

NQF state of play

 **Iceland 2020**

Table of contents

- Chapter 1 - Overview
- Chapter 2 - Introduction and context
- Chapter 3 - Policy objectives
- Chapter 4 - Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications
- Chapter 5 - Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement
- Chapter 6 - Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways
- Chapter 7 - NQF implementation and impact
- Chapter 8 - Referencing to the EQF
- Chapter 9 - Important lessons and future plans
- Chapter 10 - Main sources of information
- Chapter 11 - National qualification framework (NQF)
- Chapter 12 - Acronyms
- Chapter 13 - References
- Chapter 14 - Notes

Overview

Stage of development: Activation stage

NQF linked to EQF: ✓

Scope of the framework:

Comprehensive NQF including all levels and types of qualification from formal education and training, including certified adult learning. No qualification linked to EQF level 1.

Number of levels:

Seven, with sublevels at NQF levels 5 and 6

Legal basis/stage of development:

No overarching legal basis for the ISQF (its role and mandate are stated in a series of acts and decrees).

NQF/EQF website:

 [Website](#)

Introduction and context

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 (52.8% in 2019) and the employment rate of recent graduates is one of the highest in Europe (91.5% in 2019). Participation in adult learning also stands out, being only exceeded by Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Switzerland. Early school leaving has decreased but is still a challenge. The proportion of early leavers from education and training in 2019 was 17.9% (24.5% for males and 10.8% for females). This is the highest in the EU and EFTA countries. The percentage of underachievers in reading, mathematics and science in PISA (OECD, 2018) has improved in mathematics and science but is still high in all disciplines (26.4%, 20.7%, 25.0% respectively) (European Commission, 2020).

The youth welfare study *Youth in Iceland – upper secondary schools* ([1]) shows that about half of the students in Iceland's upper secondary schools believe that vocational education and training (VET) would be a more suitable option than general education. However, this does not translate into practical decisions, given that 85% of those who enter upper secondary education (age 15) select general education. Most learners would like their studies to have more electives. More specifically, around 66% of upper secondary, general education learners would be interested in taking more VET courses, which may suggest that an even greater proportion of students are interested in finding out whether VET could be suitable for them.

Iceland has been trying to tackle a shortage of teaching staff since 2015 when teaching professionals received a substantial salary increase, which attracted more young people to the profession. Following the introduction of new measures, such as making the final year of study a salaried training period and offering special scholarships, applications for new places in teacher education in the first academic semester of 2019 increased substantially (45%).

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 reforms of the Icelandic education system, including changes in legislation and education policy. The focus on the

learning outcomes principle and the national qualifications levels has been central to these changes. A first version of the ISQF was referenced to the EQF in 2013.

Policy objectives

The main objective of the ISQF, adopted in October 2016, is to make sure that all formally certified education and training is 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. The function and the policy objectives, however, have not been changed. The ISQF is a lifelong learning framework and aims to make the pathways through the education system clearer, to increase student mobility within the country and between countries, and to support further learning.

Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

The ISQF consists of seven qualification levels, with two sublevels at levels 5 and 6 featuring different descriptors. Level 5.2 comprises bachelor's degree and a short cycle diploma degree is included at level 5.1. At level 6 a distinction is made between master and candidatus degrees with a research component at level 6.2 and degrees based mainly on courses at level 6.1. The former give access to doctoral studies, the latter usually not. There is no descriptor or qualification linked to EQF level 1. The framework has a clear division between levels 1 to 4 and levels 5 to 7. The development of these two parts of the framework has partly taken place separately, responding to the EQF and Bologna processes respectively. The links between them, and the overall coordination between the ISQF and the framework for higher education, are still under discussion.

Level descriptors are presented in an integrated way ([2]); they reflect knowledge, skills and competences and the importance attributed to key competences and transversal skills.

