



SUMMARY SHEETS ON EDUCATION SYSTEMS IN EUROPE

ICELAND

I. Description of education system

1. Education population and language of instruction

In 1999, approximately 79% of the population aged 29 and under were receiving education and there were 43 030 young people of compulsory education age. The language of instruction is Icelandic.

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

All pupils attend publicly funded schools, in 1999 approximately 6% of which are private grant-aided institutions (provided and controlled by non-government bodies but receiving some of their finance from the public sector).

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture is responsible for implementing legislation, planning changes and issuing regulations for the education sector as a whole. However, responsibility for compulsory education has been transferred from the State to local authorities. Municipalities are responsible for all aspects of the operation of compulsory schools and for the establishment of pre-school facilities (which are operated under the auspices of the Ministry). Upper secondary schools are managed by school boards on which the Ministry, the local authority, teachers and pupils are represented. Higher education institutions are the direct responsibility of the Ministry.

There is no national inspectorate. Supervision of education takes place at the local level, with the ultimate responsibility resting with the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.

3. Pre-primary education

Pre-school institutions cater for children aged 1 to 5 and are all fee-paying.

1999	Age 3	Age 4	Age 5
Pre-primary education	86,9%	90,8%	89,8%

4. Compulsory full-time education

(a) Phases

<i>Grunnskólar</i> (primary and lower secondary education)	6-16 years of age
Primary and lower secondary education	13-16 years of age

Compulsory education from the ages of 6 to 16 is in a single structure.

(b) Admissions criteria

Although pupils usually attend their local school, parents may choose a school outside their district. Children are admitted at the age of 6. There is no division between primary and lower secondary level. All compulsory education is free.

(c) Length of the school day/week/year

The school year comprises as a minimum 170 days between September and May. Schools operate five days a week and there are between 30 to 35 (40-minute) lessons, increasing with age. The minimum annual number of teaching hours was 680 (for children aged 7), 793 (those aged 10) and 839 at lower secondary level.

(d) Class size/student grouping

Since 1995, there have been no regulations concerning maximum class size. Pupils are grouped by age; there is no streaming by ability. Classes at primary level have one teacher for all subjects; lower secondary-level pupils have separate subject teachers.

(e) Curricular control and content

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture supervises the curriculum and publishes a National Curriculum Guide (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. The National Centre for Educational Materials publishes and distributes teaching and learning materials.

(f) Assessment, progression and qualifications

The NCG contains recommendations for assessment, progression and examinations. At the end of the tenth and final year of compulsory education, pupils can choose to sit the nationally co-ordinated examination. The examinations are offered in Icelandic, mathematics, English and Danish (Norwegian and Swedish). Nationally co-ordinated examinations are compulsory for grades 4 and 7 in Icelandic and mathematics. These examinations are composed, marked and organised by the Educational Testing Service. Pupils receive a certificate stating their grades. Other assessment is carried out by teachers and is not standardized between schools. Pupils progress automatically through compulsory education.

5. Upper secondary and post-secondary education

(a) Types of education

General academic upper secondary education <i>Menntaskólar</i> (grammar schools) <i>Fjölbrautaskólar</i> (comprehensive schools)	From 16 years of age
Vocational or specialized upper secondary education <i>Idnskólar</i> (vocational schools) <i>Sérskólar</i> (specialized vocational schools) <i>Fjölbrautaskólar</i> (comprehensive schools)	From 16 years of age

Upper secondary education takes between six months to four years, according to the course. Some vocational or specialized training may continue beyond the age of 20.

(b) Admissions criteria

All pupils who complete compulsory schooling have access to upper secondary education, but there are varied admission requirements to different programmes of study. There is no charge for tuition, but pupils pay an enrolment fee.

(c) Curricular control and content

The curriculum is outlined in the NCG, produced by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. All courses leading to matriculation include Icelandic, languages, social studies, science, mathematics, and physical education. Academic education also includes compulsory specialist subjects and pupil electives. Vocational courses include the general core and vocational theory and practice courses. Most schools award unit credits for individual courses and give pupils flexibility concerning time spent on particular courses.

(d) Assessment, progression and qualifications

The NCG includes guidelines for assessment, progression and examinations. National examinations in general academic upper secondary education will be instituted in 2003-2004. Until then, assessment is the internal responsibility of the school. Upper secondary general and vocational educational assessment is based on twice-yearly internal examinations and, in many cases, on coursework. Pupils following a unit/credit system who fail an examination have two chances to re-take it. Pupils receive matriculation at the end of general academic upper secondary education. Vocational and specialized training lead to specific vocational qualifications.

6. Higher Education

(a) Types of institution

Higher education is offered either at a university (offering a range of courses) or college (offering specialized technical, vocational or arts courses).

(b) Qualifications

Non-university higher education generally leads to a diploma or certificate. As a general rule, university studies in Iceland are divided into three degree programmes: a) a bachelor degree which normally takes three to four years to complete, b) a masters degree (MA, MSc, MBA, MEd, MPaed, etc.) with a duration of one to two years, and c) a doctoral degree, with a duration of four to five years. There are several exceptions from this system. For example, remains of the old professional degree system (*Candidatus* degrees of 5-6 years duration) are still in place in e.g. Law and Medicine.

