

OUTLINE FOR THE EXTERNAL AUDIT OF THE SYSTEM FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN ICELAND



CONTENTS

Preamble	3
1. Background Information.....	4
<i>1.1 The work of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education...</i>	4
<i>1.2 Agency country auditing activities</i>	4
<i>1.3 Current policy initiatives in Iceland</i>	5
2. Framework for an External Audit of the system for inclusive education in Iceland	9
3. Main Activities within the External Audit	11
4. Suggested Timeline.....	13



Preamble

This document presents outline proposals from the Agency to the Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið) for an External Audit of the system for inclusive education in Iceland.

Following a short introductory section with key background information on the current situation in Iceland, outline proposals for an External Audit are presented. The External Audit in Iceland will be guided by the principle of the Agency working *for* the Icelandic Ministry, *with* Icelandic stakeholders.

The implementation of an External Audit involves the Agency systematically conducting agreed activities in co-operation with, but independently from any stakeholders in Iceland. The work will lead to a totally independent set of recommendations for future action, as well as the identification of potential benchmarks for monitoring developments and progress.

The goals of the External Audit approach are to:

- Support evidence-based practice and decision-making,
- Promote self-review across all levels of the system,
- Support longer-term development work in Iceland.

The External Audit team will be comprised of Agency staff working with additional consultants. The Audit team will be lead by Agency Assistant Director, Dr. Amanda Watkins.

The Agency Director, Dr. Cor Meijer, will oversee all Audit activities.

All questions regarding these proposals should be addressed to the Agency Director Dr. Cor Meijer: director@european-agency.org



1. Background Information

1.1 The work of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education

The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency) was established in 1996 by agreement between the ministers of education in its member countries. Iceland was a founding member of the Agency in 1996.

The Agency is a permanent network of ministerial representatives acting as the member countries' platform for collaboration aiming to improve educational policy and practice for learners with disabilities and special educational needs.

The Agency is maintained by the member countries (member states of the European Union as well as Iceland, Norway and Switzerland) and is supported by the European Union Institutions. The Agency has a legal basis at European level (Decision no. 791/2004/EC). It is one of six European institutions recognised as contributing to the European integration process through its activities in the field of education and training and is supported with an operating grant under the Jean Monnet initiative within the new EU Erasmus+ education programme (2014-2020).

The Agency has a mandate from its member countries to facilitate collaboration regarding country priorities that are in line with the European Council of Ministers' priorities for education and training, as identified in the ET 2020 strategy. The Agency's work is fully in line with international agreements, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

Since 1996, Iceland has been fully involved in all Agency projects and activities. This has included – amongst other activities - full participation in projects exploring issues related to early childhood intervention, inclusive classroom practice, inclusive assessment, teacher education, vocational educational and training, information and communication technology and raising achievement for all learners.

1.2 Agency country auditing activities

The Agency has developed an extensive knowledge base over its 20 years of operations. This knowledge base can be drawn upon to provide ministries of education as well as other stakeholders in member countries and at international and European levels with evidence-based information. This information takes the forms of analyses, studies, guidelines and tools that are reliable, valid and applicable to educational policy planning, implementation, monitoring and review.

Drawing on this knowledge base, the Agency is able to offer member countries possibilities for country consultancy. The focus of any country consultancy is upon specific activities that are outside the remit of the Agency's agreed work



programmes. The focus of country consultancy is upon very specific questions, or topics relating to special needs or inclusive education that have been identified by the country in question as a priority, requiring close examination and analysis.

One specific form of country consultancy is the standards-based audit. Such an approach has the potential to promote an improvement cycle of review and reflection and support evidence-based policy and decision-making.

Within the standards-based audit approach, the key question for consideration is 'are we doing what we believe is the right thing - and in the right way?' An audit is a transparent and non-judgmental examination of how current practice and/or provision compares with stated policy goals and objectives. Standards take the system policy goals and objectives as a starting point. They are statements of aspirations for specific aspects of the education system held by key stakeholders (for example ministries).

A standards-based audit is based on a cycle that involves defining standards, collecting data to measure practice against those standards, reviewing the data and then implementing changes in order to improve practice in line with the standards.