Study programmes and course descriptions at upper secondary and university levels are based on learning outcomes and linked to ISQF levels. Upper secondary schools are entrusted with great responsibility and enjoy much autonomy in developing study programmes and curricula both in general education and VET, using an approach combining learning outcomes, workload and credits ([3]). Descriptions must be approved by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture and the Directorate of Education ([4]) performs this approval on behalf of the Ministry. There has recently been an emphasis on approving the descriptions of study programmes within upper secondary education, and in this process special attention has been given to the link to the ISQF levels, which is one of the prerequisites for approval. All study programmes are due to be completed in the school year 2019/20, however the process might be delayed by the impact of Covid-19. All higher education institutions shall follow the Icelandic national qualifications framework for higher education (ISQFHE), which describes the qualifications that graduates should master when they finish their studies on different levels. The ISQFHE also demands that each higher education institution describes the learning outcomes of each study programme and each course (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

There is currently no single act or decree issued specifically for the ISQF. The framework builds on, and is integrated in, a set of acts on education and training ([5]) 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 designing study programmes and curricula;
- 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 covers training for people who do not have an education qualification at ISQF level 4 (EQF level 3).

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, 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 a Statement on mutual understanding for the ISQF was formally signed by all stakeholders in October 2016 ([6]). The new emphasis of the framework has contributed to dialogue and cooperation between education and training and labour market stakeholders. An example of this is the cooperation, between the Directorate of Education and the newly founded skills centre for tourism, on the future of education in this rapidly growing sector. In this work, there has been a great emphasis on using the ISQF as a common communication tool when working with different stakeholders. The Directorate of Education has supported the centre in developing educational offers and has participated in wide-ranging policy making on the development of educational opportunities for the tourist industry. The product of this work can be found in the report *Hæfni er grunnur að gæðum* ([7]).

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture coordinates developments of the ISQF. In 2018, day-to-day responsibilities for the implementation of the framework were transferred from the Icelandic Centre for Research (Rannís) to the Directorate of Education, which is also tasked with certifying provision in upper secondary and adult education. The Directorate of Education is responsible for qualifications up to ISQF level 4 (EQF level 5). All higher education institutions are accredited by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture and are responsible for ISQF levels 5, 6 and 7 (EQF levels 6, 7 and 8) (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

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

[8]

Validation of prior learning (VPL) in Iceland is a systematic process whereby all knowledge and competences an individual has gained through various activities – such as work experience, work-related learning, non-formal and informal learning, formal learning, social activities and family life – are formally documented and validated. The Education and Training Service Centre (ECTS) ([9]) works according to contract with the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture to ensure quality and to guarantee that approved methodology for validation is implemented by providing counselling to partners, coordinating training for validation staff and publishing guidelines and checklists. VPL projects are conducted in cooperation with lifelong learning centres distributed around the country.

There is a legal framework on VPL in Iceland and its practices are based on a regulation introduced in 2011 ([10]).

A national strategy for validating prior learning is in place for people with low levels of education and qualifications.

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 subjects at upper secondary level and formal adult education where a system of credit-based units is in place. The process focuses on assessing competences using these credit-based units. Assessment results are documented, and credit units registered 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.

The methodology of validation of prior learning is not generally used at university level, but some universities do, to some extent, consider work experience of candidates during intake procedures. A committee has been working on developing VPL in higher education; it presented its findings in a report in June 2018 ([11]). The committee's proposals on the development of VPL in higher education include better coordination of

laws and regulations and cooperation between faculties. It also suggests that an independent third party, such as ETSC, could conduct the validation.

Validation against standards in specific jobs has not been linked to a credit system or modularised structure of qualifications. However, standards have been developed for specific jobs for validation purposes. The standards used are based on a formal process linking competences to jobs through competence analysis conducted with main stakeholders. This has proven to be successful in the service and tourism sectors, for example.

Iceland, together with Belgium (FL), Ireland and Norway, took part in the Erasmus KA3 project *VISKA* (visible skills for adults) ([12]). The project ran from March 2017 to February 2020 and was managed and coordinated by Skills Norway ([13]). *VISKA* addressed the need to make the skills of low-skilled adults, migrants, asylum seekers and refugees more visible, to enhance their employability, improve their access to education and training offers and support active engagement in society. In Iceland the project was coordinated by ETSC and the education centre IDAN on behalf of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. The aim of *VISKA* in Iceland was to address the challenge linked to the lack of access and awareness of VPL services for migrants, mainly Polish, the largest cohort of migrants in the country.

