
IMPLEMENTING EUROPEAN PRIORITIES IN VET

Making national VET agile,
flexible, innovative, attractive,
inclusive and quality assured

ICELAND



Implementing European priorities in VET

Making national VET agile, flexible, innovative, attractive,
inclusive and quality assured:
Iceland

Thematic perspectives provide national overviews of specific themes in a common format and offer comparative dimension across the EU Member States, Iceland and Norway.

This thematic perspectives series complements the general information on vocational education and training (VET) policies and systems provided in [VET in Europe database](#) and the [Timeline of VET policies in Europe](#). The themes presented in the series feature high on the European agenda.

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CHAPTER 1. Introduction

Iceland is a country with a population of 394 000 where national and international developments are closely intertwined. Iceland is a non-EU member country; however, it maintains close cooperation with Europe through, among other means, the [Agreement on the European Economic Area](#) (EEA). Another closely related process is connected with vocational education and the follow-up on the [Osnabrück Declaration](#).

Iceland's [National Implementation Plan](#) (NIP) includes the national vision guiding Iceland's efforts to align with the EU priorities in this area.

[Vocational education and training in Iceland](#) is based on the [Act No 92/2008 on Upper Secondary Education](#) and the National Curriculum Guide for Upper Secondary Schools. The act and the curriculum guide frame all the policy work and the preparation of all plans and their implementation. In addition, an [Education Policy 2030](#) is being implemented.

The motto of Icelandic Education Policy 2030 is 'Outstanding education for life'. The education policy is based on five pillars that support its value: equal opportunities for all; leading teaching; skills for the future; well-being, and quality

Upper secondary education is not compulsory, but anyone who has completed compulsory education has the right to enter an upper secondary school. Students are usually between 16 and 20 years of age. General academic education is primarily organised as a three-year course leading to a matriculation examination. The length of the courses in vocational education varies, lasting from one semester to ten, but three-year VET courses are the most prevalent ones.

Almost all VET is offered at upper secondary level (ISQF 3/ EQF4), where studies at school and workplace learning settings form an integral part. Study programmes vary in length from 1 school year to 4 years of combined school and workplace learning. Enterprises responsible for training need official certification and training agreements with both the learner and the school, stipulating the objectives, time and evaluation of the training. Most learners in workplace learning receive salaries, at an increasing percentage of fully qualified workers' salaries (Cedefop, 2021).

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

A few VET programmes are available at post-secondary non-tertiary level (ISQF 4/EQF 5), including tourist guides and captains at the highest level. Certificates for all master craftsmen are also awarded at this level. These programmes last 1 to 2 years and lead to qualifications giving professional rights.

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

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

attend further general education to qualify.

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

Upper secondary schools need to submit descriptions of new study programmes to the education ministry. Approved programmes become part of the National Curriculum Guide. When formulating ideas for new study programmes, schools cooperate closely with occupation councils, which form the link between the ministry and the labour market ⁽¹⁾.

Iceland has one of the highest lifelong learning participation rates among those aged 25 to 64 in Europe: 26,7% in 2022, increasing from 20.3% in 2020. Participation in lifelong learning has become higher than it was before the Covid 19 pandemic.

Adult learning is available in upper secondary schools (day classes or special adult evening classes), 11 lifelong learning centres, training centres owned and operated by social partners for skilled workers in certain trades, and in numerous private training institutions. Two institutions owned by employer and employee organisations offer courses for journeymen and masters of trades in the latest technology. For the healthcare sector, retraining courses are offered by universities and there are specific training institutions for several professions. Labour agreements reached in 2000 established specific training funds for employees; both employees and employers pay a certain percentage of all salaries into these funds and both parties can apply for funding towards training ⁽²⁾.

The [Fund for internship in Vocational Education](#) in Iceland also provides grants to companies and institutions for workplace learning and vocational training, which is a defined part of vocational training according to the secondary school's main curriculum. Workplace learning depends on the provisions of the law on secondary schools ⁽³⁾.

