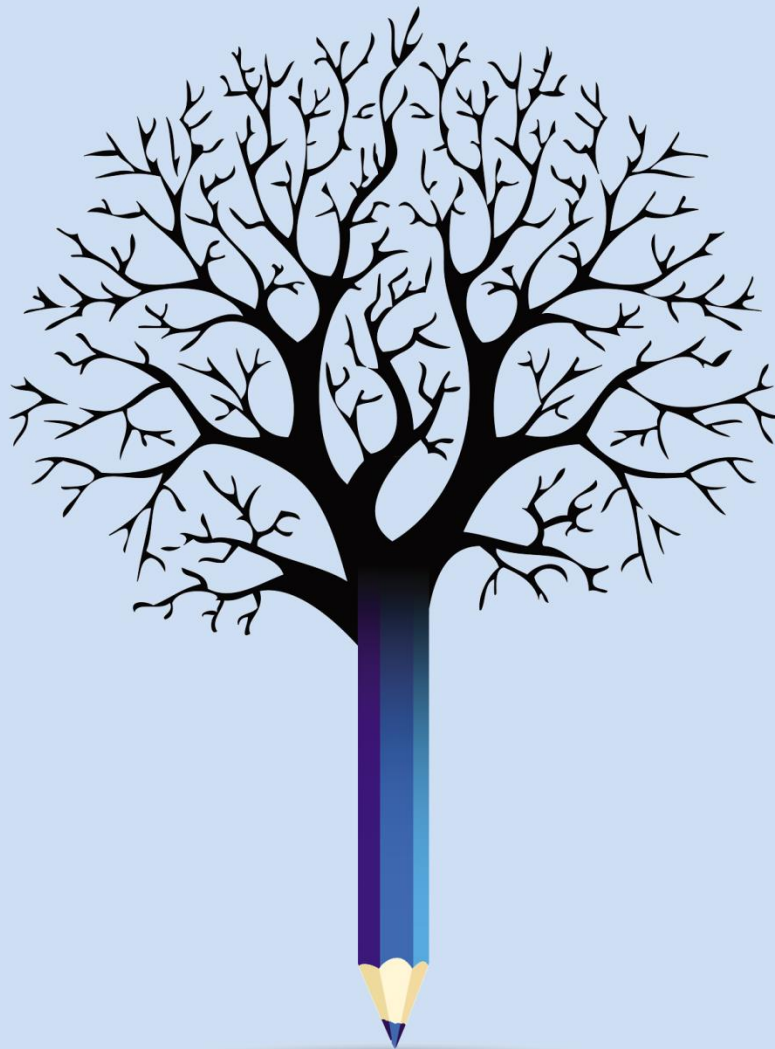




EDUCATION POLICY OUTLOOK ICELAND





EDUCATION POLICY OUTLOOK

This **policy profile on education** in Iceland is part of the *Education Policy Outlook* series, which presents comparative analysis of education policies and reforms across OECD countries. Building on the OECD's substantial comparative and sectorial policy knowledge base, the series offers a comparative outlook on education policy by providing analysis of individual countries' educational context, challenges and policies (education policy profiles), analysis of international trends, and insight on policies and reforms on selected topics. In addition to country-specific profiles, the series also includes a recurring publication. The first volume, *Education Policy Outlook 2015: Making Reforms Happen*, was released in January, 2015.

Designed **for policy makers, analysts and practitioners** who seek information and analysis of education policy taking into account the importance of national context, the country policy profiles offer constructive analysis in a comparative format. Each profile reviews the current context and situation of the country's education system and examines its challenges and policy responses, according to six policy levers that support improvement:

- Students: How to raise outcomes for all in terms of 1) equity and quality and 2) preparing students for the future
- Institutions: How to raise quality through 3) school improvement and 4) evaluation and assessment
- System: How the system is organised to improve education policy in terms of 5) governance and 6) funding

Some country policy profiles contain spotlight boxes on selected policy issues. They are meant to draw attention to specific policies that are promising or showing positive results and may be relevant for other countries.

