 2008 on upper secondary schools offer study programmes organised in continuation of defined study completion at upper secondary level. Such study programmes shall be evaluated in higher education level study credits when applicable.

[Upper Secondary School Act 2008](#)

5.11.1. General Academic Branches of Study

Academic branches of study leading to matriculation are four: natural sciences, social sciences, foreign languages and business and economics.

Traditional grammar schools and comprehensive schools offer education leading to matriculation. Subjects to be studied are divided into three groups: core subjects, elected fields and free selection. See [5.13.1.](#)

[Upper Secondary School Act 2008](#)

5.11.2. Vocational Branches of Study

Vocational education takes place in comprehensive schools and industrial vocational schools. The length of the courses they offer varies and is generally between one and eight semesters, but most courses are three- or four-year courses.

Pupils in vocational branches of study can choose between training for the certified trades or vocational training in other areas, for example in the field of agriculture, in the travel industry, the fisheries, the food production industry, health, or commerce.

Post-secondary non-tertiary courses for master craftsmen are organised into evening classes. They differ in length and comprise general academic subjects, management subjects, theoretical vocational subjects and practical vocational subjects.

Þróun starfsmenntunar á framhaldsskólastigi

Upper Secondary School Act 2008

5.11.2.1. Training for the Certified Trades

Training for the certified trades takes three to four years. It involves taking a vocational branch of study at an industrial vocational school or a comprehensive school and a study contract with a master craftsman or an industrial firm. The pupil has the choice of one of the following avenues:

1. An apprenticeship agreement with a master craftsman. 2. A one-year program of basic academic and practical studies, at an industrial vocational school or a comprehensive school, followed by an apprenticeship agreement with a master craftsman. 3. First, a one-year program of basic academic and practical studies, then a one- to two-year program of specialised academic and practical studies at an industrial vocational school or a comprehensive school, followed by an apprenticeship agreement with a master craftsman.

Both industrial vocational schools and comprehensive schools offer education with programmes or models of the same length and structure according to a common curriculum. Common to all three avenues listed above is that the school is responsible for basic education and the theoretical part of the course, whereas practical training takes place in the workplace in accordance with the contract made with a master craftsman. If practical training is carried out in school, the apprenticeship is shortened accordingly. The contract made between the apprentice and the master craftsman stipulates that the latter accepts responsibility for the practical training of the apprentice. On completion of his/her school education and practical training, the apprentice takes the journeyman's examination, which provides her/him with qualifications to pursue the trade concerned. See [5.15.2](#). During the training period, pupils receive payment from the employer according to wage agreements.

Pupils can choose from eight different vocational fields in this sector of upper secondary education. These fields are printing, construction and woodwork, tailoring, vehicle and transport, food-related industries, metalwork, electricity related trades and cosmetic trades. Each field is subdivided into specialised branches of study. In addition to the above-mentioned fields, there are some trades where only a few skilled workers remain, and there are some that do not fall under the fields listed above.

A pupil who has completed his journeyman's examination can become a master craftsman after a certain period of work experience and advanced studies. A master craftsman has the right to supervise work in his field.

5.11.2.2. Other Forms of Vocational Training within the General School System

Vocational training within the general school system is organised in different ways depending on subjects and generally takes from one to eight semesters. In most cases training takes place both in the school and in the work place. Studies in certain branches of vocational training give pupils professional rights to do particular work, for instance to work as an auxiliary nurse.

What follows is a list of the main vocational branches of study other than the certified trades and the average time it takes to complete them:

- A branch of study in marine engineering, 1st.- 4th. degree, 1-10 semesters.

