

ICELAND

European inventory on NQF 2016

Introduction and context

Iceland has developed a national framework – the Icelandic national qualifications framework (ISQF) – consisting of seven learning-outcomes-based levels and covering all levels and types of qualification. 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 qualification levels in the education reform was underpinned by the parallel development of the ISQF.

While there is currently no single act or decree introducing the ISQF, its role and mandate are explicitly stated through a series of acts and decrees introduced between 2006 and 2010. Starting with the Act on Higher Education, and followed by acts on pre-school education, compulsory education, upper secondary education, teacher training and adult education, there was a sufficiently strong formal basis for the framework to be able to move into an early operational stage during 2013.

The Icelandic NQF was referenced to the European qualifications framework (EQF) in December 2013. The ISQF can (2016) be described as having reached an early operational stage. The relationship to higher education qualifications has yet to be clarified, depending on possible revision of the level structure (with a split of ISQF levels 4 and 6 into sublevels). The relationship of the ISQF to adult learning is also being debated, particularly addressing the added value of the framework for low-skilled adults.

Policy objectives

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, including adult education. 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 starts with, and is anchored to, reform of Icelandic education and training initiated by the Act on Higher Education adopted in 2006 ⁽¹⁾. While this act referred to the Bologna process and the introduction of a three-cycle approach for Icelandic higher education, the acts on compulsory school and upper secondary education in 2008 ⁽²⁾ and on adult education in 2010 ⁽³⁾ address the remaining parts of education and training and point towards a comprehensive national qualifications framework. 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 2006-10 legal acts.

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. This is exemplified by the Act on Upper Secondary Education, which provides for a new, decentralised approach to organising study programmes and curricula. Education providers are entrusted with increased responsibility and enjoy more autonomy in developing study programmes and curricula in general education and VET, using an approach combining learning outcomes, workload and credits. Descriptions have to be validated by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.

Levels and use of learning outcomes

Iceland has decided to introduce a seven-level framework distinguishing between knowledge, skills and competence. Development of level descriptors for the ISQF has been an important part of the overall strategy to shift to learning outcomes. The NQF descriptors for levels 1 to 4 were published in the national curriculum

⁽¹⁾ Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture: Higher Education Institution Act, No 63/2006; entered into force on 1.6.2006:
<http://eng.menntamalaraduneyti.is/media/MRN-PDF-Altjodlegt/Higher-Education-Act-no.-63-2006nytt.pdf> [draft translation accessed 10.12.2014].

⁽²⁾ Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture: the Upper Secondary School Act, No 92/2008; entered into force on 1.8.2008:
https://eng.menntamalaraduneyti.is/media/MRN-pdf_Annad/Upper_secondary_school_Act.pdf [accessed 10.12.2014].

⁽³⁾ Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture: the Adult Education Act; No 27/2010; entered into force on 1.10.2010:
<https://eng.menntamalaraduneyti.is/media/MRN-PDF-Altjodlegt/Adult-Education-Act.pdf> [accessed 10.12.2014].

guide for upper secondary school in 2012 ⁽⁴⁾. Descriptors for three higher education levels were published in the form of a decree in 2011. Combined, these two approaches add up to a seven-level NQF. In 2015-16 there has been a discussion on potential revision of the level structure, possibly by introducing sublevels for levels 1, 4 and 6.

Competences are expressed in more detail than in the EQF and reflect the importance attributed to key competences. This is a positive feature and contributes to the overall relevance of the descriptors at national level. Key competences and transversal skills and competences have been taken into consideration. When comparing the ISQF descriptors to those of the EQF, however, there are often overlaps between the headline-terms knowledge, skills and competences. This can be illustrated in the 'skills' category where ISQF tends to combine and extend the (EQF) focus on cognitive and procedural skills to aspects like autonomy, initiative, and creativity. The implication of this is that the distinction between skills and competence is somewhat blurred. This problem can be overcome by reading across the knowledge, skills and competence categories but indicates that the internal consistency of the ISQF descriptors could be further strengthened.

