



# THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN ICELAND



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Sölvhólgata 4, IS-150 Reykjavík, Iceland

Telephone: +354 560 9500

Fax: +354 562 3068

E-mail address: [postur@mrn.stjr.is](mailto:postur@mrn.stjr.is)

Web site: [www.menntamalaraduneyti.is](http://www.menntamalaraduneyti.is)

Design and layout: Auglýsingastofa Skaparans ehf.

Photographs: Guðmundur Ingólfsson

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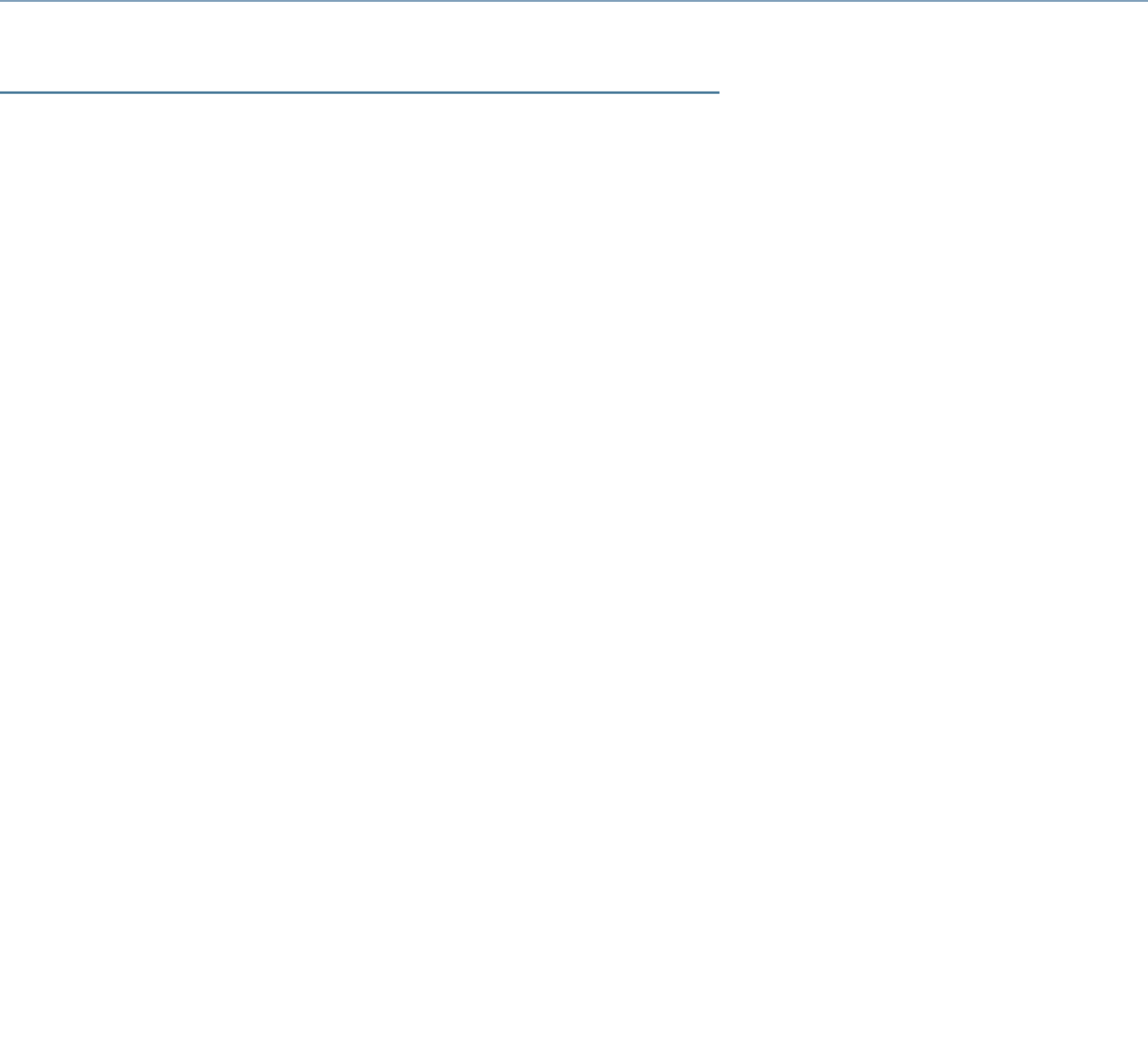
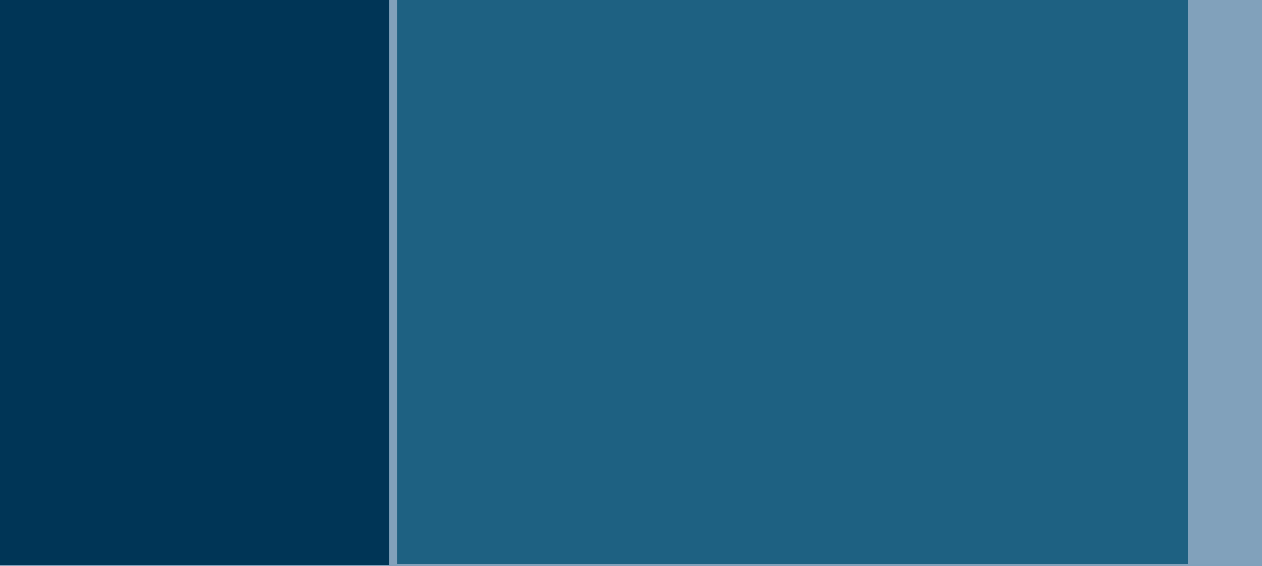


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MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND CULTURE  
2002





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## BACKGROUND

Iceland is an island in the North Atlantic Ocean, on the borders of the temperate and the Arctic zones, with its extreme northern point touching the Arctic Circle. Its nearest neighbour to the west is Greenland, at a distance of 278 km. Some 420 km to the southeast lie the Faroe Islands.

Iceland's total area is approximately 103,000 km<sup>2</sup> of which only 23% is arable land.

As of the 1st of December 2001, the population of Iceland was approx. 286,000 with a population density of ca. 2.7 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>. Icelandic is the national language.

Iceland is a republic with a parliamentary democracy. The President is elected by popular vote for a four-year term. Executive power lies with the cabinet formed by the political parties. The government must have the direct or indirect support of the majority of the Icelandic parliament, which has 63 members. Parliamentary elections are held at intervals of four years or less.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church is the official state church, with 88% membership.

Local government is exercised by 122 municipalities.

The principal employment sectors in Iceland are: services 69% of work force, there of approx. 6% in the field of education; industry 23%; agriculture and fishing 8%.

The unemployment rate in 2000 was 2.3%.

## BASIS OF THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

The educational system is divided into four levels:

- pre-school (*leikskóli*) up till 6 years of age. Governed by the Pre-school Act, No. 758/ 1994;
- compulsory (primary and lower secondary in a single structure – *grunnskóli*) 6 – 16 years of age. Governed by the Compulsory School Act, No. 66/1995;
- upper-secondary (*framhaldsskóli*) 16 – 20 years of age. Governed by the Upper Secondary School Act, No. 80/1996;



- higher education level (*háskóli*) from 20 years of age. Governed by the Universities Act, No. 136/1997.