- A graduated branch of study for officers aboard fishing and merchant navy vessels, 1st- 3rd degree, 2-6 semesters.
- A branch of study for doctors' receptionists, 4 semesters following matriculation.
- A branch of study in commerce, 4 semesters.
- A branch of study for dental assistants, 5-6 semesters.
- A branch of study in technical drawing, 6 semesters.
- A branch of study in computer studies, 6 semesters.
- A branch of study in subjects relating to the travel industry, 4-6 semesters.
- A branch of study for food technicians, 6 semesters.
- A branch of study for pharmaceutical assistants, 8 semesters.
- A branch of study for masseurs/masseuses, 8 semesters.
- A branch of study for auxiliary nurses, 6-7 semesters.
- A branch of study in social service, 4 semesters.
- A branch of study in horse breeding, 1st - 3rd degree, 2-6 semesters.
- A branch of study in market gardening, 6 semesters.
- A branch of study in greenhouse cultivation, 6 semesters.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture

5.11.3. Short General Branches of Study

A general short branch of study (1-2 years of studies depending on individual pupils) is intended for pupils who after compulsory school need further preparation for academic or vocational studies as well as for those pupils who are undecided as to what to do after compulsory education. The objective of the general branch of study is to impart a solid preparation for the core subjects and at the same time to give the pupils the opportunity to take on varied topics in both academic and practical fields.

Upper Secondary School Act 2008

5.11.4. Fine Arts Branches of Study

Study of the arts is defined as a three-year branch of study which must provide preparation for further study in the arts. Emphasis is placed on design, visual arts and music.

Upper Secondary School Act 2008

5.12. Organisation of School Time

A new Act on Upper Secondary School from 2008 provides for at least 180 annual working days for pupils. Upper secondary schools, however, shall comply with this provision no later than 1 August 2011. As upper secondary schools in the school year 2009-2010 generally have not changed their operation in this respect, former descriptions of the organisations are maintained in the sub-chapters.

The minimum annual operating time for upper secondary schools, nine months, is defined in the law concerning this level of education with more detailed provisions stated in a ministry regulation. See **5.12.1.** and **5.12.2.**

Upper Secondary School Act 2008

5.12.1. Organisation of the School Year

The length of the school year for pupils in upper secondary schools is nine months and shall be organised within the period from 22nd August to 31st May. The operating time is prescribed in a Ministry regulation. The academic year is divided into two semesters. Examinations take place in December and May after teaching periods and may last up to 2-3 weeks each time. In addition, teachers have, according to a wage contract, four working days organised by individual schools before the beginning and/or after the end of the 9-month school year. Individual schools are open longer for administrative reasons, usually for a total of 10-10.5 months a year.

The above-mentioned regulation on schools' annual operating time stipulates pupils' leaves during the school year: Christmas holiday from December 21st to January 3rd, inclusive, and an Easter holiday from Palm Sunday and up to and including the first Tuesday after Easter. Other pupils' leaves are only on public holidays. However, individual schools may in addition organise short leaves (1-4 days) once or twice per school year, generally in October and/or February.

Upper Secondary School Act 2008

5.12.2. Weekly and Daily Timetable

All upper secondary schools operate a 5-day week system, i.e. from Monday to Friday.

The average number of lessons for pupils in general academic programmes is 35 per week. This may however vary from one year to another, these pupils normally being expected to attend 30 - 36 lessons a week. The number of lessons for pupils in vocational education varies between branches of study and between semesters.

Each lesson in upper secondary schools lasts 40 minutes, but some schools plan their teaching around longer units.

Individual schools at the upper secondary level organise their timetables. They generally start between 8.00 a.m. and 8.15 a.m. Most schools will have finished their school day between 3.00 and 4.00 p.m.

LENGTH OF SCHOOL DAY, EACH DAY OF THE WEEK General academic education

An example

	Out of hours provision (before lessons)	Lessons (starting time in the morning)	Lunch break	Lessons (finishing time in the afternoon)	Out-of-hours provision (after lessons)
Monday		8:10	40 min	14:30	
Tuesday		8:10	40 min	14:30	
Wednesday		8:10	40 min	14:30	
Thursday		8:10	40 min	13:45	
Friday		8:10	40 min	14:30	
Saturday		No lessons	-	-	