CHAPTER 2. Main policy developments in 2023

2.1 Resilience and excellence through quality, inclusive, and flexible VET

According to the Osnabrück Declaration, VET excellence at all qualification levels, including higher European Qualification Framework (EQF) levels, will become increasingly important to maintaining employability. The declaration also sets out the relationship between innovation in VET and new skills, curricula, education methodologies and forecasting tools.

Regarding steps taken at national level, see Chapter 4, Achievements of implementation with examples of actions taken to improve learning environments.

2.2 Sustainability – a green link in VET

According to the Osnabrück Declaration, companies, private sector organisations and societal initiatives are major drivers of sustainability in the economy and society at large, together with initiatives to create incentives for greening VET programmes. Examples of steps taken at national level.

As a member of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)

⁽¹⁾ <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/iceland-u2>

⁽²⁾ <https://hagstofa.is/utgafur/frettasafn/menntun/simenntun-2022/> Nov.16 2023 - <https://statice.is/>

⁽³⁾ <https://www.althingi.is/lagas/nuna/2008092.html>

and other related agreements, in 2023, Iceland, along with the Ministry of Education and Children, encouraged entities operating within the school environment to emphasise environmental and climate issues when drafting or revising curricula for learners, including those in vocational education and training.

VET curricula and digital training logbooks were reviewed in 2023. When reviewing job descriptions and competence requirements, not only are technical changes in jobs considered, but also environmental issues, feeding into the national curricula. As of 2024, a new competence requirement concerning sustainability and environmental issues has been added to all job descriptions and competence requirements.

School curricula in VET schools and digital workplace training logbooks are primarily based on job descriptions and competence requirements. This approach effectively integrates necessary knowledge and skills directly into both educational and workplace content. As a result, when job descriptions and competence requirements are written or updated, reviewing them through this method has become a widely accepted practice across various professions ⁽⁴⁾.

CHAPTER 3. Involvement of VET stakeholders in the implementation of policy developments related to NIP

In line with the Osnabrück recommendations, the social partners and relevant stakeholders are involved at all levels of VET development and implementation. The following organisations are key stakeholders from the business community and serve as the ministry's primary contacts with companies and workplaces that host trainees in vocational training programmes: The Federation of Icelandic Industries (umbrella association of Icelandic employers), RAFMENNT Electrical VET Centre, and IDAN Education Centre, play a pivotal role in guiding companies during the development of new projects or approaches, such as the introduction of logbooks. Additionally, these entities maintain essential communication with schools regarding students who are participating in internships.

For examples of involvement and implementation of VET stakeholders, see Chapter 4, Achievements of implementation.

CHAPTER 4. Achievements of implementation

Achievements of the work carried out in Iceland are in line with the commonly agreed objectives set in the [Council Recommendation on VET](#) and the [Osnabrück Declaration](#), and with Iceland's NIP.

Iceland, with its future vision in vocational education and training and its NIP, is responding specifically to the first objective of the Osnabrück Declaration of achieving VET resilience and excellence through quality, inclusive and flexible VET.

Increased capital has been earmarked for extensions to all secondary school buildings that offer vocational education that will be built in the next five to six years to accommodate the increase in the number of students expected to undertake apprenticeships. The decision was

⁽⁴⁾On 24 April 2024, an amendment to the law was approved. [1321/154 lög í heild: háskólar | Þingtöðindi | Alþingi \(althingi.is\)](#)

announced by Ásmundur Einar Daðason, minister for education and children on 2 March 2023. According to a report by the Ministry of Education and Children from 2023 ⁽⁵⁾ on the number of students in secondary schools, the number of those who will choose vocational education in the next ten years is expected to rise from 33.5% in 2023 to 42.5% in 2033. The report is based on the 2023 population forecast of Statistics Iceland for the years 2023-2033 ⁽⁶⁾. The initial state cost of the buildings is ISK 6.6 billion, partly shared by the municipalities to an amount of ISK 2.6 billion ⁽⁷⁾.