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Sources: This country profile draws on OECD indicators from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Survey of Adult Skills of the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) and the annual publication *Education at a Glance*. It also refers to country and thematic studies such as OECD work on early childhood education and care, teachers, school leadership, evaluation and assessment for improving school outcomes, equity and quality in education, governing complex education systems, vocational education and training, and tertiary education. Much of this information and documentation can be accessed through the OECD Education GPS at <http://gpseducation.oecd.org>.

Most of the figures quoted in the different sections refer to Annex B, which presents a table of the main indicators for the different sources used throughout the country profile. Hyperlinks to the reference publications are included throughout the text for ease of reading, and also in the References and further reading section, which lists both OECD and non-OECD sources.

More information is available from the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills (www.oecd.org/edu) and its web pages on Education Policy Outlook (www.oecd.org/edu/policyoutlook.htm).



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HIGHLIGHTS

Iceland's educational context

Students: Iceland has comparatively high equity in education, combined with declining student performance. In PISA 2012, Iceland performed around the OECD average in mathematics and below the OECD average in science and reading. Iceland's performance has decreased in all three assessment areas across PISA cycles. At the same time, the socio-economic background of students in Iceland had one of the smallest impacts on mathematics performance among OECD countries. Iceland has broad participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC), with pre-primary education that usually starts at age 2 and almost universal enrolment of 3-4 year-olds. Comprehensive school education is compulsory from age 6 to age 16, longer than the duration of comprehensive schooling in most OECD countries. On completion of compulsory school, all 16-year-olds are entitled to education at upper secondary schools up to age 18. However, Iceland's attainment in upper secondary education and enrolment in vocational education and training (VET) programmes at upper secondary level are below the OECD average. Many students leave school before completing upper secondary education. Some factors that have increased the risk of dropout in Iceland are the structure and quality of upper secondary education, the availability of lifelong learning to complete studies and the apparently broad employment opportunities for youth.

Institutions: Schools in Iceland have autonomy over resource allocation, curriculum and assessment that is above the OECD average on issues such as hiring and dismissing teachers as well as on establishing student assessment policies. Iceland has made efforts to increase the level of initial education attainment of incoming teachers by requiring that they have at least a master's degree. Teaching conditions for primary and secondary teachers include below-average class sizes, below-average teaching time in primary and secondary education and, since 2005, decreasing salaries. While school leaders are young, teachers are older than their peers in other countries. This may lead to future teacher shortages at all school levels. A lower proportion of teachers in Iceland than the TALIS average consider that the teaching profession is valued in society and would choose to work as teachers if they could decide again. Evaluation and assessment in Iceland appears to be highly used for accountability at the central level and for formative purposes at the school level. Icelandic students take national tests in Grades 4, 7 and 10.

System: Governance of the education system is shared between central and local authorities. The Icelandic Parliament is responsible for the school system and sets the basic objectives and administrative framework. Municipalities are responsible for pre-primary and compulsory education, and most schooling decisions in lower secondary education are taken at school level. The central government steers upper secondary schools and higher education institutions. Expenditure on education institutions as a percentage of GDP (for all educational levels combined) is one of the highest among OECD countries, with a higher share from public sources than the OECD average, while expenditure per student is above average at pre-primary and primary levels and below average at secondary and tertiary levels. Student loans are available for tertiary and upper secondary VET students.

Key policy issues

A challenge for Iceland is developing a more relevant and appealing education system that facilitates timely completion of studies, while raising student performance. Another area of concern is the ageing teaching body, which may lead to future teacher shortages. This highlights the need to ensure that teachers already in the profession have adequate professional development opportunities and to provide conditions that will attract strong candidates to the teaching profession. Other areas of action for Iceland include developing an integrated assessment and evaluation framework aligned with efficient teacher appraisal. Iceland is one of the few OECD countries without a formal national teacher appraisal framework in place. With the increasing demand for higher education, an additional challenge for Iceland is ensuring quality in supply, given the diversity of institutions in the country.