LENGTH OF SCHOOL DAY, EACH DAY OF THE WEEK Vocational education

An example

	Lessons (starting time in the morning)	Lunch break	Lessons (finishing time in the afternoon)	Out-of-hours provision (after lessons)
Monday	9:50	45	16:25	
Tuesday	9:50	45	17:50	
Wednesday	8:10	45	14:40	
Thursday	8:10	45	14:40	
Friday	8:10	45	13:15	
Saturday	No lessons	-	-	

5.13. Curriculum, Subjects, Number of Hours

The Upper Secondary School Act contains fairly specific provisions concerning the National Curriculum Guidelines and school working guides. The National Curriculum Guide, issued by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture in 1999 define among other things the objectives of individual subjects and branches of study. They are also supposed to describe the overall structure and the contents of individual subjects and branches. Furthermore, the National Curriculum is to contain guidelines for school working guides and assessment of the work that goes on in the schools, see 9.4. The law stipulates that individual schools are to write their own school working guides which, among other things, are to specify what areas individual schools have chosen to emphasise, define the education they offer, teaching methods and administration. The National Curriculum Guidelines came into force 1 June 1999. In 2004 a revised general part of the guidelines was issued.

The National Curriculum Guide of 1999 and 2004 (general part) is currently under revision.

The intention underlying the National Curriculum Guidelines is to ensure that each individual pupil may be enrolled in a course of study suitable for him or her within the framework of the upper secondary schools and that the speed at which the pupil completes his/her education is partly based on ability.

Most upper secondary schools operate according to a unit-credit system where the educational content of each subject is divided into a number of defined course units which last for one semester. Each course unit represents a fixed number of hours of instruction per week during one semester. At the end of every semester, the pupil decides on courses for the following semester according to certain rules and in accordance with his or her own study plans and results. Thus, each pupil is given his or her own personal timetable. Pupils in a given course form a group for that course unit only, and classes or forms in the traditional sense of the word do not exist. Those schools that have traditional classes or forms operate around the form or the class as a unit and organise their education by discipline.

The Act on Upper Secondary School from 2008 allows for a greater flexibility and freedom for schools to formulate descriptions of their branches of study. Schools, however, have three years from the entry of the Act into force to comply with the chapter Curriculum and Branches of Study. As upper secondary schools generally in the school year 2009-2010 operate their branches of study in accordance with the legislation of 1996, former descriptions of the specialisation of studies are maintained in sub-chapters.

[The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture](#)

[National Curriculum Guide for Upper Secondary Education](#)

[Upper Secondary School Act 2008](#)

5.13.1. General Academic Education

Within any given academic branch of study, three groups of courses are offered:

- core subjects, which all pupils of a branch are required to take,
- elected fields according to the aims of the branch of study in question
- free selection.

Schools have a certain flexibility concerning the offer of courses for the elected fields and the free selection.

For the matriculation examination, 140 credits are required. One credit is generally the equivalent of two lessons of instruction per week for one semester. Core subjects constitute 98 credits, elected fields 30 credits and free selection 12 credits. Studies leading to matriculation are organised as an eight semester course.

Core subjects constitute the required course in each academic branch of study and amount to 70% of the total course load. Compulsory core subjects for all academic branches of study are Icelandic, English, Danish, a third foreign language (usually French, German or Spanish), mathematics, history, social sciences, natural sciences and sports. However, the number of courses in these subjects for each branch of study differs as the core subjects include special subjects within that branch together with subjects that provide and support general education. There are first-year comprehensive and cross-disciplinary units in the natural and social sciences for all branches of study. A course in life skills, is obligatory for all branches, with the goal of preparing pupils for life in a democratic society by deepening their understanding of that society, including the historical basis, working conditions, culture, family responsibilities, and the rights and responsibilities of the individual. A fourth foreign language is required in the foreign languages branch of study and a course in geography in the social sciences branch.

Elected fields constitute 21% of the total course load and cover specialisation in an area of the branch of study, such as mathematics, physics and chemistry for the natural sciences branch of study, philosophy and psychology for the social sciences branch and Latin as well as any of the modern languages mentioned above for the foreign languages branch. Vocational training or recognized training in the arts may be assessed as counting as part of the specialised courses within general academic studies, provided certain conditions are met.