A fundamental principle of the Icelandic educational system is that everyone should have equal opportunities to acquire an education, irrespective of sex, economic status, residential location, religion, possible handicap, and cultural or social background. Education in Iceland has traditionally been organised within the public sector, and there are very few private institutions in the school system. Almost all private schools receive public funding.

In pre-schools children receive education and support for their all-round development, thus preparing them for compulsory school and life itself. At the pre-school level, the nucleus of the educational work is play.

The main purpose of compulsory schooling is to prepare pupils for life and work in a continuously developing, democratic society. The organisation of the school as well as its work shall, therefore, be guided by tolerance, Christian values and democratic co-operation.

At the upper secondary level anyone who has completed compulsory education or has turned eighteen has the right to enter a course of studies. An effort must be made to give pupils a choice of subjects and forms of instruction in accordance with their needs and wishes. The primary aims of upper secondary education are to prepare pupils for life and work in a democratic society by offering them suitable opportunities to learn and develop individually, and prepare them for employment through specialised studies leading to professional qualifications or further study.

Universities are entrusted with the task of carrying out research and offering higher education programmes in different subjects, as stipulated by the legislation governing each institution.

The main purpose of adult education is to encourage equality of opportunity among adults without regard to location, age, gender, occupation or previous education.





Life-long learning is a global concept, covering all education that individuals receive in the course of their lives. Important elements in life-long learning are all types of short- or long-term continuing studies, supplementary studies and hobby-related studies.

### DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSIBILITY

The Icelandic parliament is legally and politically responsible for the educational system. It determines its basic objectives and administrative framework. All education comes under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, with the exception of a few specialised schools.

The educational system has, to a large extent, been decentralised both with regard to responsibilities and decision-making. This reflects a general trend in Icelandic society. Local municipalities are responsible for the operation of pre-schools and primary and lower secondary schools. On the other hand, the state runs the upper secondary schools and schools at the higher education level.

### CENTRAL ADMINISTRATION

The Ministry issues the National Curriculum Guidelines for compulsory and upper secondary education. These National Curriculum Guidelines are intended both to provide the detailed objectives necessary to implement the law and offer direction as to how they should be carried out in practice. The Ministry, furthermore, issues National Curriculum Guidelines for pre-schools that specify the aims that pre-schools are to follow and describe the basic means and attitudes that apply in the education of young children.

The National Centre for Educational Materials (under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture) develops and publishes educational materials for compulsory schools and distributes them to schools free of charge.

The Educational Testing Institute is an independent institution funded by the state through the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. The institution is responsible





for organising, setting and grading the nationally co-ordinated examinations and for undertaking comparative analysis of the educational system through participation in international surveys.

The school board of each upper secondary school is appointed by the Minister of Education, Science and Culture. Three representatives out of five on the school board represent the Ministry, the other two come from the municipality concerned. Representatives of teachers and students are non-voting observers in the school board. The principal attends meetings of the school board as a non-voting member, serving the board in an executive function. The school board shall determine the emphases in school activities and is, among other things, responsible for the annual operating and financial plan of the school.

By law, each higher education institution is directly responsible to the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. In the state-run institutions the Minister appoints two representatives to the Senate of each institution. Other members of the Senate come from the institution, and include representatives of both teachers and students.

## LOCAL ADMINISTRATION

Local municipalities are responsible for the entire operations of pre-schools and compulsory schools. Apart from being represented in the school boards of upper secondary schools, local municipalities have no administrative responsibilities at the upper secondary level or at the higher education level.

Pre-school education is controlled by a pre-school board which supervises pre-school educational affairs in the municipality concerned.

A school board is responsible for compulsory educational affairs in each municipality. It is to ensure that all children of school age in the area receive the instruction prescribed by law. Municipalities are responsible for providing schools with educational services, such as special education advice, school psychologists, etc.



Representatives of parents and school heads of pre-schools and compulsory schools usually have the right to attend meetings of the school board in question as observers.

### ADVISORY BODIES

According to the Compulsory School Act, every compulsory school shall have a Parents' Council made up of three representatives of parents.

In most pre-schools there are parents' associations, but these do not directly influence the administration of the school.

According to the Upper Secondary School Act, an eighteen-member co-operation committee concerning vocational education at the upper secondary level is to be a forum for comprehensive policy-making in the affairs of vocational education and is to give advice in the setting of common rules on matters relating to vocational education. It is appointed by the Minister of Education, Science and Culture, which also appoints occupational councils for individual branches of industry or groups of such branches. The occupational councils are to define the needs of the vocations in question in respect to knowledge and ability of employees and to define the aims of that particular course of study. Occupational councils are also to make suggestions concerning the structure of vocational education and curriculum guidelines for special subjects that pertain to the vocation in question.

School boards of upper secondary schools are permitted to establish one or more advisory committees in order to promote the best possible co-operation between the school in question and local industries.

The relationship between institutions at higher education level, social partners and the labour market varies. Some institutions regularly set up development committees with representatives from the public sector and industry. Through research institutions and liaison offices, universities also endeavour to strengthen their ties with external actors e.g. industry.



## INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES IN EDUCATION

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture's Project Plan for e-Learning 2001-2003 entails that information technology be utilised for the benefit of education and culture to create an advantage for the Icelandic nation in the economy of the future.

The Ministry's future vision entails utilising the features of the Internet as an information utility for schooling. There, educational materials shall be imparted purposefully and communications established between students, teachers, school administrators, parents, employers and all those connected with education. This vision entails that traditional teaching practices develop into what may be called distributed education, with students engaging in studies in distributed learning schools.

As an extension of the Ministry's policy on information technology, efforts have been devoted to strengthening the premises for using the technology in schooling. Now, the Web educational gateway [menntagatt.is](http://menntagatt.is) has been opened, with information on the points of focus in education and information technology to be expanded and promoted by the Ministry.

## EVALUATION AND SUPERVISION

According to legislation and regulations on pre-school education, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture is responsible for carrying out a comprehensive evaluation of pre-schools, i.e. their general educational performance with regard to the national objectives and the schools' own educational plans.

Current legislation on compulsory education and upper secondary education stipulates that all compulsory and upper secondary schools are to adopt methods of evaluating school activities, including instruction and administrative practices, internal communication and external relations. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture is to investigate the self-evaluation methods used by the schools at five-year intervals.



The Ministry is responsible for carrying out evaluation of compulsory and upper secondary schools and their activities to ensure that schooling complies with provisions of the law on compulsory education and the National Curriculum Guidelines.

In line with the law on higher education, a regulation was issued in 1999 regarding quality control of university instruction, which requires universities to set up a formal internal quality evaluation system. The Ministry takes the initiative to conduct an external evaluation of higher education programmes or institutions and is responsible for approving new degrees.

## FINANCING

Local municipalities pay for the construction and the operation of pre-schools and primary and lower secondary schools. Parents pay fees for their children to attend pre-schools. Compulsory education (primary and lower secondary), including textbooks and materials, is free of charge. The state pays for all educational materials at the compulsory level.

The operating costs of upper secondary education are funded by the state. Construction costs and initial capital investment for equipment are divided between the state and the municipalities, which pay 60% and 40% respectively. Education at the upper secondary level is free, but students pay enrolment fees and the cost of their textbooks. Students in vocational education pay a materials fee. University level institutions receive annual budget allocations which they themselves administer. State institutions at the higher education level charge registration fees. Private institutions charge tuition fees. Instruction in state institutions at the higher education level is considered to be free for students, who also have in most cases access to loans from the Icelandic Student Loan Fund.





## PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION

### GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The present legislation concerning pre-schools was passed in 1994. The first article of the law defines pre-schools as the first level of the educational system. According to the law, pre-schools are to provide education for children who have not reached six years of age, at which point compulsory education begins.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture lays down the framework and policy for pre-school education, including specifying its educational role, and sets the general policy regarding the methods used. The Ministry is to issue National Curriculum Guidelines that specify the aims that pre-schools are to follow and describe the basic means and attitudes that apply in the education of young children. The Ministry is also to see to it that the education provided in pre-schools lays the groundwork for a smooth transition to the first years of compulsory education.

Local municipalities bear the responsibility for implementing the law on pre-school education. According to the law, the construction and operation of pre-schools is funded and administered by local municipalities, which are to establish and operate pre-schools for children and manage the schools in accordance with the law. They can furthermore employ pre-school representatives who advise on matters that pertain to such schools and supervise their operation.