The standards based audit approach was used by the Agency in 2014 to conduct the external audit *Education for All: Special Needs and Inclusive Education in Malta* (2015, available to download from:

<http://education.gov.mt/en/resources/News/Pages/News%20items/Inclusive-Education-Audit-Report.aspx>)

The work in Malta has shown the standards based audit model to be an effective methodology that leads to meaningful, practical and applicable findings and recommendations. Such recommendations have the potential to guide future work within a system development approach, based on stakeholder ownership of issues and challenges, actions and responses.

1.3 Current policy initiatives in Iceland

Inclusive education – also termed education for all – is the guiding policy for Iceland's national education system. The focus is upon responding to learners' needs without treating or defining those in need of special support any differently from other learners. In Iceland, there is no separate legislation for special education at any of the four education levels – pre-school, compulsory, upper secondary or higher education.

Iceland has a comprehensive and well-established system of identifying learners' special educational needs (SEN) and then allocating resources to provide support in pre-school and compulsory education. Iceland has a relatively high identification rate of learners with SEN, with almost 20% of learners receiving some form of



support. The majority of learners with SEN are educated in mainstream schools, with just over 1% being educated in separate settings e.g. schools or classes.

Educational reform is being considered throughout the whole system in Iceland. The Icelandic White Paper on Educational Reform: Improving Education and Competence in a New Century (2014) outlines the strengths within the system, but also highlights a number of challenges, including 'declining literacy rates amongst pupils leaving compulsory school and a comparatively slow progress of students through upper secondary school'.

Provision in upper secondary education has been the focus of recent attention in Iceland. The 2011 evaluation of the special units in upper secondary schools (Úttekt á Starfsbrautum Framhaldsskóla) highlighted various recommendations for potential reform, but the evaluation also clearly indicated the rising cost of these units in recent years. In 2013, an examination of drop out rates and reasons in upper secondary education was undertaken and the final report (Brotthvarf Úr Framhaldsskólum) was published in 2014.

The White Paper proposes two main goals to be achieved by 2018 by the Icelandic system: 90% of pupils in compulsory education will meet minimum reading standards (currently 79%); 60% of students complete their upper secondary studies on time (currently 44%).

In 2014, the OECD conducted a *Review of Policies to Improve the Effectiveness of Resources Use in Schools*. The Country Background report for Iceland presents a comprehensive overview of current challenges in the pre-, compulsory and upper-school education system. A key finding in relation to inclusive education was that there exists a significant challenge in relation to: 'The policy on inclusive schools where, while there is general agreement that the policy itself is justified, school administrators and staff feel that the implementation is not sufficiently managed or funded.' (page 11).

In addition, a review of the implementation of inclusive education policy in compulsory schools was initiated in autumn 2013, running until May 2015. This review commissioned an analysis of data on special education from Statistics Iceland (Greining á gögnum um sérkennslu frá Hagstofu Íslands, 2014) and a summary of law and theoretical material relating to inclusive education (Skóli án aðgreiningar Samantekt á lögum og fræðilegu efni, 2014). The final report presented the evaluation of the implementation of the policy of inclusive education in Iceland (Mat á framkvæmd stefnu um skóla án aðgreiningar, 2015).

The main findings from the report indicate that whilst most stakeholders fully support the national policy of inclusive education – education for all - there are different interpretations of what this means for different stakeholders. Teachers in



particular appear to feel uncertain about their changing role in relation to implementing inclusive education. There are concerns raised over the increasing demands placed upon teachers and their ability to cope with the perceived rising workload.

A related issue concerns how well teachers are prepared and then supported via their initial and on-going training to effectively meet the changing demands of meeting a diverse range of learning needs in inclusive classrooms.

The evaluation report indicates that there is a degree of disconnection between the various bodies – ministry, inter-ministerial and municipality levels – that have different responsibilities for implementing and then monitoring outcomes relating to inclusive. This has led to calls from stakeholders for more guidance on the implementation of policy goals for inclusive education. These calls are linked to requests for clear and practical information on how effective the system is and more information on ‘what really works’ in ensuring inclusive education.

The report identifies a number of recommendations for learners, teachers, other school stakeholders and policy makers. It concludes that:

‘There is a considerable need for deeper analysis of the situation and realization of policy on inclusive education and its influence on the work in the schools and on students’ wellbeing and success in school. Therefore it is suggested that the *European Agency for Special Needs and inclusive education* should, without further due, be formally asked to carry out in Iceland a similar assessment as was recently done in Malta. The group suggests that the assessment should include pre-, primary- and secondary school and build on available data.

... It is suggested that the assessment of the *European Agency* should be followed up in an organized way with improvement in mind.’