Free selection constitutes about 9% of the total course load and may include any of the subject courses on offer at the school including further deepening in a subject already studied, such as a foreign language.

ICT is used as a tool for teaching other subjects in the curriculum.

The teaching of modern languages is emphasised. For those pupils who intend to matriculate, English and Danish are compulsory subjects as well as a third foreign language (French, German or Spanish). Pupils in the language branch are to study four foreign languages, i.e. English, Danish and two of the following: French, German, Spanish. Pupils, particularly pupils at schools that operate according to a unit-credit system, also have the opportunity of taking further modern languages as free selection or taking more advanced courses in the modern languages that they have been studying.

The short general branch of study, intended for pupils who are undecided as to what to do after compulsory education or need further preparation for academic or vocational studies, is to be defined in individual school working guides.

[National Curriculum Guide for Upper Secondary Education](#)

5.13.2. Vocational Education

In vocational education at the upper secondary level, study shall be both theoretical and practical and shall form as cohesive a whole as possible in order to enable pupils to better understand the connection between its theoretical and practical aspects. The content and educational objectives of individual branches of study are defined in the National Curriculum Guide. See **5.13.**

The subjects included in vocational branches of study can be divided as follows: general academic subjects, theoretical vocational subjects and practical vocational subjects. Emphasis shall be placed on having the content of study reflect the current needs of the employment sector concerning the professional qualifications of workers.

All vocational trainees must take a certain number of credits in general academic subjects; i.e. Icelandic, modern languages, social studies and mathematics. Physical education is also compulsory. One credit is generally the equivalent of two lessons of instruction per week for one semester. The number of theoretical vocational subjects and practical vocational subjects varies in different branches, as does the extent of practical training.

[National Curriculum Guide for Upper Secondary Education](#)

[Upper Secondary School Act 2008](#)

5.14. Teaching Methods and Materials

Most upper secondary schools operate according to a unit-credit system where the educational content of each subject is divided into a number of defined course-units (modules).

Neither the curriculum guide nor laws and regulations contain instruction regarding teaching methods. Teachers are free to choose those methods that suit their aims and circumstances at any given time. Teachers are also free to choose their textbooks and other educational materials.

Generally speaking, the facilities at upper secondary schools are good and with regard to teaching aids and equipment they are fairly well supplied. In certain subjects, however, there is a shortage of suitable textbooks and other materials which may cause problems. This is partly due to the small size of the Icelandic market. Pupils buy their textbooks on the free market. Teachers commonly produce, translate and adapt teaching materials. Teachers can apply to the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture for grants for such work.

The use of new information and communication technologies in schools has grown rapidly in recent years. Computer-assisted teaching has progressively been increasing. The use of overhead projectors, VCRs and stereo equipment is common. All upper secondary schools are connected to the Internet, which allows teachers to communicate, exchange information, assignments, educational materials and ideas and to be linked to data banks worldwide.

The Ministry of Education Science and Culture's project plans for e-Learning since 2001, entail that information technology be utilized for the benefit of education. Measures have been taken to ensure that the opportunities inherent in new technology are taken advantage of. These measures have in particular included educational programmes for teachers in the use of ICT, development of educational software and the build-up of a technological infrastructure. Distance learning has increased enormously during the last few years. Efforts have been made to develop distributed learning which involves cooperation of schools in providing education so that students can choose from different services offered by educational institutions. This development will demand new practices and the breaking down of traditional boundaries.

All upper secondary schools have libraries that serve both pupils and teachers. These libraries vary, but many of them can be said to be reasonably well equipped with respect to books and premises and most schools have made the libraries into aid centres for study and instruction.

Official recommendations regarding homework do not exist.