All parents pay fees for their children to attend pre-school. Parental contributions cover roughly 30% of the operating costs of publicly run pre-schools. The fees in privately run pre-schools are usually around 10-20% higher than in the public ones.

Pre-schools are most often located in buildings specifically designed and constructed for their operation, and where there is enough room to have a spacious playground, approximately 30 to 40 square metres of space for each child. Indoors, 6.5 square metres of space are required for each child. Pre-schools are intended for both boys and girls.



Most pre-schools are established and run by the municipalities. Other parties may also operate a pre-school in consultation with the municipality. Almost all private pre-schools receive financial support from the municipality.

Pre-schools are to be available to all children who have not reached the age at which compulsory school begins, i. e. in the autumn of the year in which the child turns six. However, very few pre-schools accept children less than one year old, and the youngest children are usually two years of age. In municipalities where there may be insufficient room to accommodate all applicants, the children of single parents and students are often given priority.

Handicapped children have the same right as other children to attend pre-schools, and in many cases are given priority status with regard to admission. The programme for handicapped children is the same as for other children, but adapted to their abilities.

The children are usually divided into separate groups according to age. It is not uncommon, however, especially in smaller communities for children in different age brackets to be together in a group.

## CURRICULUM

The law concerning pre-schools defines their main aim in education as follows:

- to provide children with safe conditions to play and a healthy environment in which to grow up;
- to give children the opportunity of participating in games and activities and to enjoy the more varied educational opportunities provided in groups under the direction of pre-school teachers;
- to place emphasis on encouraging, in co-operation with parents, the all-round development of the children in accordance with the individual nature and needs of each child and to strive to offer them the emotional and physical support needed to enjoy their childhood;



- to encourage tolerance and open-mindedness in the children and to provide them with equal opportunities to develop;
- to support their Christian ethical development and lay the foundations for children to become independent, conscious, active and responsible participants in a democratic society which is constantly and rapidly changing;
- to foster the children's creative and expressive abilities in order to strengthen their self-image, feelings of security and ability to solve problems in a non-aggressive manner.

As the law concerning pre-schools stipulates, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture issues National Curriculum Guidelines which they are to follow. The National Curriculum Guidelines are to include a definition of the educational and pedagogical role of pre-schools and a policy outlining how that role is to be carried out. The current National Curriculum Guidelines are based on a child-centred ideology, where emphasis is placed on childhood as a separate stage of development with special qualities which must be borne in mind; the individual development and needs of each child must be the focal point. The nucleus of educational work in pre-schools is play, which is considered the best way for the child to learn and mature.

Children attend pre-schools from 4 hours to a maximum of 9 hours a day.

Pre-school education is intended to bridge the gap between caring for children and educating them, supporting their all-round development and thus preparing them for primary school and life itself.

Pre-school-age children who need special assistance or training because of a handicap or emotional or social difficulties are provided with such training. Aimed at increasing the child's competence, this training is undertaken within the pre-school they attend, according to certain rules and under the supervision of a pre-school teacher, a social pedagogue or other specialists. All children who get special assistance or training are given regular check-ups to monitor their health and development.





## ASSESSMENT

Pre-schools are not required to assess the performance or the progress of each child. However, such an assessment is made by the pre-school staff or specialists if any suspicion of deviation from normal development arises within the pre-school.

Heads of pre-schools see to it that the educational work that takes place in their school is evaluated on a regular basis. The present law concerning pre-schools gives the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture the responsibility for carrying out a comprehensive assessment of their general educational performance.

## TEACHERS

Pre-school teachers are required to complete a three-year course of studies at the Iceland University of Education or at the University of Akureyri. Most of the students who enter the course have completed matriculation examinations. The programme is divided into two-thirds academic subjects and one-third practical training in a pre-school under the supervision of a qualified pre-school teacher.



## COMPULSORY EDUCATION

### GENERAL DESCRIPTION

In 1995, legislation concerning compulsory schools was passed. In comparison with previous legislation, the greatest change is that in 1996 municipalities took over the operation of schools at the compulsory level. The legislation primarily defines the framework for education at this level, its aims, the role and responsibility of the state and the municipalities. More detailed provisions regarding the implementation of compulsory education are to be found in regulations which the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture issues on the basis of the law in effect.

The law concerning compulsory education stipulates that education shall be mandatory for children and adolescents between the ages of six and sixteen. The law determines the length of the academic year and the minimum number of lessons to be given each week and defines which subjects are obligatory. The school year lasts for nine months, beginning between the 21st of August and the 1st of September and ending between the 31st of May and the 10th of June. According to the law the minimum number of school days is 170 but following the teachers' new wage-contract, the number of school days will be 180. Classes are held five days a week.

The law makes it the duty of parents to see to it that their children register for and attend school. The law also specifies the duty of the state and local municipalities to see to it that instruction, as decreed by law, be given.

Compulsory education is organised in a single structure system, i.e. primary and lower secondary education form part of the same school level and usually take place in the same school. There are no entrance requirements at this school level, and all children are accepted at the age of six years. The enrolment rate is 100%.

Municipalities are responsible for the establishment and the running of compulsory schools, including the provision of special education. They pay for instruction, general teaching, substitute teaching, administration and specialists' services.



The law concerning schools at the compulsory level stipulates that all children are to receive suitable instruction, taking into account the nature of the pupil and his or her needs and promoting the development, health and education of each individual. Pupils have the right to attend school in the area where they live. Furthermore, the school is to systematically integrate handicapped pupils into mainstream education.

The state monitors the implementation of educational law and regulations and is responsible for the publication of educational materials. Furthermore, the state is responsible for assessing individual schools and the educational work that is carried out in them to ensure that all such activities are in compliance with existing law and the National Curriculum Guidelines.

Local education offices provide schools with various specialist services, such as general pedagogical counselling, counselling in respect to particular subjects, educational counselling for students and school psychology services. Where such services are not offered by the local municipalities themselves, the local authority in question is under an obligation to negotiate with other municipalities or with institutions, such as teacher training institutions or other parties which provide similar services.

Compulsory school is divided into ten grades. Three types of schools are the most common: schools that have all ten grades, schools that have grades one to seven and schools that have grades eight to ten. Schools that have grades eight to ten are often merger schools, i.e. they take in pupils from more than one school in the catchment area that has grades one to seven. All compulsory schools are co-educational, i.e., pupils of both sexes attend. Many municipalities provide out-of-hours provision for the children.

The size of schools varies tremendously. The largest schools are in the capital and its suburbs and have approx. 800 pupils. In rural areas, outside Reykjavík and its suburbs, there are many small schools, some with fewer than 10 pupils. Almost one-half of all compulsory schools have fewer than 100 pupils.



School counsellors are intended in particular to offer pupils advice on their studies, on study-related problems and as to their study choices.

## CURRICULUM

The main aims of compulsory education, as stated in the Compulsory School Act, are the following:

- to prepare pupils for life and work in a continually developing democratic society. The organisation of the school and the work that takes place there is thus to be guided by tolerance, Christian values and democratic co-operation;
- to aim at conducting its operation in the fullest possible accordance with the nature and needs of its pupils and to encourage the development, health and education of each individual;
- to give pupils an opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills and to cultivate work habits that promote a continuous interest in seeking education and self-development. School work is therefore to lay the foundation for independent thinking and to train pupils' ability to co-operate with others.

On basis of the law, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture issues regulations and National Curriculum Guidelines. These provide the details of how the law is to be implemented and define more clearly the educational role of compulsory schools and the main objectives of instruction in individual subjects in accordance with that role.

The National Curriculum Guidelines are a further development of the law and have the legal status of a ministry regulation. They interpret the law and further specify what is to be co-ordinated in all Icelandic compulsory schools. Furthermore, the National Curriculum Guidelines set the parameters for each school and its staff in respect to organisation, execution and evaluation of education within that school as well as on the proportion of total teaching time to be devoted to each individual subject for each year. The number of hours of instruction varies according to the age of pupils.





The National Curriculum Guidelines apply to all grades and subjects in compulsory school.

According to the law on compulsory education, the staff of each school is obliged to write a school working guide which is to be based on the National Curriculum Guidelines, but gives each school an opportunity to take into account its circumstances and special characteristics. The school working guide is to be an administrative plan for each school. It is to account for the school year and to include an annual calendar, the organisation of teaching, the aims and content of the education offered, pupil assessment procedures, assessment of the work that goes on in the school, extra-curricular activities and other aspects of the operation of the school.

