

## **NQF state of play**

 **Iceland 2018**

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# Introduction and context

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Over recent years, the Icelandic education system has seen improvements in several key indicators of education and training. Iceland has exceeded the EU 2020 benchmark target on tertiary educational attainment (53.7% in 2017) and the employment rate of recent graduates is the highest in Europe (94.8% in 2016). Participation in adult learning also stands out, being only exceeded by Denmark, Finland Sweden and Switzerland. However, early school leaving is still a challenge. The proportion of early leavers from education and training in 2017 was 17.8% (22.5% for males and 12.7% for females). This is the third highest in the EU and EFTA countries (European Commission, 2018). Iceland has developed a national framework – the Icelandic national qualifications framework (ISQF) – consisting of seven learning-outcomes-based levels covering all levels and types of qualification in the formal education and training system. Work started in 2006 and has been closely linked to extensive reform of the Icelandic education system, including changes in legislation and education policy. The focus on the learning outcomes principle and the national qualifications levels was central to these changes. An earlier version of the ISQF was presented in 2013 and revised in 2016.

The main objective of the ISQF, formally adopted in October 2016, was to make sure that all formally certified education and training was referenced to an NQF level. Compared to the 2013 ISQF, the 2016 ISQF is broader in scope as it includes qualifications from compulsory, upper secondary and tertiary education as well as from certified adult learning pathways. Level descriptors have been revised and the ISQF levels 5 and 6 split into sublevels.

The 2013 version of the ISQF was formally referenced to the European qualifications framework (EQF) in December 2013 (Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). It is envisaged that an updated reference report will be submitted to the EQF advisory group in 2019.

# Policy objectives

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The ISQF is defined as a lifelong learning framework and aims to cover all levels and types of education and training offered in the country. The framework is designed to make the pathways through the education system clearer, to increase student mobility within the country and between countries, and to motivate further learning.

The framework builds on a set of acts on education and training ([\[1\]](#)), based on the learning outcomes approach:

- a. the Compulsory School Act No 91/2008, which offers the lowest level of certified training (hence level 1 in the ISQF, covers both levels 1 and 2 in the EQF). Attendance is compulsory for all children aged 6 to 16 and all of them graduate formally, regardless of their grades;
- b. the Upper Secondary Education Act No 92/2008, which provides for a decentralised approach to organising study programmes and curricula. Education providers have a great responsibility, and enjoy considerable autonomy, in developing study programmes and curricula in general education and VET. The learning pathways have to be accredited by the Directorate of Education;
- c. the Higher Education Act No 63/2006, which refers to the Bologna process and the introduction of a three-cycle approach for Icelandic higher education;
- d. the Adult Education Act No 27/2010, which only covers training for people who do not have an education qualification below ISQF level 4 (EQF 3).

No separate legislative basis has yet been developed for the ISQF: this has been deemed unnecessary due to the integration of framework developments into the acts outlined above.

## **Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications**

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The Icelandic NQF, through its systematic application of learning outcomes, is seen as a tool for reviewing the overall functioning of education and training and supporting long-term reform. The ISQF consists of seven learning-outcomes-based levels, with two sub-levels at levels 5 and 6. The reason for the sub-division of levels 5 and 6 is that there are two different types of qualifications available for each of them.

The level descriptors reflect knowledge, skills and competences, and the importance attributed to key competences and transversal skills. They are presented in an integrated way, where the increase in knowledge, skills and competences from one level to the next is clear and understandable ([2]).

# Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

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A wide range of stakeholders from education and training, and from the labour market, has been involved in developing the ISQF. In between the adoption of the two versions of the ISQF, these stakeholders worked on a proposal, which was presented to the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture in autumn 2016. It was approved by the Ministry and formally signed by stakeholders in October 2016.

From 2015 to 2017, the Icelandic Centre for Research – *Rannís* ([3]) – was in charge of NQF coordination and implementation. The national coordination point (NCP) was transferred to the Directorate of Education ([4]) at the beginning of 2018. The NCP is under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. One of the main reasons for this transfer is that the Directorate has the role of certifying education provision at upper secondary level and in adult education.

The Directorate of Education will continue to encourage the use of ISQF and EQF by social partners, public employment services and education providers. An important factor in this work will be to finish the accreditation of all study programmes within upper secondary education and within both general education and VET. Within this process, which involves the work of both the formal education system and the occupational councils, special attention is given to the link to NQF levels and is one of the prerequisites for accreditation. When developing templates for graduation certificates (diplomas) for upper secondary schools, emphasis will be on cooperation with higher education, as well as with the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture and members from upper secondary schools. At tertiary level, each university is responsible for assigning its offers to an NQF level (European Commission; Cedefop, 2018).

# Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways

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A national strategy for validating non-formal and informal learning is in place for people with low levels of education and qualifications. Most of the work undertaken on validating non-formal and informal learning has been carried out by the Education and Training Service Centre (ETSC) ([6]). The target group for the work of the ETSC and of its validation activities is people with little formal education; around 22% of those aged 25 to 64 on the labour market have not completed upper secondary education ([7]).