[The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture](#)

5.14.1. Teaching Methods in General Education

As a rule, teachers in general upper secondary education only teach one subject, yet in some cases, especially in small schools, teachers teach two or even more subjects. Teaching methods are mainly based around lectures, individual tutoring, discussions between the teacher and pupils and individual assignments that the pupils are required to do. Group work projects are sometimes assigned, but projects and teaching based on the integration of subjects are not very common. The use of ICT is common, both in class teaching and as distance and distributed learning.

5.14.2. Teaching Methods in Vocational Education

On the practical side of pupils' training, an attempt is made to simulate conditions in the workplace. The trainees are usually given a demonstration with verbal explanations when there is a new problem to solve. They then practice either individually or in groups under the guidance of a teacher. In some cases the trainees follow instructions that the teacher has given them to take them through a particular process. Theoretical classes often precede the vocational practice. The use of ICT is an integrated part of teaching methods.

Teaching methods in academic subjects in vocational education are based on lectures, individual tutoring, discussions between the teacher and pupils and individual assignments that the pupils are required to do.

Facilities at vocational schools vary with regard to teaching aids and equipment. Efforts are increasingly being made to study how schools and businesses can share the same equipment. In certain subjects there is a shortage of suitable textbooks and other materials, which may cause problems. This is partly due to the small size of the Icelandic market.

A few nucleus schools for individual trades or groups of trades have been appointed. In consultation with occupational councils, nucleus schools are to lead the development of educational materials, structures and methods of teaching in vocational education. Nucleus schools are to assist other schools and enterprises in improving teaching and training in their respective areas.

5.15. Pupil Assessment

General study assessment in upper secondary schools is in the hands of teachers, under the supervision of the head teacher. Upper secondary schools generally have examinations at the end of every semester, regardless of the type of school. These examinations are in most cases written. Pupils are obliged to take these if they wish to continue and complete their education. The examination period, including the time that it takes to mark the exams, is around three weeks each semester. Some grammar schools that have traditional classes or forms have more extensive final examinations at the end of the fourth and last school year than the ones described above. There are no formal comprehensive final examinations in schools that operate according to a unit-credit system.

Marks are given in whole numbers on a scale from one to ten in all schools, ten being the highest.

On receiving their marks, all pupils have the right to inspect their examinations in the presence of a teacher.

Assignments completed during the semester often count towards the final mark, but their weighting varies depending on circumstances. Certain courses have no final examination at the end of the semester and the grade is based on continuous assessment and on the assignments set. The continuous assessment is done by the teacher and is, for example, based on tests, pupil participation during lessons, and assignments. In schools with traditional classes or forms, the teacher usually gives a grade based on work the pupil has done during the year, which counts as part of the final mark. This is also the case in some schools that operate on the unit-credit system.

According to the Upper Secondary School Act of 2008 the Minister of Education, Science and Culture may decide to put on co-ordinated examinations in individual upper secondary school subjects. The same Act also stipulates that study assessment in final courses leading to matriculation examination shall be based on reference examinations in the core subjects Icelandic, English and mathematics.

Upper Secondary School Act 2008

5.15.1. General Academic Branches of Study

In the general academic branches of study examinations are the responsibility of each individual school. They are written by the teacher or teachers in question and also marked by them. The examinations are supervised by the head of the department in question. There are no external examiners except in the event of a dispute between a teacher and a pupil. There are no nationally co-ordinated examinations, as far as final examinations are concerned or otherwise.

The Upper Secondary School Act of 2008 stipulates that study assessment in final courses leading to matriculation examination shall be based on reference examinations in the core subjects Icelandic, English and mathematics.

Upper Secondary School Act 2008

5.15.2. Vocational Branches of Study

Pupil evaluation is carried out both by continuous assessment and final assessment at the end of each semester. The continuous assessment is decided by the teacher and is, for example, based on tests, homework and pupil participation during lessons. In the theoretical aspect of a course there are usually written examinations, but in practical courses assessment is based either on assignments that have been carried out during the semester or written and practical examinations.

For the certified trades there are journeyman's examinations. They are the responsibility of the trade in question. A committee with members from industry and the trade unions (employers and employees) define the requirements and oversee the journeyman's examination. This national co-ordinated examination consists of a practical and a theoretical part. A journeyman's examination can last from one to ten days, depending on the trade.

