



NATIONAL SUMMARY SHEETS ON EDUCATION SYSTEMS IN EUROPE AND ONGOING REFORMS

ICELAND

November 2008

1. Education population and language of instruction

In December 2007, 43 % of the entire population was between 0 and 29 years of age.

In the school year 2007/08, 43841 pupils attended compulsory education, i.e. primary and lower secondary education.

The language of instruction is Icelandic.

2. Administrative control and extent of public-sector funded education

In December 2007, 61287 pupils attended pre-primary and compulsory education and 43675 students attended upper secondary and higher education, i.e. 15 % of the entire population. Education in Iceland has traditionally been organised within the public sector, and there are few private institutions in the school system. All private schools receive public funding. Private schools are schools not administered by local municipalities or state. The schools are funded in part by charging tuition. Admission to the private schools is decided by the school board and the management staff.

The Icelandic parliament is legally and politically responsible for the educational system, and determines its basic objectives and administrative framework. All education is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. The educational system has to a large extent been decentralised, both with regard to responsibilities and decision-making. This reflects a general trend in Icelandic society. Local municipalities are responsible for the operation of pre-primary, primary and lower secondary schools. On the other hand, the state operates most upper secondary schools and higher education institutions. There is no national inspectorate. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture is responsible for evaluation and supervision of education at all educational levels.

3. Pre-primary education

Pre-primary schools (*Leikskóli*) are defined by law as the first level of the educational system, providing education for children who have not reached six years of age, at which point compulsory education begins. All parents pay fees for their children to attend pre-primary school. The parental contribution covers roughly 30% of the operating costs of publicly-run pre-primary schools. The fees in privately-run pre-primary schools are usually around 10-20% higher than in the public ones.

In 2007, the attendance in pre-primary school was, 48% for pupils aged 0-2, 94,5% for pupils aged 3-5 and 66,5% for pupils aged 0-5.

4. Compulsory education

(i) Phases

<i>Grunnskólar</i> (primary and lower secondary education)	6-16 years of age
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Compulsory education is organised in a single structure system, i.e. primary and lower secondary education form a part of the same school level, and generally take place in the same school.

(ii) Admissions criteria

Compulsory education is free of charge. There are no entrance requirements at this school level, and children are accepted at the age of six. The enrolment rate is 100%. As a rule children enrol in the school closest to their residence. In municipalities where there is more than one compulsory school, parents may request that their children be allowed to attend a school that is not in the catchment-area where they live.

(iii) Length of school day/week/year

The school year lasts for nine months, beginning between approx. 21 August and 1 September and ending between approx. 31 May and 10 June. Under the Compulsory Schools Act, the minimum number of school days per year is 180. Schools operate five days a week, and pupils attend between 30 and 37 (40-minute) lessons, increasing with age. The minimum annual number of teaching hours is 720 (for children aged 7), 840 (for those aged 10) and 888 at lower-secondary level.

(iv) Class size/student grouping

The Compulsory Schools Act of 2008 does not contain any provision concerning the maximum number of pupils within a single class. Pupils are grouped into classes by age from grade one to ten. Classes at primary level usually have one teacher for all subjects; lower- secondary-level pupils generally have separate subject teachers.

(v) Curriculum control and content

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture supervises the curriculum and publishes the National Curriculum Guidelines (NCG). Core subjects include Icelandic and mathematics. Other compulsory subjects are: Arts and crafts, modern languages, social and religious studies, physical education, natural sciences, ICT, home economics and life skills. Teachers choose their own teaching methods.

Pupils are provided with teaching materials free of charge. A public institution, The National Centre for Educational Materials, is responsible for providing all children in compulsory schools with teaching materials and receives budget appropriation for this purpose. It is relatively expensive for a small nation to

publish satisfactory teaching materials in its own language. For this reason there is no possibility of a choice from a variety of different textbooks for all subjects but the variety of teaching material has increased in recent years, for example audio-visual material and computer and multi-media programmes. Individual schools and teachers may choose which materials they use when alternatives are available.

(vi) Assessment, progression and qualifications

There is no selection or streaming by ability in compulsory education, and children automatically move up from one grade to the next according to age.

Examinations and other forms of assessment, usually written, are carried out by individual teachers and schools. Assessment is therefore not standardised between different schools and teachers. The way in which the reports on pupils' progress are written varies greatly: the assessment can be in the form of a number, a letter or a description either oral or written. Reports are given at regular intervals throughout the school year and at the end of each year. The purpose of assessment by the school and the teacher is above all to help improve learning and teaching and to provide both the parents and the children with information on how their studies are progressing.

Nationally co-ordinated examinations *samræmd könnunarpróf* are given every year in the core subjects, Icelandic and mathematics, in grades 4 and 7.

According to the new Compulsory School Act from 2008, there will be, from the autumn 2009, obligatory nationally co-ordinated examinations (*samræmd könnunarpróf*) in Icelandic, mathematics and English in the last year of the compulsory education, i.e. grade ten. The examinations will be held in the beginning of the last year of compulsory education and will no longer serve as an admission requirement to a specific branch at the upper secondary level.