Compared to the EQF, and other national framework descriptors, those at ISQF levels 1 to 4 (EQF 1 to 5) are very much focused on the vocabulary of students and their ability to express themselves orally and verbally. Compared to the general definition of learning outcomes, where the focus is on what a person knows, is able to do and understand, the ISQF descriptors seem to have adopted a narrower approach.

The shift to learning outcomes is considered an important part of the reform of Icelandic education and training. Systematic use of learning outcomes, referring to a national set of descriptors, is seen as essential for future qualifications design.

Stakeholder involvement and institutional arrangements

A wide range of stakeholders from education and training, and from the labour market, has been involved in developing the ISQF. Apart from the political debate

⁽⁴⁾ The Icelandic national curriculum guide for upper secondary schools:
<http://brunnur.stjr.is/mrn/utgafuskra/utgafa.nsf/RSSPage.xsp?documentId=2149C139F3FA145B00257A240035BA1B&action=openDocument>

surrounding the preparation and passing of the education and training acts (between 2006 and 2010), representative working groups have been active during all stages of the process. Development of framework structures has been combined with extensive efforts to introduce the learning outcomes perspective in curricula and in teaching and learning practices. The strong link to continuing reforms has benefitted stakeholder involvement.

More than 20 working groups, involving representatives of education and training and occupational sectors, were set up from 2009 to work on the level descriptors and their integration into the framework. Focusing on vocational qualifications, this work proved important for testing the relevance of the learning outcomes approach and the framework to the labour market. All upper secondary schools were invited to contribute to the level descriptors and give their view on the potential role of the framework. This involvement of stakeholders and practitioners contributed to the ‘anchoring’ of the NQF proposal not only in education and training but also among labour market stakeholders.

The Icelandic higher education sector has been less involved in the development of the ISQF and has, since 2007, mainly focussed on the link to the qualifications framework in the European higher education area (QF-EHEA). There is now agreement, however, that the three cycles of the higher education framework will provide the three highest levels in the Icelandic NQF. During 2015 a working group looked into the conditions for better integrating higher education qualifications into the ISQF. This group proposed to revise the level structure and split ISQF level 4 (diploma) and 6 (master) into two sublevels each. A final decision on this has still to be made by the Ministry of Education. Adult learning stakeholders expressed concern over the lower levels of the ISQF, noting that there is no level into which adults with low formal qualifications and/or special needs could enter. A final decision on this has yet to be made.

The framework has generally been received positively by the different stakeholders, including teachers and trainers who are actively involved in continuing reforms related to learning outcomes, curricula and key competences.

Since 2015, the Icelandic Centre for Research – Rannís ⁽⁵⁾ – has been in charge of NQF coordination. This takes place under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. Rannís is also acting as EQF national coordination point.

⁽⁵⁾ Icelandic Centre for Research: <https://en.rannis.is/>

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways ⁽⁶⁾

A national strategy for the validation of non-formal and informal learning is in place for people with low levels of education and qualifications. Most of the work undertaken on validation has been carried out by the Education and Training Service Centre ⁽⁷⁾ (ETSC) since it was established in December 2002 by the Icelandic Confederation of Labour (ASÍ) and the Confederation of Icelandic Employers (SA). Since 2010, the ETSC has also been owned by the Federation of State and Municipal Employees, the Association of Local Authorities in Iceland, and the Ministry of Finance. The target group for the work of the ETSC and of its validation activities is people with little formal education; almost 30% of those aged 25 to 64 on the labour market have not completed upper secondary education ⁽⁸⁾.

The ETSC works according to a contract with the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. One of the main objectives of this contract is the development of a national strategy on validation in cooperation with social partners, so the model of validation is centralised through the ETSC. The strategic focus has been on individuals who have not completed upper secondary education and, since 2006, has been mostly industry-based. Extensive development was planned in other sectors through the EU Instrument for pre-accession assistance (IPA) project *Increasing employability of low qualified workers through the development of a skill recognition system in adult education*. This was successfully launched in autumn 2012 and 17 sectors (16 curricula and one job) were piloted. The project had planned to open 47 new validation pathways in 2012-15, but the financing but was terminated by the EU in early 2014. Developments are currently taking place at a slower pace.