The number of lessons for each grade is as follows:

Grade	1-4 (age 6-9 years)	30 lessons per week
Grade	5-7 (age 10-12)	35 lesson per week
Grade	8-10 (age 13-15)	37 lesson per week.

According to the National Curriculum Guidelines, the pupils' total school time, at the conclusion of ten years of compulsory education will be divided among the various subjects in approximately the following manner:

Icelandic	approx. 19%	Arts and crafts	approx. 11%
Mathematics	approx. 17%	Modern languages	approx. 11%
Natural sciences	approx. 9%	Home economics	approx. 4%
Social and religious studies	approx. 10%	ICT	approx. 6%
Physical education	approx. 10%	Life skills	approx. 2%



The first five are subjects which all pupils study from grade 1 through grade 9. Instruction in other subjects starts later. In the 10th and final grade all pupils study Icelandic, mathematics, English, Danish, natural sciences, social studies, life skills and physical education, while other subjects and electives vary.

The National Curriculum Guidelines for compulsory school now contain for the first time a provision concerning special instruction in Icelandic for pupils whose mother tongue is not Icelandic. The guidelines also contain a new provision concerning special instruction in Icelandic for deaf and hearing-impaired pupils and for instruction in sign language for the deaf. The aims of instruction in Icelandic for the children of immigrants and the deaf and instruction in sign language for the deaf are included in the National Curriculum Guidelines for Icelandic in compulsory school.

Pupils are generally expected to cover the same subject material at roughly the same speed. Individuals having difficulty are provided with remedial teaching, primarily in Icelandic and mathematics, but remain with their class for most of their lessons. Teachers choose teaching methods suited to their pupils, their instructional aims and the conditions under which they teach. In general, an attempt is made to provide as much variety as possible.

Compulsory school pupils experiencing academic or social difficulties are offered a considerable amount of remedial instruction, once the pupil's academic difficulties have been diagnosed. This instruction can take place in two different ways: either the remedial teacher works with the regular teacher in the classroom, where he or she assists the pupil, or the pupil is taken out of the classroom and tutored by the remedial teacher on an individual basis or in a small group. A number of schools also have special departments for pupils with severe learning disabilities.



## ASSESSMENT

Examinations and other forms of assessment, usually written, are carried out by individual teachers and schools. Assessment is therefore not standardised between different schools and teachers. The way in which the reports on pupils' progress are compiled varies greatly: the assessment could be in the form of a numerical or letter grade, or an oral or written commentary. Reports are given at regular intervals throughout the school year and at the end of each year.

Nationally co-ordinated examinations at the end of compulsory education are optional, i.e. the pupils can choose if and how many nationally co-ordinated examinations they take. In the school year 2001-2002, pupils will be able to choose between examinations in five subjects, i.e. Icelandic, Danish, English, mathematics and natural sciences. In the school year 2002-2003, pupils can choose between six subjects, i.e. an examination in social sciences will also be offered.

These examinations are composed, marked and organised by the Educational Testing Institute. Marks ranging from one to ten are awarded, based on referenced criteria (10 being the highest). The purpose of these examinations is primarily to indicate the pupil's standing at the completion of his compulsory education and to assist him or her in choosing a course of upper secondary study. At the end of compulsory schooling, all pupils receive a certificate stating their marks on both the nationally co-ordinated examinations and all other courses completed in their final year at school.

In grades 4 and 7, pupils take two nationally co-ordinated examinations. The subjects examined are Icelandic and mathematics. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture is to produce survey examinations and standardised proficiency examinations for the schools, in order to measure the academic standing of pupils.

The law also stipulates that each school is to introduce methods which will enable it to evaluate its own educational work. This evaluation must include, among other things, teaching and administration, communication within the school and relationships with





external parties. Each school's methods of self-evaluation are to be assessed externally every five years.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture is also responsible for carrying out the evaluation of schools and school activities to ensure that schooling complies with the provisions of the law on compulsory education.

## TEACHERS

At primary level (grades 1-7), the same teacher instructs a class in most subjects. At lower secondary level (grades 8-10), teachers generally teach one or more subjects to a number of different classes. Teachers may or may not continue with the same group from one year to another.

Teachers at primary and lower secondary level are trained as generalist teachers at the Iceland University of Education or the University of Akureyri. Satisfactory performance in the matriculation examination or its equivalent is required to commence a teacher education programme which lasts 3 years, except in the case of a distance learning course which lasts 4 years. Teachers at lower secondary level can also be trained at the University of Iceland. In this case, a BA or BS degree (3 or 4 years of study) is a pre-requisite for training, which lasts one year or one semester if applicants have a degree higher than the foregoing. Courses are both academic and practical and lead to the award of teaching qualifications.

Teachers are employed by the municipalities and work either full-time or part-time.

Each year, teacher training institutions offer a variety of courses for in-service training of teachers. Participation in in-service training or continuing education is not compulsory.



## UPPER SECONDARY EDUCATION

### GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Upper secondary education is governed by the Upper Secondary School Act of 1996. The Act primarily defines the framework for education at that level, its aims, the role and responsibility of the state and local municipalities, as well as other parties involved in providing upper secondary education. More detailed provisions regarding the implementation of upper secondary education are to be found in regulations which the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture issues on the basis of the law in effect. In addition, the Ministry issues National Curriculum Guidelines which, among other things, describe the objectives and contents of individual programmes of study.

Upper secondary education is not compulsory, but anyone who has completed compulsory education has the right to enter a course of studies in an upper secondary school. All schools at this level, like other schools in Iceland, are co-educational. Education at upper secondary level is free of charge but students pay an enrolment fee and purchase their textbooks. Students in vocational education pay a part of the cost of materials they use.

Students may enter upper secondary schools at the end of compulsory schooling in the year they turn sixteen. In recent years, around 90% of the students who completed compulsory education have entered upper secondary education directly thereafter; the dropout rate during upper secondary schooling has, however, been considerable.

The law concerning upper secondary education allows for varied admission requirements to different programmes of study at the upper secondary level according to what demands are made by the programme of study in question. However, all students have the right to education at this level. A general programme of study is intended for students who need further preparation to enter academic or vocational programmes of study.

The school year, which lasts for nine months, is divided into autumn and spring terms. Students generally attend 32 to 40 lessons per week, with each lesson lasting 40 minutes.



There are around 40 upper secondary schools, of varying size. The largest schools have around 1,500 students and the smallest fewer than 50.

The main types of upper secondary schools are as follows:

- grammar schools that offer four-year academic programmes of study which conclude with matriculation examinations;
- industrial-vocational schools, which offer theoretical and practical programmes of study in skilled and some non-skilled trades;
- comprehensive schools that provide academic programmes comparable to those of the grammar schools and vocational programmes similar to those offered by the industrial-vocational schools, as well as other specialised vocational training programmes;
- specialised vocational schools which offer programmes of study in preparation for specialised employment.

The Upper Secondary School Act stipulates that there should be four types of programmes of study: academic programmes leading to matriculation, vocational programmes, artistic programmes and a general programme of study. According to the law, all programmes of study can lead to further education.

Upper secondary schools either have traditional classes or forms or operate according to a unit-credit system. In a unit-credit system the educational content of each subject is divided into a number of defined course units which last for one semester. Students in a given course form a group for that course unit and they are given a certain number of credits for each course unit they complete. The unit-credit system allows students to regulate the speed at which they complete their education, i.e. to accelerate their studies or take more time, according to their personal circumstances. The unit-credit system is the most common form of upper secondary education.

Some upper secondary schools have evening classes with programmes comparable to



those of the day school. These classes are intended in particular for adults who are not in a position to attend school in the daytime because of their jobs or work in the home.

Upper secondary schools generally offer educational counselling which, among other things, includes assistance in choosing a programme of study, in organising studies and making a study plan and assistance with study-related problems. Educational counselling also often involves helping students with their personal problems.

## CURRICULUM

The law defines the objectives of upper secondary education as follows:

- to encourage the overall development of students in order to prepare them as well as possible for active participation in a democratic society;
- to prepare students for employment and further study;
- to strive to develop responsibility, broad-mindedness, initiative, self-confidence and tolerance in its students, train them in disciplined and independent work practices and critical thought, instruct them in appreciation of cultural values and encourage them to seek knowledge continuously.