This NIP objective is among other means implemented through a new regulation on workplace training and the introduction and development of the digital logbook. Following changes of regulation on workplace learning in upper secondary schools no. 180/2021⁸, labour market representatives in Iceland formed an alliance in 2022 for the establishment of an organisation called the Apprentice Centre. Its purpose is to be a forum for improved workplace training and increased numbers of skilled tradespeople in the labour market. The goal of the organisation is to increase the number of businesses and master tradesmen willing to make apprenticeship contracts and offer workplace training. Furthermore, in addition to the effective promotion of vocational education and training, to assist businesses and master tradesmen in maintaining quality standards and providing targeted education and training for apprentices in the workplace.

The role of the Apprentice Centre is to:

- (a) encourage businesses to register on a list of enterprises licenced to take apprentices and assist them as needed;
- (b) maintain an oversight of the number of apprentices in training and estimate future needs and requirements;
- (c) offer education and training for master tradesmen and mentors receiving apprentices to advance their training skills and the use of digital logbooks;
- (d) be a forum for discussion concerning projects and tasks inherent in workplace training, including the content of digital logbooks;
- (e) organize events and conferences on workplace learning and award outstanding businesses for their work with apprentices;
- (f) promote vocational education and training and the wide range of job opportunities in the industry;
- (g) work on projects agreed on by contract with the Ministry of Education and Children.

The Apprentice Centre is owned equally by IDAN Education Centre and RAFMENNT Electrical VET Centre on behalf of the companies and members who support the respective associations. With this new initiative, the framework of workplace learning has improved significantly. The number of freshmen increased considerably between the years 2022 (697) and 2023 (878). In 2024, the number of freshmen is expected to be a total of 900, and there seems to be little indication that it will decrease in the next three years. In licensed trades, 78% of apprentices are men and 22% are women ⁽⁹⁾.

⁽⁵⁾ <https://www.stjornarradid.is/library/01--Frettatengt---myndir-og-skrar/MRN/greinargerd-husnaedistharfir-framhaldsskola-MRN-020323.pdf>

⁽⁶⁾ <https://hagstofa.is/utgafur/frettasafn/mannfjoldaspa/mannfjoldaspa-2023/>

⁽⁷⁾ <https://www.visir.is/g/20232384594d/byggja-vid-alla-tha-fram-halds-skola-sem-sinna-verk-nami>

⁽⁸⁾ <https://island.is/reglugerdir/nr/0180-2021>

⁽⁹⁾ Information on the role of the Apprentice Centre and statistics on apprenticeship contracts www.nemastofa.is

On 1 April 2024, a reformed educational institution, The Directorate of Education and School Services ⁽¹⁰⁾, was formally opened. A bill for the law regarding this new institution had been approved by the Parliament on 8 December 2023 ⁽¹¹⁾. The Directorate of Education and School Services promotes excellence in education and the well-being of all children and young people. It does this through strong support and targeted services to preschools, elementary schools and secondary schools throughout the country. The Directorate of Education and School Services administers and oversees the Occupational Councils.

The main role of the Occupational Councils is to:

- (a) provide advice to the Minister of Education on matters of vocational education at secondary school level, give him feedback on curriculum descriptions that schools seek confirmation of;
- (b) make proposals about the general objectives of the study and define the needs for skills and competences on which the course descriptions are based;
- (c) make proposals about the final goals of the study. Set criteria for the division of studies at school and at the workplace and make proposals about the structure and content of tests in individual professions;
- (d) maintain a register of companies and workplaces that meet the requirements for workplace learning;
- (e) make proposals for study programme descriptions for individual study programmes.

Course descriptions in vocational training are based on job descriptions and qualification requirements defined by the Occupational Councils. The Councils also provide feedback on vocational course descriptions for which schools apply for confirmation ⁽¹²⁾

CHAPTER 5. Challenges of implementation

The main challenges in the field of VET that Iceland addresses in its NIP and in relation to Objective 1 of the Osnabrück Declaration are the following.

Promoting vocational education and training in primary schools

Technical and vocationally educated people play a key role in the dynamic of society. The number of learners in technical education has for years been significantly low and the shortage of young people with vocational and technical education is a fact.