Selected policy responses

The recent [White Paper on Education Reform](#) (2014) establishes two strategic goals for 2018: 1) at least 90% of students in compulsory education reaching the minimum reading standards, up from the current level of 79%; and 2) at least 60% of upper secondary students graduating on time, up from the current level of 44%.

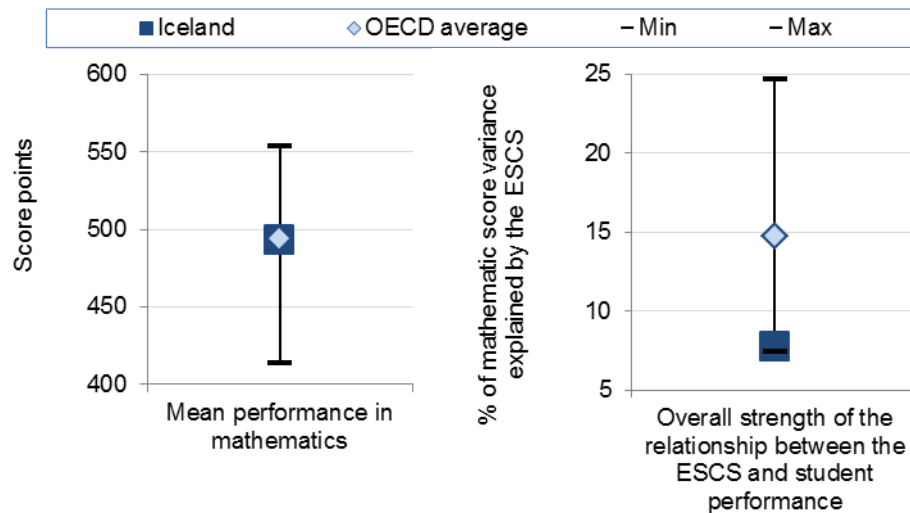
Iceland's Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (*Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið*) established the [Council of Continuous Professional Development of Teachers](#) in 2013. It is led by the ministry, with strong representation from the Icelandic Association of Local Authorities and various stakeholders of the education system.

Following the [National Qualification Framework for Higher Education](#) (2007), a Quality Council for universities was established in 2012.



Icelandic 15-year-olds achieved average scores in mathematics in PISA 2012 (mean score of 493 compared to the OECD average of 494), with below-average performance in science and reading and decreased performance in all three assessment areas across PISA cycles. Students' socio-economic background had one of the smallest impacts on mathematics performance among OECD countries (8%, compared to the OECD average of 15%).

Figure 1. Performance in mathematics and relationship between student performance and the economic, social and cultural status (ESCS), for 15-year-olds, PISA 2012

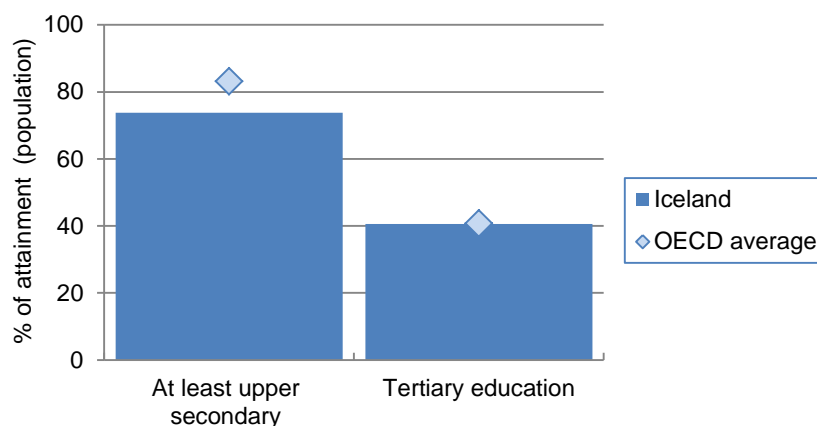


Note: "Min"/"Max" refer to OECD countries with the lowest/highest values.

Source: OECD (2014), *PISA 2012 Results: What Students Know and Can Do (Volume I, Revised edition, February 2014): Student Performance in Mathematics, Reading and Science*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264208780-en>.