The National Curriculum Guidelines issued by the Minister of Education, Science and Culture is the main guide on school operations. Here, the objectives of upper secondary school are further developed, the objectives of individual programmes of study and subjects are defined and the conclusion of study prescribed. The National Curriculum Guidelines prescribe the structure of individual programmes of study, coherence of study programmes and the normal length of study for each programme. The guidelines determine the minimum number of instructional periods in individual subjects and their general content.

On the basis of the National Curriculum Guidelines, upper secondary schools are to write their own school working guides. School working guides are required, among





other things, to specify what areas individual schools have chosen to emphasise, define the education they offer, their teaching methods and administration.

## GENERAL ACADEMIC EDUCATION

General academic education is primarily organised as a four-year course leading to a matriculation examination. Subjects to be studied are divided into three groups: general subjects that all students are required to take, specialised subjects according to the aims of a particular programme of study, and electives.

According to legislation on upper secondary education, there are to be three academic programmes of study leading to matriculation: foreign languages, natural sciences and social sciences. However, there are possibilities for specialisation within each programme of study. Furthermore there is a shorter general programme of study for students who need further preparation for academic or vocational studies or are undecided as to what to do after compulsory education.

## VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Vocational education is offered in comprehensive schools, industrial-vocational schools and specialised vocational schools. The length of the courses these schools offer varies but the most prevalent are four-year courses. Many forms of vocational training give the students legal certification for certain types of employment. This applies, for example, to studies in the skilled trades.

Within vocational education, students can choose between training for a skilled trade or vocational training in other areas, for example, in the field of fisheries, the travel industry or health and commerce.

Training for a skilled trade takes three to four years. It is comprised of a vocational programme of study at an upper secondary school and a study contract with a master craftsman or an industrial firm. On completion of studies, the apprentice takes a jour-



neyman's examination, that provides the qualifications required to pursue the trade concerned. An apprentice who has completed the journeyman's examination can become a master craftsman after a certain period of work experience and advanced studies at a vocational school. A master craftsman has the right to supervise work in his field.

Students in vocational programmes have the possibility of doing additional studies in preparation for study at the higher education level and complete the matriculation examination.

Handicapped students are to be provided with instruction and training according to their needs and to be given special support in their studies. Where possible, they are to be integrated into mainstream education and do, for the most part, attend a regular class and follow the same subjects as other students, but with special assistance.

The law concerning upper secondary schools contains provisions in respect to special teaching in Icelandic for those students whose first language is not Icelandic. It also provides for special instruction in Icelandic for Icelandic students who have lived abroad for long periods of time and for deaf students.

## ASSESSMENT

Icelandic upper secondary schools generally have examinations at the end of every semester regardless of the type of school. Certain courses have no final examination at the end of the semester and the grade is based on continuous assessment and on the assignments set.

For the skilled trades, there are journeyman's examinations which are the responsibility of the trade in question. According to the law, occupational councils make proposals concerning assessment in vocational training, including the journeyman's examination.

Apart from the journeyman's examination, nationally co-ordinated examinations in



upper secondary education have not been practised. Examinations have been the responsibility of each school. According to the current law on upper secondary education, nationally co-ordinated final examinations in certain subjects are to be introduced. This provision will come into effect in the school year 2003-2004.

The law on upper secondary education stipulates that upper secondary schools are to evaluate their educational work. This evaluation includes, among other things, teaching, administration and communication within the school. Each school's methods of self-evaluation are to be assessed externally every five years.

## TEACHERS

Upper secondary teachers of academic subjects shall have completed at least four full years of university education. At least two of these should be in a major subject and one year should be devoted to the study of education and instructional methodology. Teachers who hold a higher qualification in their teaching subject(s) than described above only need one semester's study of education and instructional methodology. Teachers of vocational subjects or other technical subjects at a vocational school must be qualified in the field in which they teach or be a master craftsman in the trade in question and have, in addition, a minimum of two years' experience working in the trade. They also are required to have completed a one-year programme of study in education and instructional methodology.

A variety of in-service training courses are offered annually.

Teachers are paid by the state although they are hired by individual schools to teach the subject(s) in which they have specialised.





## HIGHER EDUCATION

### GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The Icelandic higher education system dates back to the foundation the University of Iceland. There are currently eight higher education institutions in Iceland. The University of Iceland (est. 1911) remains the principal institution of higher learning in Iceland, but over the last three decades new institutions of higher education have emerged with a more specialized focus, providing greater diversity at the higher education level.

Legislation on higher education institutions enacted in 1997 establishes the general framework for the activities of these institutions. In this Act, the term "háskóli" is used to refer both to traditional universities and institutions which do not carry out research. Separate legislation for each public higher education institution, and the charters of privately run universities, define their engagement in research, internal organisation, etc. Public and private higher education institutions receive individual appropriations from the state budget.

The administration of each public university is entrusted to the Senate, the rector, faculty meetings, faculty councils and deans, if the university is divided into faculties. The Senate issues final rulings in the affairs of the university and its institutions, formulates their overall policy and furthers their development.

The Senate is the supreme decision-making body in each institution unless otherwise provided for explicitly in relevant act.

The state draws up performance-related contracts with all higher education institutions, defining how the institution intends to achieve its objectives and what the government's financial contribution shall be.

Icelandic students have a long tradition of studying abroad for their higher education. About 16 percent of Icelandic students in higher education study abroad, most of them in post-graduate studies.



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## TYPES OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Presently there are eight institutions of higher education in the country. Most of the institutions of higher education are run by the state. Private parties with state support run three institutions. Institutions of higher education differ in the extent to which they engage in research and the number of programmes of study offered.

Of the eight higher education institutions, the University of Iceland is the largest. It has 11 faculties. These are: humanities, economics and business administration, engineering, law, medicine, pharmacy, nursing, natural sciences, odontology, social sciences and theology.

The University of Akureyri has five faculties: health sciences, business management studies, fishery studies, teacher education and information technology.

The Iceland University of Education is responsible for education of teachers at the pre-school and compulsory school levels, as well as physical education and developmental therapy.

The Icelandic College of Engineering and Technology offers programmes in management, civil and electrical engineering technology, laboratory and radiology technology.

The Hvanneyri Agricultural University offers a two-year programme leading to a diploma in agronomy, and with an additional year in order to obtain a BS degree.

The Bifröst School of Business is a private university institution that offers programmes in business administration. The university is divided into three departments: business and management, business law and distance learning. In addition, the university operates a preparatory department.

The Reykjavík University is a private institution with three faculties: computer science, jura and business administration.

The Iceland Academy of the Arts is a private institution and has four departments: design, visual arts, drama and music.



Most of the higher education institutions offer distance learning courses in some areas of study.

## ADMISSION

In general, for admission to institutions at the higher education level students must have passed the matriculation examination or its equivalent. In some cases applicants with substantial work experience who have not completed their matriculation examination may be admitted. For vocational and technical courses in higher education institutions, practical experience in an appropriate field of study is usually required.

The legislation on higher education institutions of 1997 includes provisions for all higher education institutions to set their own admission criteria. Admission may also be granted to students who have completed studies abroad which ensure sufficient preparation for university studies and are equivalent to the Icelandic matriculation examination. Institutions of higher education may also grant admission to students who have completed other studies in Iceland.

Registration of first year students usually takes place from late May until early June. The application deadline for foreign students, other than students from the Nordic countries, is 15 March of the year in which they wish to commence their studies. Some institutions also admit new students for the spring semester.

## FEES/STUDENT FINANCE

There are no tuition fees at state-run Icelandic institutions of higher education, only registration fees. Privately run higher education institutions charge tuition fees.

Students attending institutions of higher education are eligible for student loans from the Icelandic Student Loan Fund. The total loan received per annum depends upon the income of the student and his/her spouse, as appropriate. Repayments commence two years after completion or discontinuation of studies.



In accordance with the EEA Agreement, individuals from the European Union member states and the EEA-EFTA countries (Iceland, Norway and Liechtenstein), who have worked at their trade or profession in Iceland for at least one year, are entitled to apply for a loan. Students from the Nordic countries, who are permanent residents in Iceland and are registered at an Icelandic institution of higher education, are also eligible for student loans if they are not supported financially by their own country. The Icelandic Student Loan Fund may grant loans to other foreign students if reciprocity agreements have been concluded between their countries of origin and Iceland.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture annually offers a limited number of scholarships to foreign students to pursue studies in Icelandic language and literature at the University of Iceland.

Grants are available for post-graduate, research-oriented studies at universities in Iceland. The grants are awarded on the basis of a research proposal submitted jointly by a student and professor. The respective university faculty must also approve the research proposal.