Apart from the journeyman's examination there are no national co-ordinated examinations in vocational education. Examinations are the responsibility of each individual school and are supervised by the head of the department in question. Examinations are written by an individual subject teacher or teachers and marked by them. External examiners are not called in except in the event of a dispute.

According to the Upper Secondary School Act, occupational councils make proposals concerning assessment, including the journeyman's examination.

Próun starfsmenntunar á framhaldsskólastigi

Upper Secondary School Act 2008

5.16. Progression of Pupils

In schools that operate according to the unit-credit system pupils are given a certain number of credits for each course unit they complete. The pupil's progress is thus measured in credits. The passing grade for each course unit is five (on a 1-10 scale). Pupils in the above-mentioned schools who fail to receive a passing grade in any given course unit are not allowed to retake an examination at the end of the semester and have to

repeat the course unit during the next semester in order to continue in that particular subject. Pupils are allowed three attempts to complete a given course unit. No average mark is calculated, but pupils must complete at least nine credits per semester. Studies leading to matriculation are organised as an eight semester course but eleven semesters are allowed as a maximum length of time.

The unit-credit system which is the prevalent form of organisation of schools at the upper secondary level allows pupils to regulate the speed at which they complete their education, i.e. to accelerate their studies or take more time due to personal circumstances. It is not uncommon for pupils to complete a four-year branch of study in 3 to 3 1/2 years or spend 5 to 5 1/2 years doing so. One of the factors making this possible is the existence of courses in certain subjects which take a longer or shorter time to complete, and the possibility for pupils to decide for themselves to a certain extent the number of credits to be completed each semester. Pupils with high academic standards or those who are close to graduation may enroll in individual courses without attending lessons. These pupils take the examination at the end of the course unit and hand in those assignments that count towards a grade in the course in question. See [5.14.1](#).

In schools that have traditional classes or forms a minimum grade of four (on a 1-10 scale) in every subject and a five average for all subjects is needed to be allowed to move up to the next year. Examinations can be retaken after the regular examinations at the end of the school year by those pupils who have failed to get a grade of four in individual subjects but whose grade average of all subjects is sufficient to pass. Those pupils whose grade average is under five or who do not reach a minimum grade of four in individual subjects after the retakes must repeat the year.

[National Curriculum Guide for Upper Secondary Education](#)

5.17. Certification

At the end of each semester, pupils are given a transcript by the school which shows their marks and present standing within the branch of study.

On completing a branch of study, pupils are issued with a certificate by the school which specifies which course units or subjects they have taken and the marks they have received. If the pupil graduates from a school that operates on a unit-credit system, the certificate also shows the number of credits completed in individual subjects and in the branch of study as a whole. These pupils are able to graduate at the end of both the autumn and spring semesters. The school-leaving certificate gives the pupil the right to enter other schools or confirms that the pupil has completed a certain amount of vocational training.

5.17.1. Certification in General Academic Education

The matriculation certificate gives the pupil the right to enter schools at the higher education level.

5.17.2. Certification in Vocational Education

Many forms of vocational training give the pupils legal certification for certain types of employment. This applies to studies in the certified trades and also, for example, to the course for auxiliary nurses and the course that qualifies sea-captains.

In the certified trades, the pupil's training ends with a journeyman's examination, see [5.15.2](#), which is a pre-requisite to working in a certified trade. Rights to practise a certain trade, that is where there is question of a right to practice, are issued by the ministry that handles matters relating to the trade in question.

Those who have completed the journeyman's examination can become master craftsmen after a certain period of work experience and advanced studies. Master craftsmen receive their qualification certification from the local chief of police or sheriff.

Þróun starfsmenntunar á framhaldsskólastigi

5.18. Educational/Vocational Guidance, Education/Employment Links

Upper secondary schools offer educational counselling which, among other things, includes assistance in choosing a branch of study, assistance in organising studies and making a study plan, assistance with study-related problems and informing about career opportunities. Educational counselling also often involves assisting pupils with their personal problems.