These examinations are organised, composed and marked by The Educational Testing Institute. Marks ranging from one to ten are given based on referenced criteria. The purpose of the examinations in grade 10 is primarily to indicate the pupil's standing at the completion of his compulsory education and to assist him in choosing a course of upper secondary study. At the end of compulsory schooling all pupils get a certificate stating their marks on both the nationally co-ordinated examinations and all other courses completed in their final year at school.

5. Post-compulsory education/upper secondary and post-secondary level

(i) Types of education

Upper secondary general education <i>Menntaskólar</i> <i>Fjölbrautaskólar</i>	Generally from 16 years of age to 20 years of age
Vocational or specialized upper secondary education <i>Ídnskólar</i> (vocational schools) <i>Sérskólar</i> (specialized vocational schools) <i>Fjölbrautaskólar</i>	Generally from 16 years of age to 20 years of age

General academic education is primarily organised as a four-year course leading to a matriculation examination. The length of the courses in vocational education varies, lasting from one semester to ten, but most prevalent are four-year courses.

(ii) Admissions criteria

The pupil's and/or parents' choice of an upper secondary school is unrestricted. Regulations on enrolment of pupils and admission requirements to the different branches of study are in force. The admission to individual schools is the responsibility of the head teacher.

(iii) Curriculum control and content

The curriculum is outlined in the National Curriculum Guidelines, issued by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. The NCG define the objectives of individual subjects and branches of study. They also describe the overall structure and the content of individual subjects and branches. There are four types of branches of study: academic, vocational, fine arts and a short general branch of study. The branches of study are of differing lengths. Each branch of study is organised into core subjects, elective fields and free selection.

All courses leading to matriculation include Icelandic, foreign languages, social studies, science, mathematics, life skills and physical education. Vocational branches include general academic courses and vocational theory and practice courses. Most schools operate according to a unit-credit system. The pupils are assigned a certain number of credits for each course they complete. This system allows for a certain flexibility concerning time spent on particular courses and completion of studies.

(iv) Assessment, progression and qualifications

All pupils who complete compulsory schooling have the legal right to upper secondary education regardless of their results in the tenth grade of compulsory school.

Icelandic upper secondary schools generally have examinations at the end of every semester, regardless of the type of school. Pupils are obliged to take these examinations if they wish to continue their studies, and complete their education. 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. In the general academic branches of study leading to matriculation, examinations are the responsibility of each individual school. A matriculation examination is generally required for admission to higher education institutions.

In vocational education, pupils' assessment is carried out by both continuous assessment and examinations at the end of each semester. For the certified trades there are the journeyman's examinations, which are the responsibility of the trade in question. Many forms of vocational education give the students legal certification for certain types of employment.

6. Higher education

(i) Structure

Higher education institutions include both traditional universities and institutions which do not carry out research. Institutions of higher education vary in the extent to which they engage in research and the number of programmes of study offered. According to the Higher Education Act nr. 63/2006, higher education institutions in Iceland had to acquire accreditation by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture by July 1. 2008. The follow up of the accreditation will be brought about through a system of independent quality assurance.

(ii) Access

Higher education institutions are responsible for selecting students for admission. In general, for admission to institutions at the higher education level, students must have passed the matriculation examination or its equivalent. In some cases, applicants with substantial work experience who have not completed matriculation examinations may be admitted. For vocational and technical courses in higher education institutions, practical experience in an appropriate field of study is often required.

There is no charge for tuition in higher education institutions operated by the state, only registration fees. Higher education institutions operated by private parties charge tuition fees.

(iii) Qualifications

As a general rule, studies at the higher education level in Iceland are divided into three degree programmes in accordance to the Bologna process within the European Higher Education Area: a) a bachelor's degree, which normally takes three to four years to complete, b) a master's degree (MA, MSc, MBA, MPA, MEd, MPAed, etc.) with a duration of two years, and c) a doctoral degree, with a duration of three years. In a number of higher education institutions a diploma or a certificate is awarded after one-and-a-half or two years' study in various subjects.

7. Special needs

The Compulsory Education Act stipulates that all children are to receive suitable instruction. Pupils have the right to attend school in the area where they live. Furthermore, the school is to undertake systematically the integration of handicapped pupils in its catchment area into mainstream education. In the school year 2007/08, approx. 0.4 % of pupils at compulsory level with special educational needs were educated in separate schools.

There are no separate schools for pupils with special educational needs at the upper secondary level. All pupils at that school level attend mainstream education.

8. Teachers

Teachers in pre-primary and compulsory schools complete a three-year programme of study leading to a BEd degree. Teachers at primary level are generalists, while teachers at lower secondary level specialise in one or more subjects. Upper secondary teachers complete a three- to four-year programme of study (leading to the degree of BA or BSc) plus a one-year programme in pedagogy and didactics. All teachers are civil servants. In 2008, new law was passed that states that from 2011, all new teachers must undergo a five year education instead of three years.