## ACADEMIC YEAR

In most institutions of higher education the academic year lasts from September to May and is divided into two semesters, autumn and spring. The autumn semester generally starts at the beginning of September and lasts until late December. The spring semester lasts from early January until the end of May.

## QUALIFICATIONS

### Diploma Courses

In a number of higher education institutions a diploma or certificate is awarded after one and a half or two-year study in various subjects such as pedagogy, business and languages.





### First University Degrees

A *BA* degree is awarded to students who have completed 3 to 4 years of study in a degree course in the fields of humanities, theology, social sciences, visual arts and design and who have satisfactorily completed the required final thesis or research project.

A *BS* degree is awarded to students who have completed 3 to 4 years of study in a degree course in the fields of economics, business administration, natural sciences, health sciences, fishery studies, agricultural science, computer science or engineering and who have completed the final thesis or research project.

A *BEd* degree is awarded to students who have completed 3 years of study for pre-school teachers, compulsory school teachers and in developmental therapy. The *BEd* degree represents professional teacher certification at the respective school level.

A *BFA* degree is awarded to students who have completed 4 years study of drama.

A *BMus* degree is awarded to students who have completed 3 years study of music.

A *BPhIsl* degree (Baccalaureatus Philologiae Islandicae) is awarded to foreign students on completion of a programme in Icelandic language, literature and history offered at the University of Iceland. This degree is on the same level as the *BA* degree.

*Candidatus* degrees are offered only at the University of Iceland and qualify the holder for a special office or profession. It is an academic/professional degree in the fields of theology, medicine, pharmacy, law, economics, business administration, engineering and dentistry.

### Postgraduate Degrees

Some higher education institutions offer one- or two-year programmes of study after the bachelor degree leading to postgraduate certificates in various subjects such as education, social work, journalism and mass communication.

Students who have completed graduate courses leading to a Master's degree are



awarded an MA, MBA, MEd, MPA, MPaed, or MSc, degree. Similar courses for midwives and psychologists are recognised with the degrees Cand. obst. and Cand. psych.

Doctoral programmes are offered at the University of Iceland and the Iceland University of Education.

## SPECIAL ASSISTANCE FOR STUDENTS

Student counselling centres are operated at Icelandic higher education institutions. Counselling centres provide counselling for students regarding their choice of programmes and organisation of their studies, as well as individual problems.

Higher education institutions accept students with disabilities and handle the task in a variety of ways, however, no legislation deals with special needs or disabled students in higher education. At this level, guidance counsellors diagnose and help individual students asking for assistance.

Some higher education institutions have an official policy on how to meet students' special needs, such as dyslexia, physical disabilities and psychological problems.

## ASSESSMENT

Student assessment is usually based on written or oral examinations and individual assignments. University degrees are only awarded after students have written a final thesis or completed a research project.

According to a regulation from 1999 regarding quality control of university instruction, universities are to set up a formal internal quality evaluation system. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture takes the initiative to conduct an external evaluation of higher education programmes or institutions and is also responsible for approving new degrees.



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## TEACHERS

According to the Universities Act of 1997 university instructors must have completed at least a Master's degree or have equivalent knowledge and experience.

The forms of appointment for legally qualified university teachers are as follows:

a) permanent appointment, b) indeterminate appointment, c) temporary appointment.

In addition to those teachers who have a formal contract of employment, there are sessional teachers at most institutions.





## ADULT EDUCATION

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### GENERAL DESCRIPTION

No comprehensive legislation applies to adult education in Iceland. The Upper Secondary School Act of 1996, however, covers several aspects of adult education, such as evening classes for adults and lifelong learning centres. The funding of evening classes and distance learning programmes at the upper secondary level, as well as of lifelong learning centres, is determined in the annual state budget, but students pay part of the cost of tuition.

On the basis of laws on individual higher education institutions, these institutions may offer distance learning programmes for adults and run continuing education institutions. Students in distance learning programmes pay enrolment fees, but there are tuition fees for participation in continuing education programmes.

A few municipalities organise evening schools for adults. These schools receive financial support from the local community in question but have to rely on tuition fees to make up the rest of their costs.

A variety of adult education courses is offered by private schools, companies and associations.

Trade unions, companies or institutions may pay tuition fees for those members or employees who participate in various adult education courses or programmes.

### ADULT EDUCATION BODIES

According to the above-mentioned law on upper secondary education, schools at that level are allowed to offer special programmes, including evening classes, for mature pupils (18 years or older) who are unable to avail themselves of regular instruction within the upper secondary schools but wish to complete studies comparable to the programmes offered by them. These programmes offered to adults include both academic programmes leading to matriculation examination and vocational programmes leading to other qualifications. The law also permits anyone who has turned 18 to take individual courses during regular school hours.



Lifelong learning centres provide courses and counselling for a particular geographical region in the country. Eight lifelong learning centres have been established, with one in each of the main regions of the country. They co-operate with schools at upper secondary and higher education level and with municipalities, employers' and employees' organisations and private enterprises. A part of the courses are offered as distance learning courses. Lifelong learning centres offer courses in Icelandic for adult immigrants.

Distance learning courses are increasingly being offered in schools at the upper secondary and higher education levels, for example, at the College of Vocational Training in Akureyri, the University of Iceland, the Reykjavík University and the University of Akureyri.

The Iceland University of Education organises a four-year basic teacher training programme for adults in such a way that students have the chance to attend school as well as being employed part-time. The school offers a mixture of distance learning and direct teaching. Students complete a pre-school or a compulsory school teacher training programme giving them full qualifications.

The Institute of Continuing Education of the University of Iceland offers a variety of courses for adults, such as a three-semester course in business administration, a one-year course for administrators of fishing and fish processing firms, a two-year course in real estate assessment and a two-year course in family therapy, health economy and administration of health institutions. In addition, this institution offers a wide variety of courses, both occupationally and hobby-related.

The evening schools run by the municipalities offer a variety of courses, such as language courses, hobby-related courses, and courses for employees that relate to their work. They may also offer compulsory level courses, preparatory courses for upper secondary schools and even some upper secondary level courses.

A few private schools, most of them in the capital area, offer courses for adults in different areas such as in ICT, languages and hobby-related courses.



## WEBSITES

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The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture:  
[www.menntamalaraduneyti.is](http://www.menntamalaraduneyti.is)

Educational Gateway:  
[www.menntagatt.is](http://www.menntagatt.is)

Educational Testing Institute:  
[www.namsmatsstofnun.is](http://www.namsmatsstofnun.is)

National Center for Educational Materials:  
[www.namsgagnastofnun.is](http://www.namsgagnastofnun.is)

University of Iceland:  
[www.hi.is](http://www.hi.is)

University of Akureyri:  
[www.unak.is](http://www.unak.is)

Iceland University of Education:  
[www.khi.is](http://www.khi.is)

Icelandic College of Engineering and Technology:  
[www.ti.is](http://www.ti.is)

Hvanneyri Agricultural University:  
[www.hvanneyri.is](http://www.hvanneyri.is)

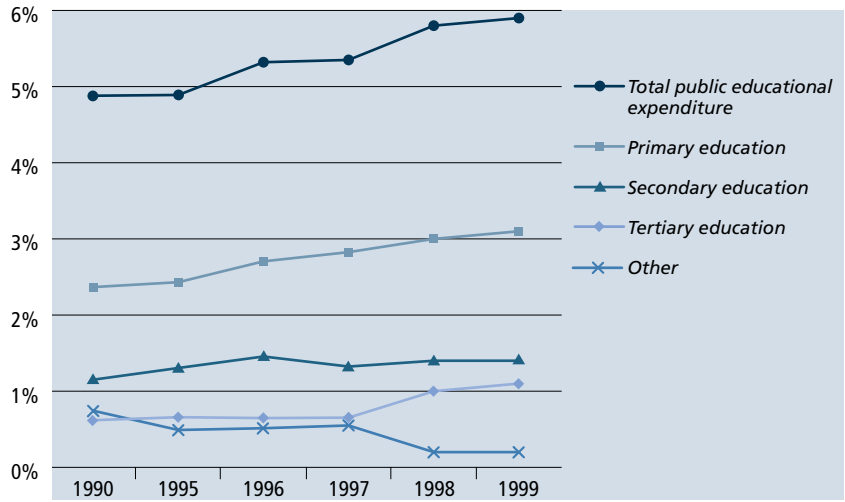
Bifröst School of Business:  
[www.bifrost.is](http://www.bifrost.is)

