

VET in Iceland



The Icelandic vocational education and training (VET) system originates from the time when Iceland was still part of the Danish kingdom. At that time, apprentices learned from their masters by working alongside them. Gradually, schools took over parts of the training and more theoretical subjects were added. Workplace learning is still important, and the journeyman's exam is centred on demonstrating skills learners have acquired.

Almost all VET is offered at upper secondary level (ISQF 3/EQF4), where studies at school and workplace learning form an integral part. Study programmes vary in length from one school year to four years of combined school and workplace learning. Enterprises responsible for training need official certification and training agreements with both the learner and the school, stipulating the objectives, time period and evaluation of the training. Most learners in workplace learning receive salaries, at an increasing percentage of fully qualified workers' salaries. Companies training learners can apply to the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture for a subsidy to fund training.

Several qualifications are offered at upper secondary level; some of these are preconditions for holding relevant jobs. The most common are journeyman's exams but there are also exams for healthcare professionals and captains and engineers of ships and planes. In other professions, a VET degree is not a precondition for employment, but graduates enjoy preferential treatment for the jobs they are trained for.

A few VET programmes are available at post-secondary non-tertiary level (ISQF 4/EQF 5), including tourist guides and captains at the highest level. Certificates for all master craftsmen are also awarded at this level. These programmes last one to two years and lead to qualifications giving professional rights.

Learners with severe learning difficulties are offered special programmes at mainstream upper secondary schools. Several VET pathways leading to a diploma give these students the potential to continue their education.

The overall emphasis of the education system is to keep its structure simple and understandable, so learners can move relatively easily between study programmes. They can finish upper secondary school with a vocational and a general degree (matriculation exam), the prerequisite for higher education. VET learners who have not passed the matriculation exam can attend further general education to qualify.

Courses which give study points at upper secondary schools must be approved by an official validation body, according to standards approved by the education ministry.

Upper secondary schools need to submit descriptions of new study programmes to the education ministry. Approved programmes become part of the national curriculum guide. When formulating ideas for new study programmes, schools cooperate closely with occupation councils, which form the link between the ministry and the labour market.

Iceland has one of the highest lifelong learning participation rates among 25 to 64 year-olds in Europe (21.6% in 2019). Adult learning is available in upper secondary schools (day classes or special adult evening classes), 11 lifelong learning

centres, training centres owned and operated by social partners for skilled workers in certain trades, and in numerous private training institutions. Two institutions owned by employer and employee organisations offer courses for journeymen and masters of trades in the latest technology. For the healthcare sector, retraining courses are offered by universities and there are specific training institutions for several professions. Labour agreements reached in 2000 established specific training funds for employees; both employees and employers pay a certain percentage of all salaries into these funds and both parties can apply for funding towards training.

Distinctive features of VET

Study programmes vary in length from one school year to four years of combined school and workplace learning.

Participation of young people in VET aged 15 to 24 is among the lowest in Europe at 20.3% in 2020. Looking at all upper secondary learners, however, the proportion is around 29.5% *vis-à-vis* general studies; this reflects the higher average age of VET learners, many of whom had enrolled in general studies before switching to VET programmes.