There are some developments in validation against job standards in cooperation with stakeholders in the service and tourism sectors, which have been growing rapidly.

⁽⁶⁾ This section draws mainly on input from the 2016 update to the *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning* (European Commission et al., 2016).

⁽⁷⁾ Education and Training Service Centre: <http://www.frae.is/um-okkur/about-us/>

⁽⁸⁾ Statistics Iceland, 2013. News item from 1 October:
<http://www.statice.is/Pages/444?NewsID=10137>

The main obstacles for further development are mostly related to the need for open gateways for participants in validation to complete studies in upper secondary schools. Challenges ahead are also linked to including working life in the national qualifications framework in order to have workplace learning recognised, and to secure the quality of the validation system.

NQF implementation

Following the referencing to the EQF in December 2013, the ISQF has now reached an early operational stage. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture coordinates developments, supported by Rannís. A NQF coordination committee has yet to be set up but progress is expected in the near future. Implementation of the ISQF is largely based on limited resources: for 2015 Rannís had a budget of EUR 50 000 and 0.35 staff dedicated to the work ⁽⁹⁾ though since the NQF forms an integrated part of the education and training system, these figures are misleading. NQF/EQF levels now are being included in all qualifications issued at upper secondary level, both for general and vocational pathways, so visibility is increasing, including to students and parents.

Referencing to the EQF

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). The outcome descriptors of the ISQF levels are generally more detailed than those in the EQF, and key competences and transversal skills are taken into consideration. ISQF development has been supported by discussions in a network of Nordic countries and by international experts. Among topics discussed was where to place primary and (lower) secondary education certificates in the frameworks of the Nordic countries.

⁽⁹⁾ Cedefop (2015). *Survey on the sustainability and visibility of NQFs* [unpublished].

Important lessons and challenges

Promotion of the ISQF is planned for the near future to support implementation. The ISQF is regarded as a living tool that can regularly be revised and adapted according to developing needs and requirements of the education system.

A main challenge in the next few years is to continue the process of dialogue and information. Retaining stakeholder involvement and clarifying roles in future implementation of the framework will be important, as will establishing an active stakeholder coordination committee. Without this there is a risk that momentum will be lost and the opportunity created by the ISQF not used. Whether this committee would be best supported by a body outside the ministry is an open question but could be considered.

The link to higher education seems important for the years to come. The overlaps between levels 3 and 4 need to be further discussed, as does overall coordination between the ISQF and the QF-EHEA.

In support of learner mobility and recognition of competences between education levels, an accreditation process for curricula in adult education is currently being developed, together with the relevant quality criteria. The question of validation is of major importance, and is expected to be a vital element when adult learning is being developed and connected to the ISQF.

Icelandic qualifications framework (ISQF)

ISQF levels	Examples of qualifications		EQF levels	
7	Doctorate degree		8	
6	Master and <i>candidatus</i> degree		7	
5	Bachelor degree		6	
4	Diploma at higher education level	Additional studies at upper secondary level	5	
3	Matriculation examination	Preliminary higher education	Vocational examination for professional rights	4
2	Upper secondary school leaving certificate Other final examinations	Vocational qualification for professional rights	3	
1	Upper secondary school leaving certificate Other upper secondary school final examinations Compulsory school final examinations		1 & 2	

Source: Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014.

Further sources of information:

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/> [accessed 4.3.2015];

Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (2014). *Reference report of the Icelandic qualifications framework to the European qualifications framework on lifelong learning*. Reykjavík: Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.
https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/EQF_Reference_Report_2014.pdf

List of abbreviations

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

References

[URLs accessed 10.12.2014]

European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International (2014). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2014: country report Iceland*.

https://cumulus.cedefop.europa.eu/files/vetelib/2014/87063_IS.pdf

European Commission; Cedefop; ICF International (2016). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2016: country report: Iceland*.

<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory>

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