(c) Access

Most institutions require upper secondary matriculation; in addition, vocational courses may require relevant work experience.

7. Special needs

Although separate structures for special education provision exist, pupils with special educational needs are usually integrated into mainstream education. In 1999, about 0,4% of pupils at compulsory level with special educational needs were educated in separate schools.

8. Teachers

Teachers of pre-school and compulsory-level education complete a three-year Bachelor of Education course; teachers at primary level are generalists, teachers at lower secondary level specialize in one or more subjects. Upper secondary teachers complete a three to four year degree course (leading to BA or BS) plus 30 credits in pedagogy and didactics. All teachers are civil servants.

II. Ongoing Reforms and Topics of Debate in Education in Iceland

In the last few years one of the major changes in compulsory education is that the schools are now run and governed by the municipalities. In accordance with new laws for pre-schools, compulsory and upper-secondary schools, an emphasis has been put on the use by schools of self-evaluation as a mean to improve their work. The use of information technology has also been encouraged by the Ministry in several ways. In 1999, new NCG was issued.

The aims of the ongoing reforms in education in Iceland are to improve the work in the schools. The schools are to be able to give young people as good education as possible in a continually developing society. The revision of NCG at the first three school levels was done at the same time so the continuity between school levels was an important factor in the revision. In the NCG

for compulsory and upper-secondary level the aims of each subject are stated more clearly than was done in the former guidelines. Schools at each level are to make their own school working guide in accordance with those aims.

Pre-schools

The new revised NCG for the pre-primary level is based on the law on pre-schools from 1994 and the educational programme from 1993. As before child-centred ideology is the foundation of the guidelines and the nucleus of work in pre-schools is the play which is the best way for the child to learn and mature. In these guidelines the major changes are chapters about evaluation of the work in pre-schools and each pre-school is to have its own school working guide. There is also greater emphasis than before on co-operation between parents and pre-schools. Furthermore it is emphasised that pre-primary level is the first school level and at this stage the child should get necessary preparation before starting compulsory school.

Compulsory level

Following new law on compulsory schools set in 1995 the municipalities took over the responsibility of running compulsory schools in Iceland. The Ministry has the responsibility to ensure that the work in the schools is in accordance with law. It has also the responsibility to issue national curriculum guidelines. In 1999 new and revised NCG was issued.

The principle changes that the new NCG entails are the following: that instruction in English begins in the 5th grade or at 10 years of age; that instruction in new subjects (life skills) will be instituted that impart necessary skills for general living in the modern world; that teaching information technology will become more goal-oriented and that teaching hours in natural sciences and mathematics is increased and now pupils can choose which nationally co-ordinated examinations they take on completion of the compulsory education.

Beginning instruction in English in the 5th grade will mean a one-fourth increase in the number of hours of English teaching over the present requirement. The beginning of instruction in Danish, on the other hand, will be delayed by one year and will begin in the 7th grade. The goal of instruction in the courses in the new subject life skills is, among other things, to support goal-oriented factors in the general development of the pupils, to increase their ability to cope with an ever-changing and complex society, and to include important areas that fall outside the limits of traditional courses. Instruction in the field of informational technology is intended to meet the technological advances and the computer revolution of the modern world.

In recent years a new policy has been formed in matters concerning pupils with reading difficulties at all school levels. For example when pupils start compulsory school emphasis will be on diagnosing pupils standing. Six year old pupils will be offered a test for dyslexia so it will be possible to support those pupils who need it. Pupils standing will be assessed regularly so it will be possible to meet their different needs.

Upper secondary level

A new NCG for the upper-secondary level was issued in several parts in 1999. The intention underlying the new NCG is to insure 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. An emphasis is placed on increased variety and flexibility of the studies especially with regard to vocational studies and on using information technology in the schools.

There are 4 types of branches of study: academic, vocational, fine arts and a short general branch of study. The branches of study are of differing lengths and are to be organised in accordance with the final objective of the programme. Each branch of study is organised into core subjects elected fields and free selection. In the new NCG the structure and organisation of

branches of studies has been revised and changed in various ways. The new NCG will allow for increased specialisation in academic studies. A new course, life skills, will be added to the requirements for all branches, with the goal of preparing pupils for life in a democratic society.

University level

A framework law on higher education was passed in December 1997. The enactment of the law gives Icelandic HEI's increased autonomy in their own matters, and has altered the relations between the HEI's and the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. The Ministry's emphasis is on agreements and monitoring, rather than on interference with particular internal matters of the institutions.

The Minister of Education, Science and Culture passed a regulation in May 1999 on quality assessment and monitoring of university instruction, which requires universities to set up a formal, internal quality assessment system. The regulation also stipulates that the Minister can decide when an external quality assessment is to be carried out and nominates specialists for the evaluation group implementing the quality assessment.

The government has recently signed new financial contracts with each higher education institution (both public and private). By this the government has created uniform rules for the public financing of HEI's. The first such agreement was signed with the University of Iceland in 1999. The contracts are intended to finance the instructional side (not research) of the HEI's operations, and are performance-related, i.e. financial contributions are based on the number of pupil equivalents.

Unrevised English

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