9. Current reforms and priorities

Pre-Primary level

A new Pre-Primary School Act entered into force on 1 July 2008.

The main objectives of the Act are the following:

- The main emphasis is on children's welfare and interests.
- It will be systematically ensured that the duties and responsibilities of parents and children are as comparable as possible between the compulsory school and pre-school, taking into account the fact that pre-school attendance is optional and compulsory school attendance is obligatory.

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- The Act reflects recent changes in the society and economy, increased sociological diversity and the fact that most parents work away from the home.
 - Children's right for specialist services is defined as well as the duty to provide information to parents. The pre-school is for all children without discrimination so it is important to ensure that all children can get specialist assistance as needed.
 - The Act stipulates increased possibilities for parents to actively participate in pre-school activities, which is in keeping with the Acts for Upper Secondary School and for Compulsory School.
 - Evaluation of pre-school activities and information dissemination is increased considerably.
 - As the supervision and administration of the pre-school is more definitely transferred to the municipalities, a clearer criteria is provided for evaluation of pre-school activities, their quality control and information dissemination.
 - The municipalities' supervision for pre-school affairs is reinforced and their responsibilities are defined more explicitly. The criteria for evaluation and quality control of pre-school activities and information dissemination are clearly defined.
 - Support for development and innovation in pre-schools is increased.

Compulsory level

A new Compulsory School Act entered into force on 1 July 2008.

The main objectives of the Act are the following:

- to provide conditions that make the education of children in Iceland exemplary at international level
- to ensure the welfare of all compulsory school children as well as equal study opportunities
- to provide pupils and their parents with a variety of alternatives regarding choice of compulsory schools and study arrangements
- to ensure that studies are adapted to the different needs of pupils and that they participate actively in school activities
- to increase the scope and coherence between school levels and within the compulsory school level
- to ensure that compulsory school children get the appropriate study support and that specialist services are coordinated with the main focus on the child's needs
- to clarify the responsibilities, rights and duties of children and parents
- to increase participation of parents in school activities and ensure their close collaboration with the school administration and the school community in general
- to increase the municipalities' authority of compulsory school affairs and strengthen school autonomy
- to clarify division of tasks between state, municipalities and compulsory school administration
- to confirm the main rule that children's compulsory school education shall be free of charge

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- to strengthen the evaluation and monitoring of school operations in order to encourage progress and improvements to compulsory school activities.

Upper secondary level

A new Upper Secondary School Act entered into force on 1 July 2008. The upper secondary schools have to July 2011 to fully implement all provisions of the Act. The main objectives of the Act are:

- To enforce pupils' rights to acquire education, e.g. by the duty of the authorities to provide education until the age of 18
- To define the implicit role of the matriculation examination as preparation for higher education, while providing upper secondary schools with flexibility for structuring their study programmes with regard to organisation and content
- To take into account pupils' needs and requirements when organising school activities by increasing considerably the flexibility of study organisation and increasing the number of study programmes in order to provide conditions for more individuals to complete recognised studies to decrease the drop-out rate
- To provide extensive counselling and support for pupils and to organise special upper secondary school final examination based on special study programmes
- To provide upper secondary schools with the liberty to develop specific study programmes based on the specialisation and strengths of each school and according to demand for specialised study provisions and solutions
- To decentralise considerably the organisation of study programmes and curricula
- To increase the scope and flexibility of study programme descriptions e.g. by adopting a new course unit evaluation system
- To ensure transparency and coherence in evaluation of pupils' achievements in all studies at upper secondary level, including vocational education and equality in evaluation of the matriculation examination taken within academic as well as vocational study programmes
- To entrust educational institutions with increased responsibility of developing study provisions on the margins of educational levels in order to increase flexibility and the possibilities of pupils transferring between school levels
- To safeguard the position and interests of pupils in vocational education in general, e.g. by making the upper secondary school responsible for organisation of workplace training
- To ensure quality of education by strengthening internal and external evaluation of school activities and support improvements thereof

Higher education level

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture supervises the implementation of the Bologna process. The Ministry appointed in 2003 a National Bologna working group to coordinate and conduct the process and to provide input and make proposals for possible legislative reforms and regulations in order to

ensure successful implementation of the process. A self-certification committee was appointed in fall of 2008 and will start its work during the spring of 2009.

In recent years there has been a significant rise in the number of students in higher education, followed by an increase in the availability of higher education programmes of various lengths. In relation to this, there is an ongoing debate about the finances of higher education institutions. Private institutions receive state support and can also charge tuition fees. Public institutions are only authorised to charge registration fees. Public institutions are considering ways to cope with their financial problems, for example by charging tuition fees or restricting admission.

For more detailed information on education systems in Europe, you may consult the EURYDICE data base, EURYBASE (<http://www.eurydice.org>)