



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Executive Summary presents the main findings, recommendations and critical levers for ways forward presented in the Final Report *Education for All in Iceland: External Audit of the Icelandic System for Inclusive Education*. The full Audit Reporting Package consists of the Final Report and six associated Annexes. Each of the Annexes presents detailed information on different areas – methodology, literature review and data analysis – that have served as the basis for this report.

The Agency's work used a standards-based audit model, which is a cyclical process involving defining standards, collecting data to measure policy and practice against those standards, reviewing the data and then implementing changes to improve policy and practice in line with the standards. This cycle is presented in the Figure below.



**The Audit Cycle**



The External Audit of the system for inclusive education should be seen within the wider context and processes of on-going development work being undertaken in Iceland, in particular the previous internal evaluation of the implementation of the policy of inclusive education (*Mat á framkvæmd stefnu um skóla án aðgreiningar*) conducted in 2015 (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið, 2015).

The Audit focused on exploring the implementation of the Icelandic policy for inclusive education. To achieve this, the Audit scope covered:

- pre-school through to the end of upper-secondary education;
- all responsible funding bodies involved in inclusive education;
- all school-level stakeholders, including learners and their families.

The key Icelandic stakeholders undertook a Critical Reflection process, which identified seven focus areas. These seven areas provided the framework for identifying the Standards and Descriptors that can be seen as *Icelandic stakeholders' aspirations for their system*. They highlight policy and practice factors that are all crucial in ensuring a quality system for inclusive education. These Standards and Descriptors served as the basis for Audit data collection and analysis.

Audit data collection activities ran from March to August 2016. They focused upon three separate, but mutually supporting activities:

1. Background information collection in the form of policy documents, reports, articles and web links in either English or Icelandic.
2. Fieldwork for the External Audit, carried out during April 2016. It included: 27 focus groups involving 222 participants; 11 school visits; 9 individual face-to-face interviews with high-level decision-makers for the local and national levels.
3. An On-line survey with 934 responses across four surveys (available in both English and Icelandic language versions).

Data analysis by Audit team members highlighted issues underpinning key areas of policy and practice that required attention and suggested areas of strength that could be built upon when planning improvement.

## Findings

The main body of the report is structured around seven findings with one chapter focusing upon each of the seven Standards and sets of Descriptors:

**1<sup>st</sup> Standard: Inclusive education is defined by all stakeholders as an approach for improving the quality of education of all learners.** Stakeholders across and between system levels do not have a common understanding of inclusive education.



There is generally a lack of clarity around the concept of inclusive education and how it should be implemented in practice.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Standard: Legislation and policy for inclusive education has the goal of promoting equal opportunities for all learners.** Legislation and policy do support the goals and aims of inclusive education. The majority of stakeholders, across all system levels, agree upon these goals and aims. However, stakeholders require more concrete guidance on how the policy aims and objectives should be translated into local- and school-level action plans and then put into practice. Stakeholders also need guidance on how practice should then be monitored and evaluated in line with national legislation and policy.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Standard: Policy for inclusive education is effectively implemented at all levels.** Stakeholders at all system levels, despite their commitment, are not as effectively enabled to implement inclusive education policy as they could be. Some mechanisms for support are in place, but stakeholders consider that a range of more flexible opportunities should be widely available. All stakeholders see the full achievement of this Standard as being highly dependent upon the achievement of other standards proposed by the Icelandic Team, in particular the effectiveness of support systems, funding mechanisms and governance and quality assurance procedures.

**4<sup>th</sup> Standard: All stakeholders, at all levels are enabled to think and act inclusively in their daily practice.** Many school staff do not feel that the education system fully enables them to think and act inclusively in their daily practice. Stakeholders across all system levels suggest that there are examples of innovative practice in relation to school organisation, curriculum, assessment, pedagogy, support for learners, development opportunities for all stakeholders and effective communication between stakeholders. However, these ways of working are not widespread or usual practice. Further work is needed to ensure that all stakeholders, including learners and parents, view the availability of support for school and class-level work as both appropriate and effective.