The main objective of the national validation strategy is opening pathways for people with little formal education, focusing mainly on reducing the length of studies based on curricula at upper secondary level, and where a unit-based system is in place. The process focuses on assessing competences within each curriculum subject with a specific unit value. The results are calculated as recognised credits and certified specifically as 'passed' into a general databank for upper secondary schools and formal adult learning. It is possible to obtain a full qualification through validation in some sectors, however this is rarely the case and a full qualification as a skilled worker is not granted until a trade - or journeyman's examination - is completed. Validation against standards in specific occupations has not been linked to a credit system or modularised structure of qualifications.

The ETSC works according to contract with the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. Validation of prior learning (VPL) projects is conducted in cooperation with lifelong learning centres distributed around the country. VPL has a legal framework in Iceland and its practices are based on a regulation introduced in 2011.

Around 60 pathways at upper secondary school level have been validated against curricula at ISQF levels 2-3 (EQF levels 3-4), evenly spread between the certified trades and other sectors. In 2016-17, around 955 individuals had their competences validated: 426 within the certified trades; 404 against curricula in other sectors; and 113 against specific occupational standards, of which 86 were linked to employability skills. Only 12 individuals had their competences validated against general

subjects. In 2017, 6% of participants in VPL projects were immigrants. In the Erasmus KA3 project *VISKA 2017-20* (visible skills for adults), the focus is on developing methods and processes for increasing migrants' access to VPL processes, education and work ([8]).

There have been developments in validation linked to occupational standards in cooperation with stakeholders in the service and tourism sectors, which have been growing rapidly. Validation of occupational standards for lighting technicians and sound technicians has already been successfully introduced. Pilot projects are to be planned soon for ISQF level 4/EQF level 5. A committee has been working over the last two years on developing VPL in higher education; it presented its findings in a report in June 2018 ([9]). The committee submitted four proposals on the development of VPL in higher education based on its work:

- a. to support validation of prior learning in higher education it is vital to coordinate a common understanding of VPL and the best practices to be used. Regulations need to be clear and it is very important to ensure a common definition of validation of prior learning and of ensuring that laws and regulations on the issue at the level of higher education are coordinated, although each education institution will devise its own implementation methods. Quality assurance is a vital part of carrying out VPL in HE and it is important to keep track of statistics and results;
- b. the committee suggests that an independent third party e.g. the Directorate of Education or the Education and Training Service Centre (ETSC) will conduct the validation;
- c. it is proposed that each university faculty develops its validation of prior learning to shorten the study time required, hence there may be differences between faculties;
- d. the committee suggests a pilot project where VPL methods are developed in chosen faculties at university level, such as engineering, computer science and education. The methods developed in this project could be used in other faculties in the future.

Validation methodology is not used at university level, but some university departments partly consider candidates' work experience during intake procedures.

## NQF implementation and impact

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The first version of the ISQF was referenced to the EQF in December 2013. The revised ISQF was agreed upon by all stakeholders in October 2016 and can be described as having reached an early operational stage.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture coordinates developments, supported by the Directorate of Education and *Rannís*. Recently the national website for the NQF/EQF was transferred to the Directorate of Education ([10]).

The Directorate of Education will work closely with education providers to ensure that all new education offers will be assigned to the relevant qualification level. The compilation of a guidebook is envisaged, where education providers will be instructed in the whole process, from the creation of learning outcomes to a formal education offer where education content is referenced to the appropriate qualification level. The guidebook is seen as a living document which will be edited and updated when needed.

The Directorate of Education will also continue supporting the setting up and use of the NQF and EQF by clearly referencing the appropriate NQF and EQF level on qualification documents. The focus will be on developing templates for graduation certificates (diplomas) for upper secondary school in close cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture and the school community (European Commission; Cedefop, 2018).

A clear focus on learning outcomes through the development of the ISQF has been beneficial for the process of validating non-formal and informal learning as well as for the recognition of foreign qualifications. It is also anticipated that the framework will provide transparency of standards and will promote a more open mindset towards non-formal and informal learning.

## Referencing to the EQF

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The link between the EQF and the ISQF is described in the Icelandic referencing report, submitted to the EQF advisory group in December 2013 (Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). It is anticipated that it will submit an updated referencing report based on the 2016 revision to the EQF advisory group in 2019.

ISQF/EQF levels are included in all formal qualifications certificates and Europass supplements (both the Diploma supplement and the Certificate supplements ([11])). A discussion on whether to indicate the ISQF/EQF levels on certificates in adult education is currently taking place.

## **Important lessons and future plans**

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The overarching framework of the ISQF has created a dialogue between different education providers. That in itself has created greater understanding of different types of education, training and qualifications across the sector, although there is still a considerable way to go to reach parity of esteem between types of qualifications, both inside the education system, and in the eyes of the general public. A main challenge in the next few years is to continue the process of dialogue and information.

The link to higher education seems important in the years to come. This is linked to the discussions taking place at European level on changes to the Bologna Reform process, which is expected to be adopted in 2019.