Reykjavík University:  
[www.ru.is](http://www.ru.is)

Iceland Academy of the Arts:  
[www.lhi.is](http://www.lhi.is)

The Office of International Education:  
[www.ask.hi.is](http://www.ask.hi.is)

**FIGURE 1**  
**PUBLIC EXPENDITURE ON EDUCATION AS PROPORTION**  
**OF GDP, 1990-1999**



Source: National Economic Institute

**TABLE 2**  
**NUMBER OF SCHOOLS AT COMPULSORY, UPPER SECONDARY AND HIGHER**  
**EDUCATION LEVEL AND STUDENT PROPORTION BY SCHOOL SIZE, 2000/2001**

Size of schools	Compulsory		Upper secondary		Higher	
	Number of schools	% of all schools	Number of schools	% of all schools	Number of schools	% of all schools
Less than 50	49	3	6	0,5	0	0
51-100	29	5	2	0,5	1	1
101-200	29	10	5	4	1	2
201-400	32	21	3	5	1	2
401-600	42	46	6	16	0	0
601-800	8	13	6	23	3	18
801-1000	1	2	1	5	0	0
More than 1000	0	0	6	46	2	77
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>190</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Statistics Iceland, 2001

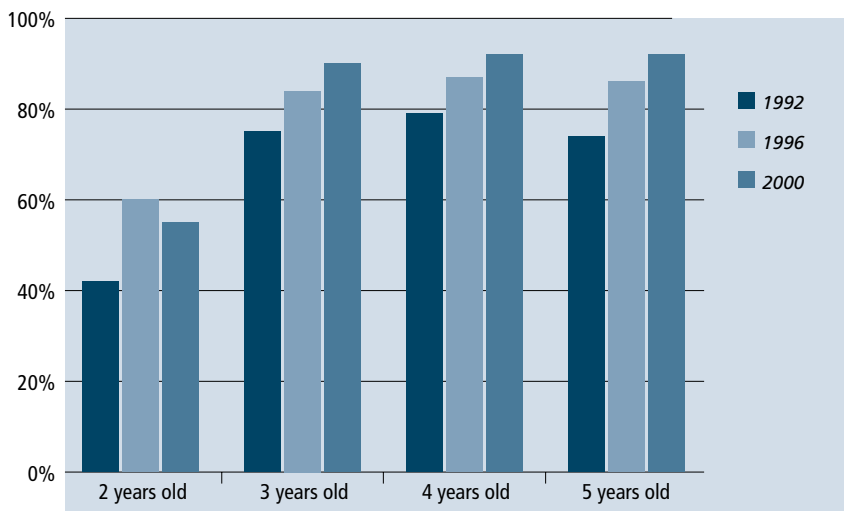
**TABLE 3**  
**NUMBER OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS, TEACHERS AND**  
**INSTRUCTORS BY GENDER AND SCHOOL LEVEL, 1999**

	Number			% of total	
	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male
<b>Pre-school level</b>	3194	48	3242	98,5	1,5
School Head	257	3	260	98,8	1,2
School Head Assist.	181	1	182	99,5	0,5
Teacher	731	9	740	98,8	1,2
Instructor	2025	35	2060	98,3	1,7
<b>Compulsory school level</b>	3107	1089	4196	74,0	26,0
School Head	66	124	190	34,7	65,3
School Head Assist.	78	64	142	54,9	45,1
Teacher	2478	699	3177	78,0	22,0
Instructor	485	202	687	70,6	29,4
<b>Upper secondary level</b>	485	654	1139	42,6	57,4
School Head	8	30	38	21,1	78,9
School Head Assist.	3	24	27	11,1	88,9
Teacher	474	600	1074	44,1	55,9
<b>Higher education level</b>	585	766	1351	43,3	56,7
Rector	2	10	12	16,7	83,3
Vice-chancellor	3	3	6	50,0	50,0
Professor	14	148	162	8,6	91,4
Associate professor	41	115	156	26,3	73,7
Lecturer	67	68	135	49,6	50,4
Sessional Teacher	458	422	880	52,0	48,0

Source: Statistics Iceland, 2001

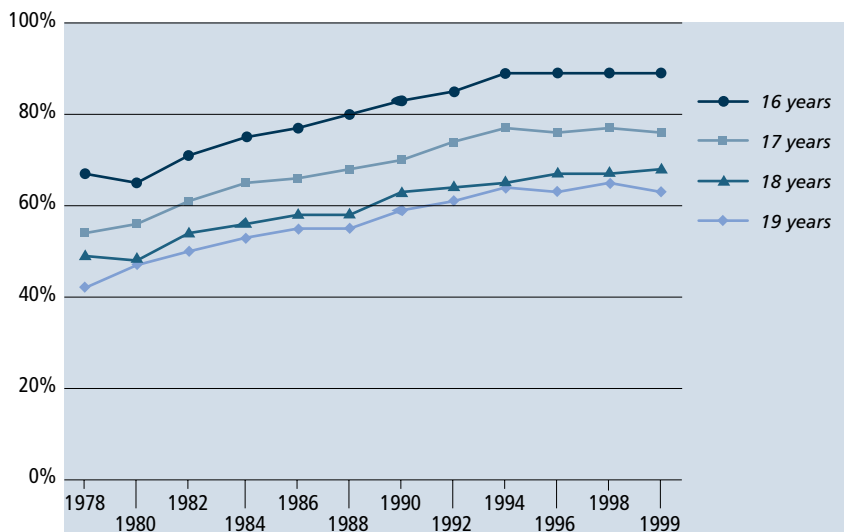


**FIGURE 2**  
**PROPORTION OF CHILDREN IN PRE-SCHOOLS BY AGE, 1992-2000**



Source: Statistics Iceland

**FIGURE 3**  
**ENROLMENT RATES OF COHORTS AGED 16-19 YEARS, 1978-1999**



Source: Statistics Iceland

**TABLE 4**

PROPORTION OF STUDENTS AT UPPER SECONDARY LEVEL BY LINE OF STUDY AND GENDER, 1980-2000

	1980			1990			2000		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
General programmes	12	12	12	14	14	13	15	14	16
Languages	7	3	12	9	4	15	8	4	13
Fine and applied arts	2	2	3	4	2	5	5	2	7
Pedagogical and physical progr.	9	4	15	6	3	10	3	2	2
Social science	4	4	5	8	5	12	16	12	20
Commerce, economics	15	13	18	14	14	15	10	10	10
Natural sciences	14	16	11	15	16	14	19	20	19
Crafts and technical trades	25	44	3	21	36	4	17	32	3
Agriculture, food and service trades	4	4	4	6	6	6	5	4	6
Health-related programmes	8	0	17	3	0	5	2	0	4
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Statistics Iceland, 2001

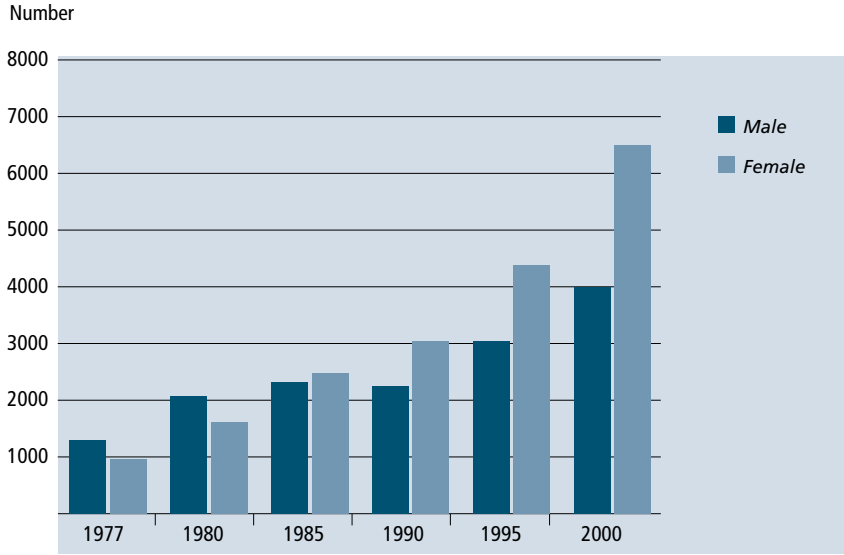
**TABLE 5**

STUDENTS PASSING MATRICULATION EXAMINATION 1979/1980 TO 1999/2000 AS PERCENTAGE OF 20-YEAR-OLDS, BY GENDER

Year	Men	Women	Total
1979-80	21,8	28,6	25,1
1989-90	34,4	55,4	44,7
1999-00	35,4	57,8	46,4