The proposals in this document have been specifically prepared in response to this recommendation. The proposals are based on virtual as well as face-to-face presentations and on-going exchanges of information between the representatives from the Icelandic working group on inclusion, representatives of the Icelandic Ministry of Education, Science and Culture and Agency staff members.

Discussions with key representatives of the Icelandic working group on inclusion highlighted a number of interrelated, critical questions that will be considered within the overall audit process:

- Does the current system for inclusive education ensure all learners rights? Is the current structure with different approaches for different sectors working for all learners and their families? What is the impact of the current system on learners’ long-term educational opportunities?



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- Are teachers being prepared in the right way? Are the current expectations on them reasonable? Do teachers receive the sort of support they need to implement inclusive education? Does in-service training and staff development opportunities meet all teachers' needs?
 - Is the overall system cost effective? Is it working efficiently enough? Can key processes such as interactions between ministries, schools, education and social / health services be improved?
 - How equitable is the system across the nation? Are there regional differences that may be inequitable for some learners and their families?
 - How well is Iceland doing in relation to policy and practice in European and other global regions? Is Icelandic policy and practice in alignment with European and international benchmarks?

The working group on inclusion will be a main reference point for the planning and implementation of the External Audit in Iceland. However, representatives of wider stakeholder groups will be engaged in the audit work including: learners and their families; teachers and other school level educators; school leaders; educational support personnel; representatives of support organisations and groups; teacher educators; regional level decision-makers; national level decision-makers; representatives of social and health sector providers.



2. Framework for an External Audit of the system for inclusive education in Iceland

The External Audit of the inclusive education system in Iceland will be conducted by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency) working co-operatively, but independently from any stakeholders within the Icelandic system.


The External Audit will be conducted by a team of Agency staff working with additional consultants who will collectively examine the implementation of the national policy for inclusive education in practice.

The External Audit will take a standards-based audit approach, following a model that involves the internal definition of desired standards for the inclusive education system by stakeholders in Iceland and external data collection by the Agency audit team to examine current practice against the identified standards.

The External Audit will consider structure, process and outcome factors and will lead to information that can be used to plan systematic improvements for the system in Iceland in the long term.

The *objectives* of the External Audit will include:

1. Situating the current system in Iceland within a wider international and European context of policy and practice for inclusive education;
2. Building upon the previous evaluation of the implementation of the policy of inclusive education (Mat á framkvæmd stefnu um skóla án aðgreiningar, 2015), work with Icelandic stakeholders to refine the findings of the study in order to develop a critical reflection on the implementation of policy for inclusive education in current practice;
3. Building upon existing work in Iceland, in particular the previous evaluation study, work with Icelandic stakeholders to identify a framework of process and outcomes standards for their system for inclusive education;
4. Preparing independent data collection methods in line with the framework of standards and then collecting data to identify areas of strength and challenge areas, as well as inform issues of alignment between the agreed standards and practice in schools and supporting services;
5. Identifying examples of innovative, high quality practice in implementing policy for inclusive education from the Icelandic, as well as international and European contexts, that will inform policy development and implementation;
6. Identifying key levers for ensuring effectiveness in the system;
7. Considering short and long term investment issues by exploring system added value issues alongside cost issues;

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8. Preparing focussed and practical recommendations for the implementation and monitoring of future action plans aimed at developing the system for inclusive education policy and practice in Iceland.

The *main focus* of the External Audit will be an exploration of how successful the implementation of the Icelandic policy for inclusive education is in practice.

The *scope of the Audit* will cover:

- pre-school through to the end of upper secondary education. This will include a focus on the special units and the support system in upper secondary schools, as this school level was not covered in the recent evaluation and analysis in Iceland;
- all responsible funding bodies involved in inclusive education i.e. the municipalities; the Ministries of Education, Science and Culture; Health and Welfare; and the Interior. This also includes a consideration of the Municipalities Equalisation fund (<http://www.jofnunarsjodur.is/english/>);
- all school stakeholders i.e. learner and their families; school staff; support services; school funders and operators; national teacher organisations and teacher education institutions; local and national level decision-makers, including those from the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture and the Ministry of Welfare.

The Audit will examine:

- system factors impacting upon equity, efficiency and effectiveness;
- co-operation at and between regional and national levels;
- the evidence and reasons for the perceived policy-practice gap across different educational sectors and forms of provision;
- the monitoring of policy implementation via existing mechanisms (school inspections and information on learning outcomes);
- stakeholders' perceptions of the effectiveness of schools in terms of promoting achievements all learners.