In Iceland in 2014, the share of 25-34 year-olds with at least an upper secondary education is 74% (below the OECD average of 83%), while 41% of 25-34 year-olds have a tertiary education (the same as the OECD average) (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Upper secondary and tertiary attainment for 25-34 year-olds, 2014



Source: OECD (2015), *Education at a Glance 2015: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2015-en>.



EQUITY AND QUALITY: HIGH EQUITY WITH NEED TO IMPROVE PERFORMANCE

Iceland has comparatively high equity in education, combined with declining student performance. In PISA 2012, Icelandic 15-year-olds performed at around the OECD average in mathematics and below the OECD average in science and reading. Iceland's performance in PISA has decreased in all three subjects across PISA cycles. This suggests that Iceland can focus further on motivating all students to reach their full potential (Figure 3). At the same time, the impact of students' socio-economic status on mathematics performance in PISA 2012 remained well below the OECD average. It was one of the lowest among all countries participating in PISA (7.7%, compared to the OECD average of 14.8%). Iceland had a slightly lower share than the OECD average of both low performers (21.5% of students performing below proficiency Level 2 in mathematics, compared to the OECD average of 23%), and top performers (11.2% of students performing at Level 5 or above, compared to the OECD average of 12.6%).

Broad participation in **early childhood education and care** in Iceland contributes to achieving a more equitable education system. Early childhood education is not mandatory, but it constitutes the first level of education in the school system. Pre-primary education usually starts at age 2, and enrolment in ECEC for ages 3 and 4 was almost universal in 2013: 96% of 3-year-olds and 97% of 4-year-olds were enrolled in pre-primary schools (compared to the OECD average of 74% for 3-year-olds and 88% for 4-year-olds). Public pre-schools are open to all children, with priority access for handicapped children or children whose parents are single or students. Children with special educational needs enrol in the same education programme as other children, but it is adapted to their abilities. Public pre-schools charge fees to all students, accounting for about 30% of their operating costs. In private pre-schools, fees are usually 10%-20% higher than the fees of public schools. Evidence from an [OECD study](#) shows that ECEC can provide lasting benefits to students. In PISA 2012, Icelandic students who attended more than one year of pre-primary education scored 47 score points higher than their peers who did not attend pre-primary education (compared to the OECD average of 53 score points).

Several **system-level policies** promote equity in Iceland. School is compulsory and comprehensive from age 6 to 16, which covers primary to lower secondary levels. Virtually all 15-year-old students in Iceland attend government or public schools (99.5%). The school system, from pre-primary through upper secondary, is based on the principle of inclusiveness, i.e. that all students, irrespective of their disabilities should have access to normal schooling. Tracking (streaming students into different education pathways) starts at age 16, later than the OECD average of age 14. The percentage of students who have repeated a grade during primary, lower secondary or upper secondary education is also one of the lowest among the countries participating in PISA 2012 (1.2%, compared to the OECD average of 12.4%).

School segregation is low in Iceland, but **social factors**, such as low motivation towards school, students' immigrant status or special education needs, can still lead to dropout and lower performance. A [2012 OECD study](#) found that just 45% of Icelandic students complete upper secondary education within four years (compared to the OECD average of 68%). The percentage of students in low-performing, socio-economically disadvantaged schools is one of the lowest among the countries participating in PISA. However, while immigrant students in Iceland are a small share of the population (3% of 15-year-old students), they had a larger achievement gap with non-immigrant students in mathematics in PISA 2012 than their peers in other OECD countries, after adjusting for socio-economic status (a difference of 31 score points, compared to the OECD average of 21 score points) (Figure 3).

The challenge: Increasing the ability of schools to motivate students to stay in education, boost their performance and complete their studies without delays.