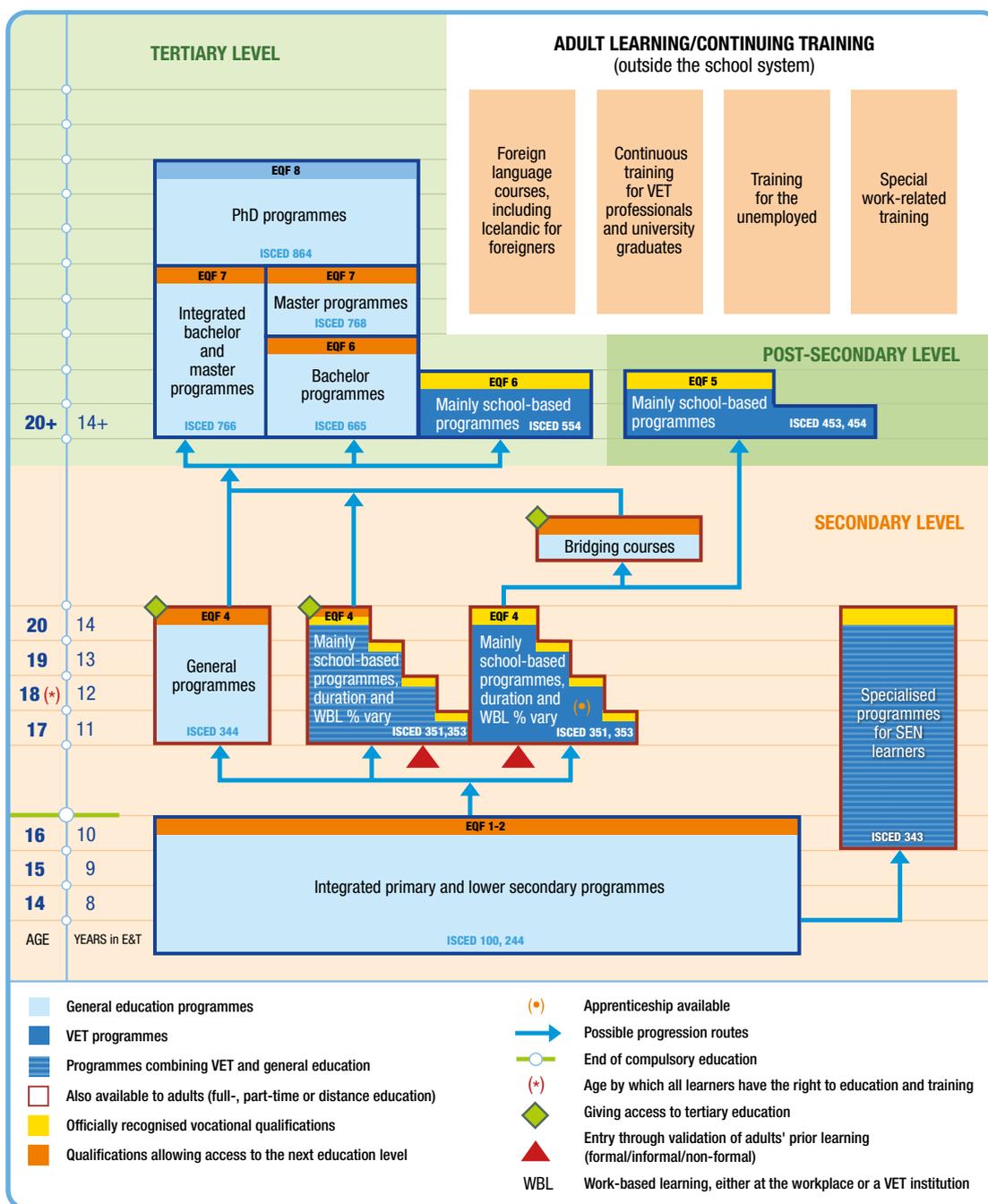
Most learners in workplace learning receive salaries; enterprises involved in training can apply to the education ministry for a subsidy to fund the training.

The Upper Secondary Act of 2008 called for VET programmes that better respond to labour market skill needs. The act, as well as the Icelandic national curriculum guide for upper secondary schools, provides, since 2011, for a decentralised approach in designing study programmes and curricula. Upper secondary schools are entrusted with great responsibility and enjoy autonomy in developing study programmes both in general education and VET, combining learning outcomes, workload and credits. Focus is on flexible schedule, in the balance between general subjects and occupational specific skills, and can vary between different VET programmes. However, learning pathways must be accredited by the directorate of education on behalf of the education ministry.

Challenges and policy responses

In 2014, the education ministry published the White Paper on education reform. Following this publication, the education ministry, the Federation of Icelandic Industries and the Association of Local Authorities contributed to more visible and accessible VET that is also more attractive to young learners. In February 2020, the education minister, along with the chairwomen of the Federation of Icelandic Industries and the Association of Local Authorities, introduced a strategy and priorities on strengthening Icelandic VET. Among the priorities introduced were new policy proposals such as:

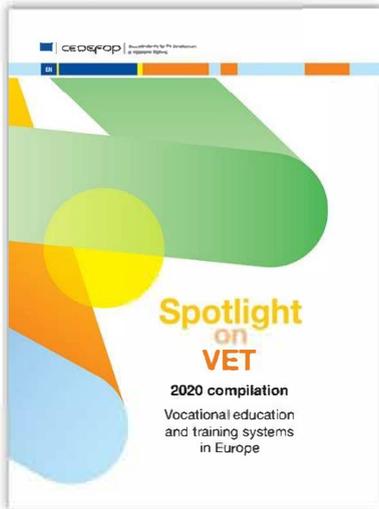
- transferring the responsibility for finding apprenticeship contracts from learners to VET schools. When the digital logbook is fully implemented, schools will be responsible for finding work placements for learners;



NB: ISCED-P 2011.
Source: Cedefop and ReferNet Iceland, 2020.

- VET learners should have the same access to tertiary education as learners succeeding in matriculation exams;
- easier access to qualified guidance and counselling in lower and upper secondary schools;
- making access to VET in rural areas more flexible;
- analyse future infrastructure needs for VET schools;
- simplify VET governance in Iceland.

This action plan and some of the proposals are already implemented but the challenges posed by Covid-19 have re-defined many priorities within both the ministry and the Parliament, possibly delaying some implementation measures.



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