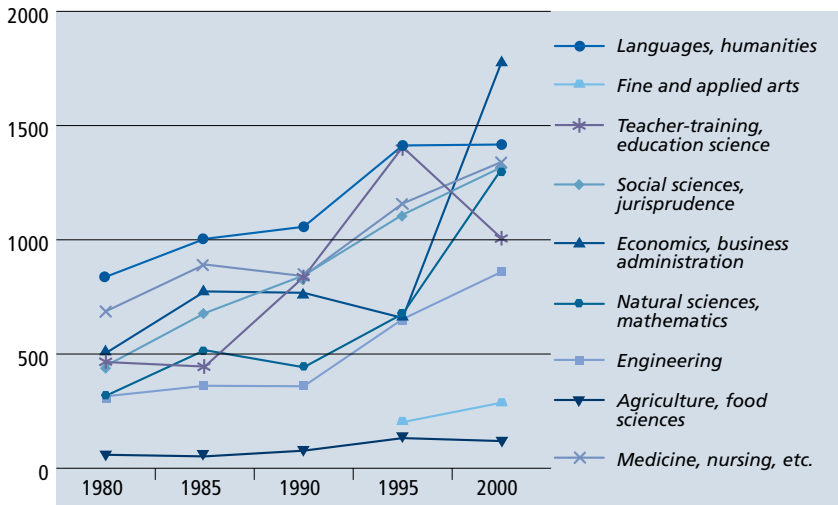
Source: Statistics Iceland

**FIGURE 4**  
**NUMBER OF STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION BY GENDER, 1977-2000**



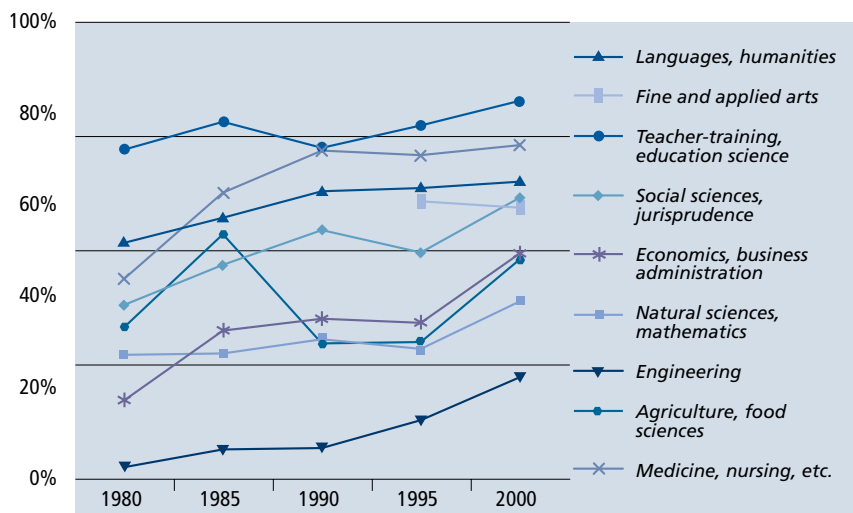
Source: Statistics Iceland

**FIGURE 5**  
**NUMBER OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS BY FIELDS, 1980-2000**



Source: Statistics Iceland

**FIGURE 6**  
**PROPORTION OF FEMALES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**  
**BY FIELDS, 1980-2000**



Source: Statistics Iceland

**TABLE 6**  
**ENROLMENT RATES IN EDUCATION OF**  
**AGE COHORTS 20-29 YEARS, 2000**

Age	Men %	Women %	Total %
20	50	50	50
21	45	48	47
22	44	47	45
23	38	46	42
24	32	40	36
25	28	33	31
26	25	27	26
27	20	22	21
28	16	19	18
29	11	17	14

Source: Statistics Iceland, 2001

**TABLE 7**  
**NUMBER OF STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**  
**BY INSTITUTION AND GENDER, AUTUMN 2000**

	Total	Men	Women
University of Iceland	6.670	2.621	4.049
University of Akureyri	649	148	501
Reykjavík University	643	371	272
Iceland University of Education	1.263	197	1.066
Hvanneyri Agricultural University	92	44	48
Iceland Academy of the Arts	233	83	150
Icelandic College of Engineering and Technology	630	390	240
Bifröst School of Business	177	103	74
Studying abroad	1.706	899	807

Source: Statistics Iceland, 2001

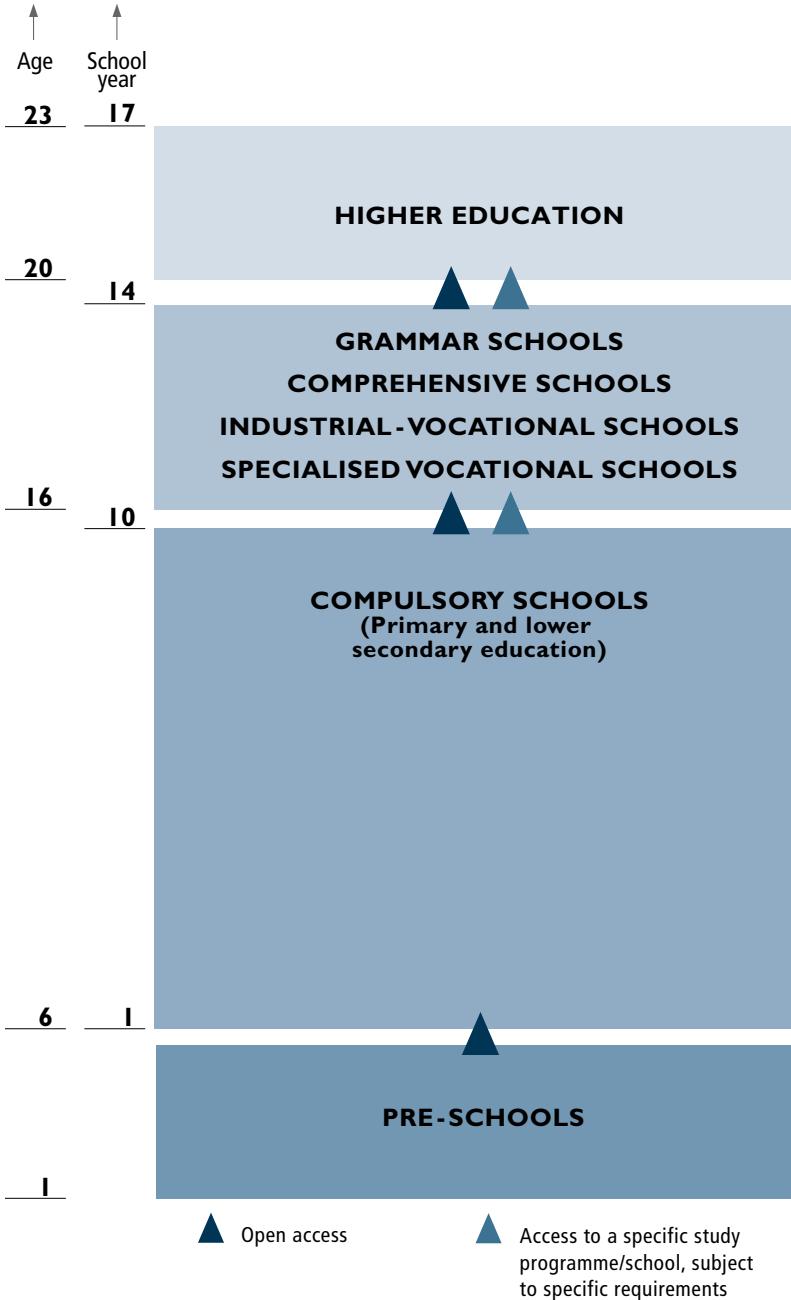
**TABLE 8**  
**NUMBER OF DISTANCE LEARNING**  
**STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**  
**BY INSTITUTION, AUTUMN 2001**

Distance learning courses	Number of students
University of Iceland	150
University of Akureyri	258
Reykjavík University	108
Iceland University of Education	508
Hvanneyri Agricultural University	26
Bifröst School of Business	51
<b>Total</b>	<b>1.101</b>

Source: Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2001



# THE ICELANDIC SCHOOL SYSTEM





MENNTAMÁLARÁÐUNEYTIÐ

Ministry of Education, Science and Culture

2002