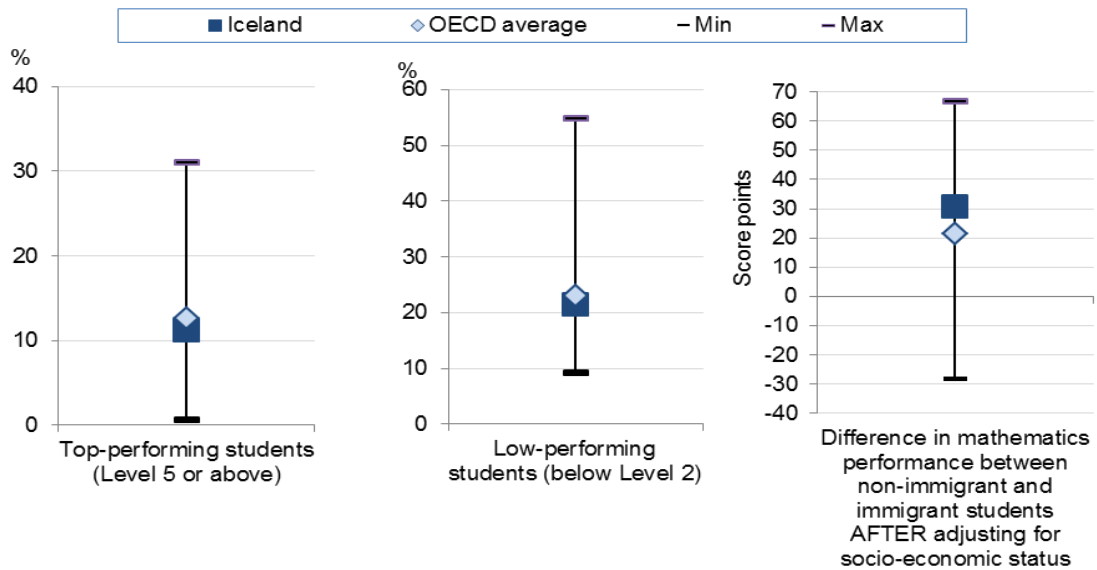
Recent policies and practices

In 2012, Iceland developed new [National Curriculum Guides](#) for pre-schools, compulsory schools and upper secondary schools. At pre-primary level, for example, the National Curriculum Guide sets out the learning objectives for children at pre-primary schools and describes the core competencies and basic principles that should guide school activities: broad literacy, creative thought, equality, democracy and human rights, health and welfare, and sustainability.

A new regulation for students with special needs in public and private upper secondary schools ([No. 230/2012](#), based on Article 34 of the [Upper Secondary Act](#), No. 92/2008) aims to ensure that all students have equal opportunities in education and that their educational, physical, social and emotional needs are met. This regulation also aims to offer students with special education needs sufficient learning opportunities, mentoring and support in stimulating learning environments and adequate infrastructure.



Figure 3. Percentage of top and low performers and difference in mathematics performance between non-immigrant and immigrant students, PISA 2012



Note: "Min"/"Max" refer to OECD countries with the lowest/highest values.

Source: OECD (2014), *PISA 2012 Results: What Students Know and Can Do (Volume I, Revised edition, February 2014): Student Performance in Mathematics, Reading and Science*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264208780-en>.



PREPARING STUDENTS FOR THE FUTURE: IMPROVING COMPLETION OF UPPER SECONDARY EDUCATION TO BUILD A SKILLED LABOUR FORCE

The capacity of a country's education system to effectively develop **skills and labour market perspectives** can play an important role in the educational decisions of its population. Overall, in 2014, Icelandic adults aged 25-64 had the highest employment rate for their peer group in OECD countries (86%, compared to the OECD average of 73%). While employment rates have decreased since 2005 for 25-34 year-olds, employment rates for all age groups have still remained above the OECD average. For example, 74% of 25-34 year-olds with educational attainment below upper secondary education are employed (compared to the OECD average of 57%). Iceland also has one of the lowest proportions in the OECD of 15-29 year-olds not in education, employment or training (8.8%, compared to the OECD average of 15.5%).