Increasing the number of vocational students, especially in small professions

It has also for a long time been a challenge in Iceland to increase the number of students in the so-called small-scale industries, where there is a lack of professionals, and few have been educated in the field for a long time. The aim is to introduce these industries to prospective students in vocational education.

Improve learning conditions in vocational schools

In the aforementioned report of the ministry ⁽¹³⁾, an assessment was made of the facilities and

⁽¹⁰⁾ <https://island.is/en/o/directorate-of-education-and-school-services/about-the-directorate-of-education-and-school-services>

⁽¹¹⁾ <https://www.althingi.is/thingstorf/thingmalin/atkvaedagreidslur/?btim=2023-12-08+15:19:57&etim=2023-12-08+15:29:34>

⁽¹²⁾ <https://mms.is/starfsgreinarad>

⁽¹³⁾ <https://www.stjornarradid.is/library/01--Frettatengt---myndir-og-skrar/MRN/greinargerd-husnaedistharfir-framhaldsskola-MRN-020323.pdf>

the vocational school buildings. A new building for the country's largest vocational school is already at implementation stage. Three or four other schools will have an extension or extra buildings, which are much needed as the demand for vocational education is increasing rapidly. In 2023, the government already approved the financing of this new building which will house a national technical school. Financing for another 3-4 technical school extension buildings await the results of the government's budget proposal, expected to be agreed by the parliament before the end of 2024.

Increase the number of vocational education and training places/placements

The business community, including the Confederation of Icelandic Enterprise (SA) ⁽¹⁴⁾ support the task of increasing the number of companies that take on apprenticeships. (*See Achievement above: Apprentice centre*)

Increase the number of companies that accept interns for in-the-job training

The main challenge here concerns the smallest crafts, with few entities and mainly sole proprietors. It has proven difficult for them to commit to receive learners for a long-term internship. The consequence is that trainees may then have to move between three workplaces to achieve the required training.

The above challenges must also be accompanied by a systematic increase in the number of qualified vocational teachers. This will be the next task in response to the increase in students, which has immediately become visible in the applications received by vocational schools (see increased number of apprenticeships in Chapter 4 above).

In the 2030 Education Policy ⁽¹⁵⁾ continued emphasis is placed on teacher recruitment and teacher education. In the first action plan of the education policy, it is stated that the number of new students in teacher training must be increased, their dropout from education must be stopped and it must be promoted that newly graduated teachers see a future in working in the country's schools ⁽¹⁶⁾.

CHAPTER 6. Conclusions

Iceland is following up on the priorities of the Osnabrück Declaration by implementing activities put forward in the National Implementation Plan especially regarding Article 3, Improvement of learning conditions in vocational schools.

The general procedure and service to VET-learners has been greatly improved with improved registrations for workplace training, both by workplaces and companies that are ready to take interns for training.

Recent legislative developments on 21 March 2024 have enabled short-term studies to contribute European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credits towards formal degrees. Nevertheless, there remains a pressing need for increased dialogue between educational systems and the labour market on the establishment and definition of micro credentials within Iceland.

Real competence validation/accreditation of prior learning is a system organised by the social

⁽¹⁴⁾ <http://old.sa.is/sa-confederation-of-icelandic-enterprise>

⁽¹⁵⁾ *Education Policy 2030 (Iceland's 2030 education strategy)*:
<https://www.stjornarradid.is/verkefni/menntamal/menntastefna/>

⁽¹⁶⁾ <https://www.stjornarradid.is/verkefni/menntamal/adgerdir-i-menntalum/fjolgum-kennurum-adgerdir-i-menntalum/>

partners and the education ministry to validate non-formal and informal learning. People who have acquired some skills at the workplaces, for example, can get them validated through a formal process, which may shorten their study periods towards a journeyman's examination in a trade, for example. They also get valuable assistance (counselling and study aid) if they have dyslexia, for example, or other learning problems. Real competence validations are available in several trades.

In Iceland, there is already a link between the multi-annual national budget plan 2023-27 and the NIP. A new government finance bill is currently under consideration in Parliament.

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