One of the main challenges for adult education is to validate learning acquired in the non-formal system for formal education. At present, there is an unclear understanding of qualifications at adult education level and one of the next steps in the process is to set up curricula development, curricula certification, quality management and certified learning outcomes in adult education. The validation of non-formal education will be a vital element in this respect and there are expectations that in the future, all adult education qualifications will be formally assigned to an ISQF level. It is anticipated that a new act on adult education (expected in 2019 or 2020) will be helpful in achieving this, as it is intended to stipulate that adult education curricula exceeding 40 hours in duration should be validated and certified. A vital part of the accreditation process of adult education curricula is the process of assigning qualifications to the correct ISQF level. Curricula in adult education has been accredited and assigned to ISQF levels since the agreement on the framework in the year 2016. The Directorate of Education and The Education and Training Service Centre (ETSC) are fully aware of the older curricula that have not gone through the same accreditation process and are, therefore, not properly linked to the ISQF. Dialogue is continuing on this issue.

## Main sources of information

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- The Directorate of Education acts as EQF NCP:  
<https://mms.is/directorate-education>
- Icelandic qualifications database: [www.menntabrunnur.is](http://www.menntabrunnur.is)
- Information and documents covering Icelandic developments can be found on the website of the Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture: <http://eng.menntamalaraduneyti.is/>
- Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (2014).  
*Reference report of the Icelandic qualifications framework to the European qualifications framework on lifelong learning:*  
[https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/EQF\\_Reference\\_Report\\_2014.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/EQF_Reference_Report_2014.pdf)

# National qualification framework (NQF)

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPES	EQF LEVEL
7	<b>Doctoral degree (Doktorspróf)</b>	8
6.2	<b>Master and candidatus degree (Meistarapróf)</b>	7
6.1	<b>Degree at master level but without a research report (Próf á meistarastigi)</b>	
5.2	<b>Bachelor degree (Bakkalárpróf)</b>	6
5.1	<b>Diploma degree (short cycle) (Diplómapróf)</b>	
4	<b>Additional studies of vocational subjects (Viðbótarnám á framhaldsskólastigi)</b>	5
3	<b>Matriculation examination (Stúdentspróf)</b> <b>Vocational examination for professional rights (Réttindapróf í starfsmenntun)</b>	4
2	<b>Upper secondary school leaving certificate (Framhaldsskólapróf)</b> <b>Other final examinations (Önnur lokapróf)</b> <b>Vocational qualification for professional rights (Próf í starfsmenntun)</b>	3
1	<b>Compulsory school final examinations (Grunnskólapróf)</b> <b>Diploma in adult education (Diplómapróf í fullorðinsfræðslu)</b>	2

## Acronyms

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EQF	European qualifications framework
ETSC	Education and Training Service Centre
ISQF	Icelandic qualifications framework
NCP	national coordination point
NQF	national qualifications framework
QF- EHEA	qualifications framework in the European higher education area
VPL	validation of prior learning

# References

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[URLs accessed 14.1.2019]

European Commission (2018). *Education and Training Monitor 2018: EU targets for 2020*.

[https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/2018-et-monitor-leaflet\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/2018-et-monitor-leaflet_en.pdf)

European Commission; Cedefop (2018). *Survey on implementation, communication and use of NQF/EQF* [unpublished].

European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International (forthcoming).

*European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018: country report Iceland.*

Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (2014). *Reference report of the Icelandic qualifications framework to the European qualifications framework for lifelong learning*. Reykjavík: Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. [https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/EQF\\_Reference\\_Report\\_2014.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/EQF_Reference_Report_2014.pdf) [assessed 30.10.2018]

Statistics Iceland: <https://www.statice.is>

## Notes

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[1] Links to all these acts in English can be found at:

[https://www.gov.is/publications/legislation/\\$LisasticSearch/Search/?SearchQuery=&Ministries=Ministry+of+Education+Science+and+Culture&Themes=Education&ContentTypes=](https://www.gov.is/publications/legislation/$LisasticSearch/Search/?SearchQuery=&Ministries=Ministry+of+Education+Science+and+Culture&Themes=Education&ContentTypes=)

[2] [https://www.gov.is/media/menntamalaraduneyti-media/media/frettatengt2016/Haefnirammi\\_A4\\_enska\\_anlogo.pdf](https://www.gov.is/media/menntamalaraduneyti-media/media/frettatengt2016/Haefnirammi_A4_enska_anlogo.pdf)

[3] Icelandic Centre for Research: <https://en.rannis.is/>

[4] The Directorate of Education: <https://mms.is/directorate-education>

[5] This section draws mainly on input from the 2018 update to the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning (European Commission et al., forthcoming).

[6] Education and Training Service Centre: <http://www.frae.is/um-okkur/about-us/>

[7] Statistics Iceland, data from 2017: <https://www.statice.is/>

[8] <http://www.viskaproject.eu>

[9] <http://frae.is/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Raunf%C3%A6rnimat-%C3%A1-h%C3%A1sk%C3%B3lastigi-ni%C3%B0urst%C3%B6r%C6%B6rvinuh%C3%B3ps.pdf>

[10] <https://mms.is/directorate-education>

[11] These supplements can be found at:

<https://www.erasmusplus.is/menntun/stodverkefni/europass>

## Related content

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## Iceland - European inventory on NQF 2018

European inventory of NQF

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