Upper secondary education includes mainly students between age 16 and age 20. Anyone who has completed compulsory education, has had equivalent basic education, or is at least 16 years old, can enrol in upper secondary education. Many students leave school before completing upper secondary education: in 2014 21.9% of Icelandic 15-19 year olds were not in education, compared to the OECD average of 13.7%. Some factors that have increased the risk of dropout in Iceland are the structure and quality of upper secondary education, the availability of lifelong learning to complete studies and the apparently broad employment opportunities for youth. In Iceland, 61.7% of all 15-19 year olds are employed, compared to the OECD average of 23.8%. Addressing dropout has been high on the agenda of the Icelandic government in recent years, but it has become increasingly important with the financial crisis. According to an [OECD survey of Iceland's economy](#), high dropout reduces skill levels of the Icelandic workforce, undermining productivity and labour market performance. Around one-third of the working-age population have completed only primary or lower secondary education; they account for the majority of those who are out of the labour force and nearly 45% of those who are unemployed.

Vocational education and training has a broad programme offer and multiple modes of delivery, but low enrolment rates (31%, compared to the OECD average of 46%). Vocational programmes are the most prevalent study programmes in upper secondary education in Iceland. They can last from one to four years, although the average duration is three or four years. These programmes are also provided in non-formal settings such as adult education centres, evening schools and the workplace. They aim to help students prepare for work or for continued study and can lead to specific professional qualifications and jobs. Re-entry to upper secondary is assured in Iceland, as shown by the high proportion of students (particularly in VET) over age 20 who have labour market experience. However, transitions between upper secondary vocational programmes and higher education are sometimes obstructed or difficult to navigate: vocational progression routes can be unclear, and some vocational programmes do not easily allow for further studies.

With an older student population, coverage of **tertiary education** in Iceland has increased in recent years. The University of Iceland must accept all students who have an upper secondary diploma, except in courses such as medicine or dentistry. Icelandic students enter tertiary education later than students in most OECD countries. Around 69% of new entrants to tertiary education were under age 25 (compared to the OECD average of 82%). The number of students at tertiary level in Iceland increased by 20% from 2005 to 2012 (compared to the OECD average increase of 21%), while the student population below tertiary level remained stable. The share of population with tertiary education was above the OECD average (37%, compared to the OECD average of 34%).

The challenge: Reducing dropout rates at upper secondary school level and making VET more attractive to promote completion of studies.

Recent policies and practices

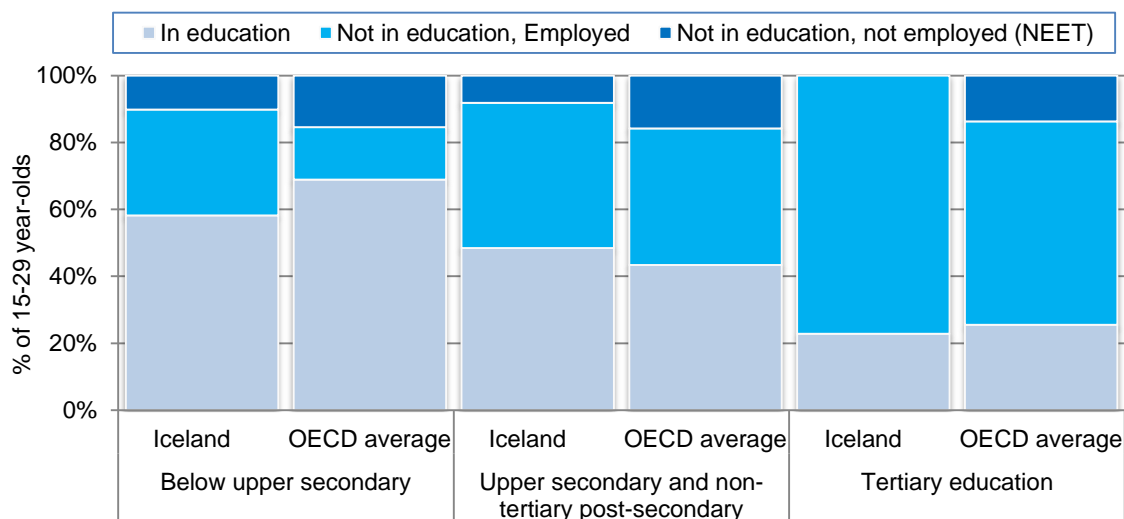
The government has taken steps in recent years to reduce dropout from upper secondary education. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture recently released the [White Paper on Education Reform](#) (2014) (See Spotlight 1). It spells out two main goals for the Icelandic education system: to increase attainment in reading and to increase the rate of on-time graduation.