The trials carried out showed that language learning in general and the lack of language support in educational pathways and career development was a main challenge. In this respect, the Icelandic project recommends that language barriers should be addressed, such as through access to professional interpreters. The Icelandic project further concludes that *VISKA* findings and recommendations should be part of the revised Parliamentary action plan for 2020-24.

NQF implementation and impact

The ISQF is a comprehensive lifelong learning framework covering general education, vocational education and training and higher education. It has reached activation stage. Implementation structures are in place; the main working methods and instruments are being put in place and the framework is gradually playing a role in improving transparency and comparability of qualifications at national and international level and supporting reform of education and training systems at national level.

The focus on implementing the ISQF has moved in recent years towards non-formal adult education. Quality criteria for curricula in adult education, and an accreditation process that includes the levelling of adult education qualifications to the ISQF, have been developed since 2016 and curricula have been linked to the ISQF in the accreditation process. A discussion on whether to indicate the NQF/EQF levels on certificates in adult education is ongoing.

Menntabrunur, the Icelandic database on education, was intended to be the

national database but was never fully completed. Negotiations concerning another website, *Næsta skref*, which can take over the role, are ongoing ([14]).

Until now the focus has been on inclusion of qualifications at levels 2-5 in the ISQF, however there is a possibility that more levels will be presented on the new website. The link between the Icelandic qualifications and the Europass will be ensured.

NQF/EQF levels are being included in some qualifications issued in upper secondary vocational education and for the Europass certificate. NQF/EQF levels are included in diplomas and Europass supplements in higher education.

Education and training providers, practitioners in guidance, quality assurance and recognition bodies are fully aware of the ISQF and use it in their work. The employment service is also fully aware of the ISQF as all labour market stakeholders took part in developing and revising the framework. The ISQF is less familiar to end users like workers, jobseekers, learners and students if they have not been involved in development or

use of the framework. The learning outcomes have played an important role in providing transparency of standards and promoting a more open mindset towards validation of non-formal and informal learning and given stakeholders a common ground for discussions.

The Directorate of Education has worked closely with education providers to ensure that all new education offers are referenced to a relevant qualification level and lead the work of developing an online manual/guidebook for educational providers (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

Referencing to the EQF

The first version of the Icelandic NQF was referenced to the EQF in December 2013; the referencing report included the self-certification report to the QF-EHEA. It is not foreseen that Iceland will present an updated reference report to the EQF AG. The ISQF remains comprised of seven levels; in 2016, changes were made that entail division of level 5 and 6 into two sublevels each, i.e. 5.1/5.2 and 6.1/6.2 respectively.

Important lessons and future plans

The Statement on mutual understanding of the Icelandic national qualifications framework signed in 2016 by all stakeholders has proved to be a great success; it has created a common understanding of the NQF and is a vital part of the implementation. It was signed by parties from the labour market and all parts of education and training in Iceland.

Future plans are to finish implementation and increase public awareness of the NQF and EQF. This will also be the main challenge, as well as to decrease barriers between formal and non-formal education (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

Iceland's toughest tradesman is a competition organised by non-government stakeholders, complementing efforts by national education authorities and the industry to promote VET among young learners. It is increasingly popular among the general public. The competition demonstrates that increasing the attractiveness of VET has become a collective effort in Iceland, with individual initiatives joining and complementing those of the State and social partners ([15]).

During the Covid-19 outbreak, organising distance learning solutions for VET programmes has been more challenging than doing so for general education. Many learners have experienced difficulties remaining active in isolation from fellow learners or workmates. It is currently difficult to estimate the dropout rate but data on learner engagement in some study programmes raise reasonable concerns. Iceland is already highly exposed to digitalisation, but some schools have come much further than others using distance learning solutions. It is expected that experiences from this period will have a digital impact on future teaching practices ([16]).