**5<sup>th</sup> Standard: Resource allocation is equitable, efficient and cost-effective.** The majority of stakeholders across all system levels believe that current funding mechanisms and the resource allocation framework are not equitable or efficient in any school phase. Rather than enabling stakeholders to implement inclusive education, current funding processes are seen as a barrier to developments in inclusive practice. For many national and local-level stakeholders, changes to the current funding mechanism linked to a diagnosis of SEN/disability would be a critical lever in moving the system for inclusive education forward in Iceland.



**6<sup>th</sup> Standard: Governance and quality assurance mechanisms ensure co-ordinated and effective implementation of inclusive education policy and practice.**

Stakeholders at national, local and school levels do not view the current educational governance and quality assurance/accountability processes as effective.

Stakeholders at national and local levels suggest that current governance mechanisms do not effectively support their work. Stakeholders at school level suggest that current quality assurance mechanisms do not always inform their work in a way that promotes school development and improvement.

**7<sup>th</sup> Standard: Professional development issues at all system levels are effectively addressed.** Many school-level stakeholders question the degree to which their initial education and/or on-going continuous professional development opportunities prepare them for the realities of inclusive education practice. Many national and local-level stakeholders question how far initial and professional development opportunities are aligned with national and local policies and therefore to what extent they enable school staff to implement inclusive education as a rights-based approach for all learners.

**Evaluation of the Standards and Descriptors**

The evaluation of the Standards and Descriptors was based on all available evidence considered by the Audit Team. The overall evaluation of Standards and Descriptors which reflects the team's unanimous decisions can be summarised as follows:

- 7 Descriptors were identified as being at the stage of **to be initiated**, with planning being at an early stage or practice yet to be started and, consequently, needing attention.
- 31 Descriptors were identified as **requiring development** with implementation being partial, or inconsistent across schools, phases and municipalities, but having possibilities for existing practice to be built upon;
- 1 Descriptor was identified as being **fully embedded**, established and sustainable in policy and practice across schools, age phases and municipalities.

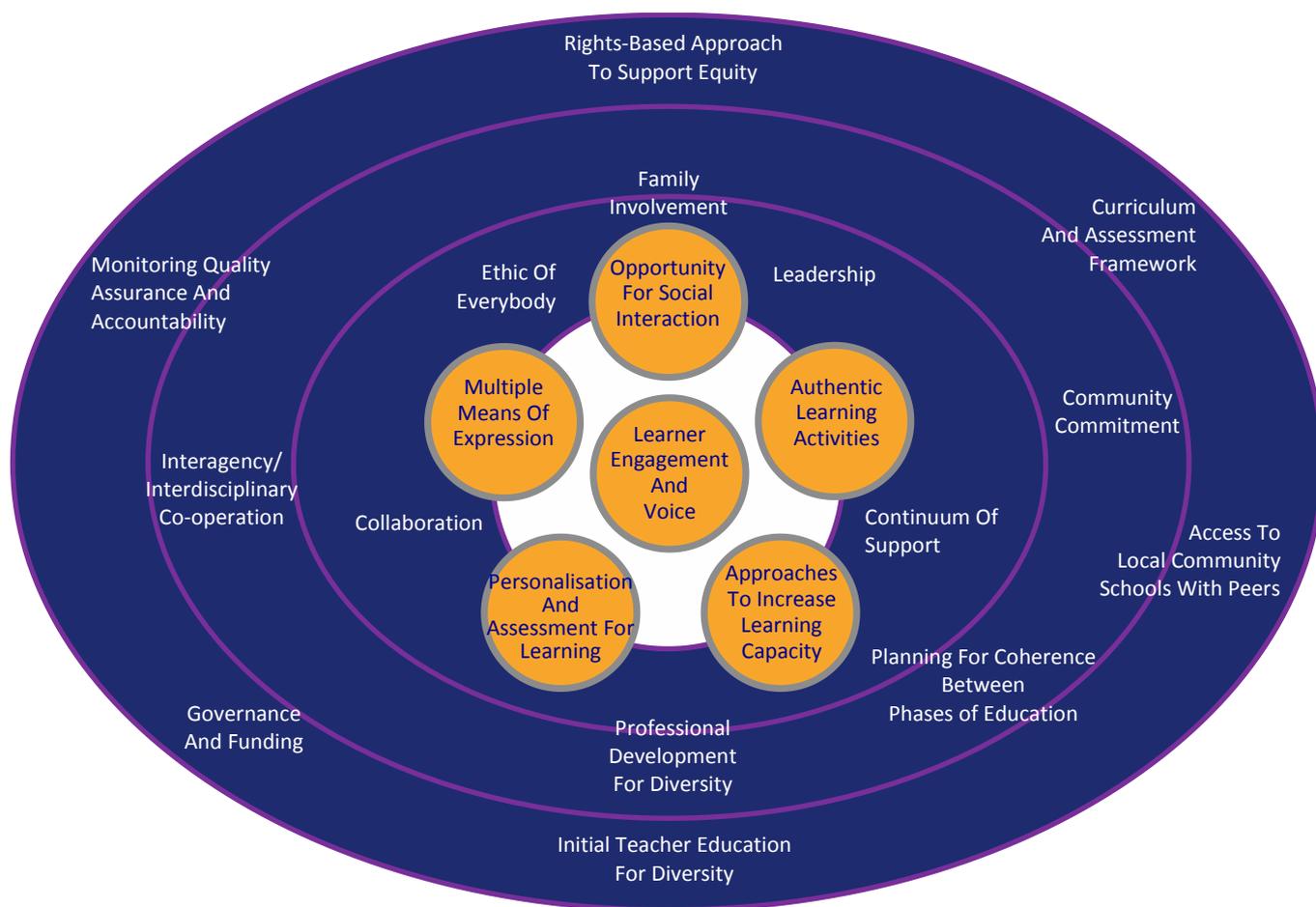
All seven Standards overall were identified as **requiring development**.