Icelandic authorities reduced the length of upper-secondary schooling in 2014, allowing students to graduate a year earlier. Most upper secondary schools are now credit-based and allow students to organise their progression through their chosen programme. In addition, efforts to support all students entering secondary education to be suitably prepared seem to be helping to reduce dropout rates of vulnerable groups.

In 2010, the [Adult Education Act](#) was introduced to provide those who have a short formal education or have dropped out of upper secondary schools with opportunities to increase their vocational skills and adult education that takes their competencies and work experience into account.



Figure 4. Percentage of 15-29 year-olds in education and not in education, by educational attainment and work status, 2014



NEET: Neither Employed, nor in Education and Training (by higher education status)

Source: OECD (2015), *Education at a Glance 2015: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2015-en>.

Spotlight 1. Iceland's White Paper on Education Reform

The [White Paper on Education Reform](#) was published by the Ministry of Education Science and Culture (*Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið*) in 2014. In line with the experience of other countries, this report focuses on identifying the status of Iceland's education system, (in a context of, for example, high equity, but decreasing student performance, low enrolment in VET and low rates of on-time completion of studies). It then proposes priorities and actions, establishing two strategic goals for 2018: 1) boosting reading literacy (in terms of reaching minimum reading standards) from 79% to 90%, with the complementary objective of reducing dropout in upper secondary education; and 2) increasing the graduation rate from 44% to 60%.

To achieve the first goal, the White Paper proposes to strengthen learning of Icelandic at compulsory school level. It also proposes the development of reading proficiency standards for each level of compulsory education, and regular measurement of reading literacy from pre-school through compulsory school. All pre-primary schools and compulsory schools must adopt a literacy policy in line with the 2013 National Curriculum Guides and the school policy of each local community.

To achieve the second goal, the White Paper proposes to rethink the duration of programmes, shortening studies that lead to final examinations, reducing dropout and restructuring VET. The document also encourages schools at all levels to strengthen teachers' professional development, increase collection of data and analysis of results, and use data as a basis for identifying and correcting specific issues.



SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TO STRENGTHEN THE AGEING TEACHING WORKFORCE

Developing positive **learning environments** in schools can help promote high learning outcomes for students and tackle school dropout. In PISA 2012, 15-year-old students reported better relations with their teachers than the OECD average, and their views of their learning environments as conducive to learning were similar to the OECD average (Figure 5). At the same time, in TALIS, teachers reported spending a larger share of their class time keeping order in the classroom than their counterparts elsewhere (15.7%, above the TALIS average of 12.7%).

The role of **school leaders** in Iceland has changed over the past decade, with more school autonomy and higher demands for accountability. School leaders in Iceland are, on average, slightly younger than in most other TALIS countries (50.9 years, compared to the TALIS average of 52.4 years). In PISA 2012, school leaders reported being involved in instructional leadership activities at a level similar to the average in OECD countries (Figure 5). According to the 2012 OECD report [Towards a Strategy to Prevent Dropout in Iceland](#) (and given the increased school autonomy), Icelandic school leaders need to be trained and supported to be stronger pedagogical leaders.