Main sources of information

- The Directorate of Education acts as EQF NCP:
<https://mms.is/directorate-education>
- ISQF/EQF website: www.haefniramm.is
- Ministry of Education, Science and Culture:
<https://www.government.is/topics/education/>
- A new qualifications database “Næsta skref” is under development: <https://naestaskref.is>
- Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (2014).
Reference report of the Icelandic qualifications framework to the European qualifications framework of lifelong learning:
<https://europass.europa.eu/europass/en/compare-qualifications>

National qualification framework (NQF)

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

Acronyms

EQF	European qualifications framework
ETSC	Education and Training Service Centre
ISQF	Icelandic qualifications framework
ISQFEH	Icelandic qualifications framework for higher education
NCP	national coordination point
NQF	national qualifications framework
VET	vocational education and training
VPL	validation of prior learning

References

[URLs accessed 4.2.2021]

European Commission (2020). *Education and training Monitor 2020*.
https://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/et-monitor_en

European Commission; Cedefop (2020). *Survey on implementation, use and impact of NQF/EQF: Iceland* [unpublished].

Jónsson, S.A. (2019). *Vocational education and training in Europe; Iceland*. Cedefop ReferNet VET in Europe reports (2018).
http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2019/Vocational_Education_Training_Europe_Iceland_2018_Cedefop_RerferNet.pdf

Lárusdóttir, F.M. (2019). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update: Iceland*.

http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2019/european_inventory_validation_2018_Iceland.pdf

Notes

[1] Icelandic Centre for Social Research and Analyses (ICSRA), 2018. See : <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news-and-press/news/iceland-vet-attractiveness-challenge-policy-makers>

[2] https://www.government.is/media/menntamalaraduneyti-media/media/frettatengt2016/Haefnirammi_A4_enska_anlogo.pdf

[3] A credit is defined as the standard for the work effort of the students, whether their studies are vocational or academic, and whether they take place at school or elsewhere. It equals 18 to 24 hours of work. Each study programme is composed of a certain number of credits and assigned a level in the ISQF based on the expected learning outcomes. Study programmes with final learning outcomes at EQF level 4 are generally 150 to 240 credits. Within VET, the number of credits required for professional rights can vary from 120 credits at EQF level 3 (e.g. health care assistant), up to 290 credits at EQF level 4 (some journeyman's exams) and even further with additional VET studies at EQF level 5, such as study for master of craft, film direction, creative photography and health care assistants' specialisation in elderly care (Jónsson, 2019).

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

[5] Links to all these acts in English can be found at:
[https://www.government.is/publications/legislation/\\$LisasticSearch/Search/](https://www.government.is/publications/legislation/$LisasticSearch/Search/)?
SearchQuery=&Ministries=Ministry+of+Education+Science+and+Culture
&Themes=Education&ContentTypes=

[6] <https://www.stjornarradid.is/media/menntamalaraduneyti-media/media/frettatengt2016/Haefnirammi-um-islenska-menntun.pdf>

[7] Haukur Harðarson et al. (2019) Hæfni er grunnur að gæðum [Competence is the basis of quality] (in Icelandic). https://haefni.is/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Haefni_er_grunnur_ad-gaendum_VEFUR.pdf
xD; The discussion on the Icelandic qualification framework is very noticeable in the report and can be found on pages 18 and 23.

[8] This section draws mainly on input from: Lárusdóttir, F.M. (2019). European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update: Iceland.&xD;
http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2019/european_inventory_validation_2018_Iceland.pdf

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

[10] Regulation on further education (in Icelandic):
<https://www.reglugerdir.is/reglugerdir/allar/nr/1163-2011>

[11] Eyþórsdóttir I.D. et al. (2018). Real skills assessment at university level: results of a working group on real skills assessment at the university level (in Icelandic): <http://frae.is/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Raunf%C3%A6rnimat-%C3%A1-h%C3%A1sk%C3%B3lastigi-ni%C3%B0urst%C3%B6r%C3%B0ur-vinnuh%C3%B3ps.pdf>

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

[13] <https://www.kompetansenorge.no/english/>

[14] <https://naestaskref.is/>

[15] ReferNet Iceland (2020). Cedefop news; article published on 24.6.2020. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news-and-press/news/iceland-competition-enhances-vet-attractiveness>

[16] ReferNet Iceland (2020). National news on VET; article published on 17.6.2020. <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news-and-press/news/iceland-responses-covid-19-outbreak>

Related content

-

2020

Iceland - European inventory of NQFs 2020

European inventory of NQF



Iceland