This pattern of evaluation is to be expected. The Standards developed by the Icelandic Team and stakeholders are by nature aspirational. Therefore, there was no expectation for a high number to already be embedded in the current system. The fact that the majority of Descriptors, as well as all Standards, are considered as 'requiring development' should be interpreted as positive. It indicates that work is underway and should form a good basis for future improvement.



## Audit recommendations

The recommendations have been formulated in line with an 'ecosystem' of the key factors impacting upon learners and their engagement and participation in educational opportunities. In an ecological model, the process of development and learning is understood to be based upon the interactions between the individual learner and their surrounding environments. Such a model encompasses the experiences of and interactions between learners and families, teachers, support staff and school leaders and decision-makers at all levels. The model in the Figure below views the learner at the centre of a series of four systems that interact with one another.



### An Ecosystem model of support for inclusive education

Seven main recommendations are proposed, one for each of the seven Standards that served as the basis for all the Audit activities:

**1. Ensure that all stakeholders understand inclusive education as the basis for high-quality education for all learners.** This will require national and local level dialogue about the kind of schools and learning communities that stakeholders want and the best ways to achieve/develop these.



**2. In light of the shared dialogue, ensure that legislation and national and local-level policy promote a rights-based approach to inclusive education.** Legislation and policy for inclusive education at all levels should aim to support the active participation and engagement of all learners and maximise their learning opportunities.

**3. Within the policy framework for inclusive education at national and local levels, embed governance and quality assurance mechanisms that support effective implementation at all system levels.** Greater clarity is needed around the different levels of system governance – that is, the processes and structures that ensure co-ordinated operations between different levels and actors in the system.

**4. To support the effective implementation of policy at all system levels, develop flexible resource allocation mechanisms that increase the system's capacity to be inclusive.** This requires a shift away from compensation to intervention and prevention approaches and a complete rationalisation of all funding mechanisms. The aim should be to reduce the use of formal needs identification procedures that involve the labelling of learners as the main means to access support for learners experiencing difficulties in school.

**5. Develop initial and continuing professional training opportunities that are aligned with national and local level policy goals and school development plans to support the ability of all stakeholders to effectively develop inclusive practice.** For this to be achieved, minimum levels of service provision in line with national and local policies for inclusive education must be introduced to guide the work of all training providers. This should ensure coherent initial and continuing education and development pathways and opportunities that develop positive attitudes and values, as well as knowledge, understanding and skills for all stakeholders working at all system levels.

**6. Build the capacity of support systems at all levels to provide inclusive learning environments through an integrated continuum of support and resources.** The support system must address age, phase and geographical inequities in accessing provision and resources. Learners, families and schools should be guaranteed a minimum level of support no matter where they live or which school they attend.

