Organization of the Education System and of its Structure

The educational system is divided into four levels: pre-primary, compulsory (single structure primary and lower secondary education), upper secondary and higher education. Adult education is also available and art schools, mainly music schools.

The pre-primary school level is intended for children up to the age of six, at which compulsory school begins. Education is compulsory for children for 10 years, from six to sixteen years of age. The upper secondary level normally includes sixteen to nineteen-year olds, but also older pupils. Anyone who has completed compulsory education, has had equivalent basic education or has turned sixteen is entitled to enrol in upper secondary education. Those who have the right to enrol in upper secondary school studies have the right to study in upper secondary schools until the age of 18 as a minimum. Students at the higher education level are generally required to have passed the matriculation examination, or its equivalent. In line with legislation on adult and continuing education, public authorities as well as private entities and organizations may provide this kind of education.

Pre-primary education is the first level of the Icelandic educational system. Pre-primary schools in Iceland all operate in accordance with the Preschool Act (Act 90/2008) [1] and follow the National Curriculum Guide for Preschools 2011 [2], issued by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. Pre-primary schools are for all children in the age group of 1-6 years old. Day care in private homes is an option for parents but is not considered to be part of the educational system.

The legislation for compulsory schools, the Compulsory School Act (Act 91/20 [3]08) stipulates mandatory education for children and adolescents between the ages of six and sixteen. All pupils are to attend school full-time and attendance is mandatory.

The municipalities are responsible for providing appropriate education as decreed by law. The head teacher of compulsory school determines whether a pupil has concluded compulsory school education and is responsible for the pupil’s graduation from compulsory school. A pupil may graduate from compulsory school before completing the 10-year compulsory education, provided that the pupil fulfils compulsory school requirements according to description of learning outcomes in the National Curriculum Guide [4].

According to the Compulsory School Act, parents can teach their children at home, in part or totally, but they must apply for such exemption from their municipality. Children who receive instruction at home are exempt from compulsory schooling but must comply with
regular evaluation and monitoring and undergo the nationally coordinated examinations. If the permission is granted, the municipality must make a contract with a compulsory school in the municipality concerning advice, supervision and various services. Home schooling is rare in Iceland and to be able have your children in home schooling, parents must be qualified with a licence to teach in compulsory schools.

Pupils have the right to have their special needs met regarding studies in inclusive compulsory school, and regardless of their physical or mental attainment. According to the Compulsory School Act, municipalities must ensure that specialist services are provided in compulsory schools, determine the organisation of such services and conduce towards providing the services within the compulsory school itself. Specialist services include support for pupils and their families as well as support for compulsory school activities and its personnel. A regulation on specialist services (Regulation no. 584/2010) describes what kind of specialist services both for pre-primary schools and compulsory schools should be provide.

Upper secondary education is not compulsory in Iceland. However, the framework legislation for the upper secondary school level (Act 92/2008) stipulates that anyone who has completed compulsory education, or has had equivalent basic education, or has reached the age of 16, is entitled to enrol in upper secondary school. Those who have the right to enrol in upper secondary school, also have the right to study until the age of 18. The upper secondary level normally includes the sixteen to nineteen-year-old students. All schools at that level are co-educational. Although upper secondary education is generally divided into general and vocational education, with some programmes of artistic study as well, it is mainly organised in a single structure with a variety of options.

According to the Upper Secondary School Act of 2008, pupils with special needs shall be provided with instruction and special study support. Specialised assistance and appropriate facilities shall be provided as considered necessary by the educational ministry. Pupils with special needs are to study side by side with other pupils, but in addition, many schools offer special four years lines of study where most of the pupils with disabilities are provided with education according to individual educational plans. All disabled students have the right to attend upper secondary schools and the financial crisis has not affected this provision.

Higher education in Iceland is regulated by the Higher Education Institutions Act of 2006 (Act 63/2006). All higher education institutions are subject to the provisions of the Icelandic word háskól (e. university), according to the legislation, is used to refer both to those higher education institutions which have several faculties, permanent research facilities and undergraduate and graduate programmes, and institutions that do not have research responsibilities. Consequently, there is no formal distinction between non-university and university institutions in Icelandic, but by law, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture determines the title of each institution in foreign languages, i.e. whether it is to be called a university or university college. The institutions accredited as háskól may offer first and second cycle studies in the fields of studies they are accredited for, but must apply specially for accreditation for doctoral programmes.

Adult education is provided by public authorities, private institutions, companies and organisations. Adult education and training is offered by institutions at the upper secondary
and higher education levels, including lifelong learning centres. Adult education may also be provided for by municipality schools, private schools, companies or organizations. The Education and Training Service Centre is a forum of the social partners for adult and continuing education and training in co-operation with other education bodies and the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.

During the years 2011-2015, the Icelandic health and education ministries hosted a successful education/work campaign named: “Education is a work process” („Nám er vinnandi vegur“) 2020 programme. The project was completed in 2015. The main objective of the project was to open access to upper secondary schools for the unemployed and young people under the age of 25, to strengthen vocational education and to increase co-operation between schools and industry. The boundaries between the formal upper secondary school system and adult education system were made more flexible and school guidance more accessible. The project was considered to be generally successful and to have strengthened cooperation between stakeholders and various ministries in an effort to lower unemployment and increase skill-levels of younger people with no formal education. Through this project efforts were furthermore made to register all information regarding early school leaving.