The 2015 evaluation report findings will be used as a starting point for identifying critical issues for examination in the Audit.



3. Main Activities within the External Audit

The External Audit will work within an audit cycle model. Five main phases can be identified within this cycle: planning, fieldwork, reporting, implementation and monitoring, review and re-audit.

The External Audit will focus on the first three of these phases - planning, fieldwork and reporting – with a view to informing the implementation of the further two phases in the longer term.

During the *planning phase*, the final scope of the External Audit will be agreed upon between the Agency team, Ministry representatives and other key stakeholders. Planning meetings for all involved parties will be held and the exact focus of data collection agreed upon.

On the basis of the planning meetings, the Audit team will draw up a set of proposals detailing the specific issues to be examined in the External Audit, how and when they will be explored. These main issues will be agreed upon by the Ministry representatives and other key stakeholders.

Using the 2015 evaluation report as a point of departure, additional desk-research will be undertaken by the Agency team to prepare background information for data collection fieldwork.

The Agency will recruit suitably experienced consultants to work as part of the Audit team.

Ministry representatives and other key stakeholders will prepare a critical reflection document describing the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the current system for inclusive education. This critical analysis document will build upon the findings of the 2015 evaluation study and will focus upon the specific issues identified for examination in the External Audit. The critical reflection document will explicitly highlight the goals, benchmarks and standards for the system of inclusive education in Iceland.

The critical reflection document will be analysed by the Agency Audit team and there will then be a further meeting of the Audit team and Ministry representatives and other key stakeholders to identify and agree upon the final parameters for the Audit and standards to be used as the basis for data collection.

A detailed programme will then be developed outlining all data collection methods and activities.

Fieldwork will involve the Agency Audit team collecting data from a distance as well as completing on-site visits to a sample of schools identified by the Agency audit team. Both surveys and focus groups will be used to obtain users' views about the key issues identified for examination.



The main focus of fieldwork will be the collection of data in order to evaluate the alignment between the agreed standards and actual practice.

The main fieldwork involving stakeholders at school level will be completed by the end of May 2016, before the summer vacation period.

At the end of the fieldwork period, an initial findings meeting will be held between the Agency Audit team and Ministry representatives and other key stakeholders to validate the evidence gathered and clarify any emerging issues prior to preparing a draft External Audit report.

The *Audit reporting phase* will involve the preparation of a draft report presenting all findings as well as final recommendations.

During a working seminar in Iceland in October 2016, organised as part of the Agency biannual meeting, the main issues arising in the Audit will be presented and discussed with all member country representatives. This seminar will provide an additional international dimension to the consideration of the findings.

A factual check of findings will be made with the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture before publication of a final report.

The final report will have a clear aim of informing future development work in Iceland. The final report will have the potential to be used as a guide to stakeholders in Iceland for the completion of the remaining steps in the audit cycle - implementation and monitoring, review and re-audit.



4. Outline workplan

The overall timeline for the External Audit will be 1st November 2015 to 31st December 2016.

The *preparatory phase* will run throughout October 2015.

- The Audit Outline will be discussed and agreed upon by mid October 2015.
- The contract will be agreed by end of October 2015 and signed in early November.

The *planning phase* will run from 1/11/2015 - 29/2/2016.

- The scoping meeting to agree final audit parameters, objectives and activities will be held by 30/11/2015.
- An elaborated work plan will be agreed upon by all parties by 31/12/2015.
- The critical reflection document will be prepared by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture by 31/1/2016.
- Initial desk-research will be completed by 31/1/2016.
- The meeting to agree Audit standards will be held by 29/2/2016.

The *fieldwork phase* will run from 1/3/2016 - 31/8/2016.

- A detailed programme of data collection activities will be completed by 29/2/2016.
- The desk research will be completed by 29/2/2016.
- Data collection activities, including the agreed fieldwork tasks, will run from 1/3/2016 to 31/8/2016.

The *reporting phase* will run from 1/9/2016 – 31/12/2016.

- Initial findings and issues for consideration will be the focus of a working seminar organised within the October 2016 biannual meeting.
- An initial report outline will be presented for discussion by 31/10/2016.
- The draft report will be presented to the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture for clearance by 1/12/2016.
- The final report will be delivered to the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture by 31/12/2016.