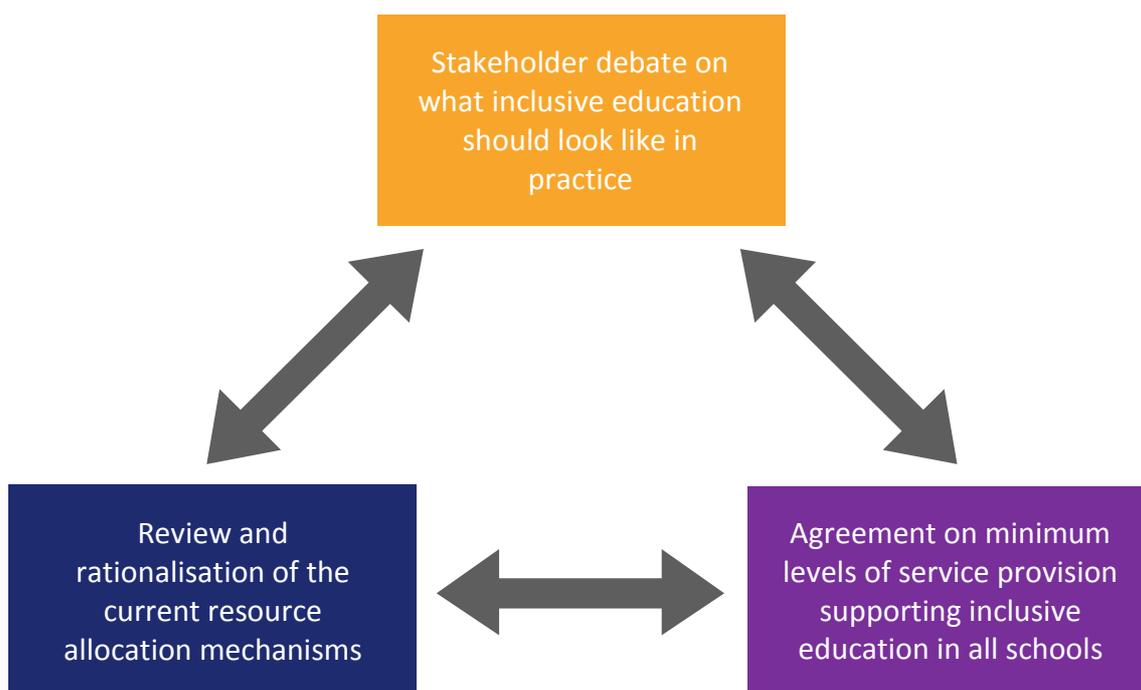
**7. Develop the capacity of all pre-, compulsory and upper-secondary school stakeholders to think and act inclusively in their daily practice and build inclusive learning communities.** All school-level stakeholders should be supported to take individual and collective responsibility for meeting the needs of all learners. The possibilities for supporting all forms of on-going self-review and development among schools and support services should be further explored.



These seven recommendations are linked to actions that are considered necessary to ensure that the Standards and Descriptors become embedded within policy and practice in the Icelandic system.

### Critical levers

It is not possible – or necessarily effective – to implement the recommendations simultaneously. Priority short-term actions that are crucial for ensuring effectiveness in the system have been identified. Three inter-connected priority actions are seen as critical levers, considered necessary to build a foundation for longer-term actions and to specifically address the Descriptors identified within the Audit as requiring initiation. These critical levers are considered key to ensuring that all other Standards and Descriptors become embedded within Iceland’s system for inclusive education. They are seen as having the most potential to promote wider system change. These levers are inter-connected and mutually supportive, as shown in the Figure below.



### Three inter-connected critical levers for system development

The three critical levers have been proposed with the clear intention of stimulating continuing debate and supporting longer-term system development work. They have the potential to be used as a discussion tool for agreeing with all stakeholders at all levels:

- the necessary system inputs, or minimum levels of provision, to be made available;



- the mechanisms for supporting innovation and system quality improvements;
- the system monitoring mechanisms and areas of responsibility for ensuring effective implementation of all forms of provision;
- the aspirations and goals that can be seen as the desired outputs for the system of inclusive education;
- a revised set of Standards and Descriptors to be used to guide future work of all stakeholders in the Icelandic system for inclusive education.

**The full Reporting Package for the Audit including the Final Report and six accompanying Annexes, is available to download from: [xxx](#)**