All pupils at upper secondary schools have a particular teacher as their educational supervisor. The teacher assists them in making their study plans, monitors their progress and attendance and acts as an intermediary between the pupil and other teachers or the school authorities.

All upper secondary schools are to provide health care, but how this is carried out varies greatly. Most schools have school doctors who monitor the health of the pupils, but generally speaking organised health-care services cannot be said to be extensive.

There is a strong tradition in Iceland for pupils at the upper secondary level to be employed during their summer vacation. This has given pupils the opportunity of becoming familiar with a variety of jobs, such as in fish processing, in construction, and work in the travel industry. In recent years, pupils have also commonly had a part-time job in addition to their studies. Pupils have thus had a relatively close relationship with the employment market. This is probably one of the reasons why there has been relatively little effort on behalf of schools offering general academic education to systematically introduce pupils to the labour market or to send them into the workplace. In vocational education there are ties and co-operation between the schools and the labour market, as a part of the pupil's study usually takes place in the workplace. The school and the workplace co-ordinate their efforts in many ways, for example through committees consisting of representatives from the trade unions, industry and the school. With regard to examinations, the labour market is involved in the journeyman's examination. See [5.15.2](#).

5.19. Private Education

Education in Iceland has traditionally been organised within the public sector. There were eight grant-aided private upper secondary schools in the country in the school year 2009-2010. These schools operate in accordance with the same legislation as the public schools and are subject to the same supervision. All eight schools receive public funding determined in the State budget.

According to the Upper Secondary School Act of 2008 the Minister of Education, Science and Culture can provide schools, other than public upper secondary schools, with accreditation to carry out instruction at

upper secondary level subject to certain conditions. Accreditation of an upper secondary school provides a confirmation that at the time in which accreditation is granted, the activities of the respective school comply with general conditions of the Act and other law and regulations issued under the Act.

State budget 2009

Upper Secondary School Act 2008

5.20. Organisational Variations and Alternative Structures

In recent years the availability of distance learning courses through the Internet organised and supervised by some upper secondary schools has increased. These schools offer distance learning in a variety of academic subjects, thus offering pupils the opportunity of completing a matriculation examination through distance learning.

5.21. Statistics

Please refer to the subdivisions for details.

5.21.1. Upper Secondary Education Statistics

Upper secondary education statistics October 2008:

Number of pupils in day schools:	21,424
Number of pupils in evening classes	1,347
Number of pupils in distance learning courses	2,819
Number of upper secondary schools:	33
Number of private schools:	6
Average pupil-teacher ratio:	13
Number of qualified teachers (Nov. 2008):	1,499
Number of instructors (lacking full qualification) (Nov. 2008):	419

Landshagir 2009

5.21.2. Percentage of Age Groups Enrolled 2008/2009

Percentage of age groups enrolled October 2008:

16 years	93%
17 years	85%
18 years	75%
19 years	71%

Landshagir 2009

5.21.3. Percentage of Pupils in the Various Branches of Study

Percentage of pupils in the various branches of study in October 2008:

General short programmes	18%
Languages for matriculation examination	6%
Natural sciences for matriculation examination	19%
Social sciences for matriculation examination	17%
Business and economics for matriculation examination	4%
Various programs for matriculation examination	3%
Education	1%
Manufacturing and construction	13%
Services	5%
Health and other welfare	4%
Arts	6%
Business	2%
Agriculture	1%
Computing	1%

Landshagir 2009

5.21.4. Graduation Rates

In the school year 2007-1008, there were 6,6150 graduations from upper secondary schools (ISCED 3). Graduation rates among these were as follows:

Basic examination	3%
Vocational basic examination	1%
Certified trade basic examination	2%
Diploma of competence	12%
Vocational certificate	14%
Certified trade, school certificate	12%
Journeyman's examination	11%
Matriculation vocational	6%
Matriculation general	39%
Total	100%

Landshagir 2009