Iceland's **teachers** can play a key role in improving student outcomes. However, the teaching workforce is ageing (the average age is 44.6 years for teachers in lower secondary education), and this may lead to future teacher shortages at all school levels. Iceland has made efforts to increase the level of educational attainment of incoming teachers. Since 2012, pre-primary, compulsory and upper-secondary teachers are required to have a master's degree in education or in their field of study, as well as Teacher Certification Studies. They are expected to spend time on in-service training, preparation and other duties in addition to their presence in schools. Teachers in Iceland have high participation in professional development courses. In the TALIS survey, 91.1% reported they had recently undertaken professional development activities (compared to the average of 88.4% reported by teachers in TALIS countries). Professional development in knowledge of the curriculum was the area where the largest share of teachers reported participation (73.8%, compared to the TALIS average of 56.3%). At upper secondary level, teachers receive initial education that focuses less on pedagogy than teachers at other levels. For example, compulsory education teachers must have a minimum of three years of education in pedagogy, while upper secondary teachers require only a year and a half. While more than 94.5% of teachers report overall satisfaction with their jobs (compared to the TALIS average of 91.2%), only 17.5% reported believing that teaching is a valued profession in society (compared to the TALIS average of 30.9%). One of the recommendations of the 2012 OECD report on dropout in Iceland was to provide more stability in the teaching career, including improved continuing professional development for teachers, advice, evaluation and incentives.

Teaching conditions at compulsory level in Iceland typically include fewer teaching hours and smaller class sizes than the OECD average and, since 2005, decreasing teachers' salaries. Teaching time is 624 hours per year in both primary and secondary education (below the OECD average of 772 hours per year in primary education and 643 hours in secondary education). Iceland has 19 students per class at primary level and 20 at lower secondary level (below the OECD average of 21 students per class at primary level and 24 at lower secondary level). After 15 years of experience, teachers earn USD 31 145 per year (converted using PPP) at primary and lower secondary education levels (below the OECD average of USD 41 245 at primary level and USD 42 825 at lower secondary level). Since 2005, teachers' salaries in Iceland have decreased by 11 percentage points in primary and lower secondary education, and by 13 percentage points in upper secondary (compared to average increases across the OECD of 3 percentage points for primary education, 2 percentage points for lower secondary and 1 percentage point for upper secondary).

The challenge: Targeting professional development to strengthen practice of the ageing teaching workforce and making the profession more attractive to strong candidates.

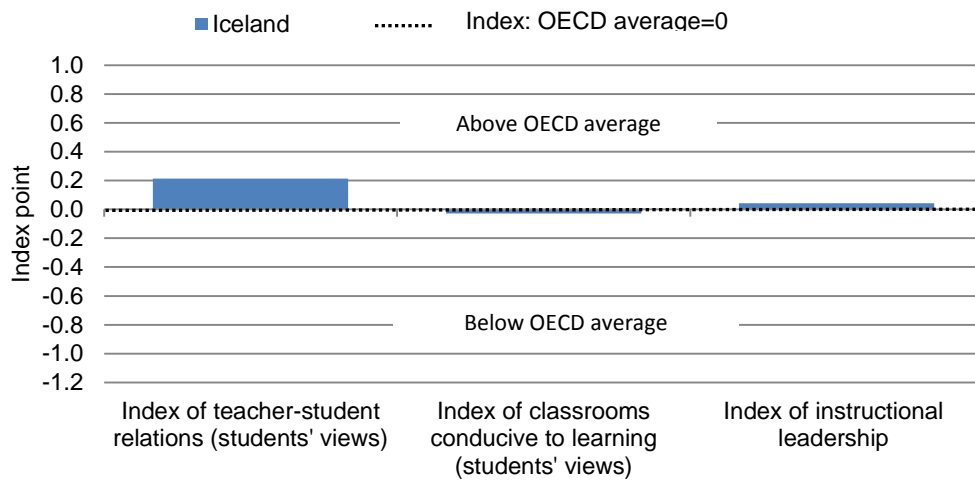
Recent policies and practices

The [2008 Act](#) on the recruitment of teachers and head teachers in pre-school, compulsory school and upper secondary school has been fully effective since autumn 2012. It sets minimum requirements for teachers at the different education levels (i.e. professional titles and recruitment processes).

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture established the [Council of Continuous Professional Development of Teachers](#) in 2013. It is led by the ministry, with representatives from the Icelandic Association of Local Authorities, the Icelandic Teachers Union and teacher education institutions.



Figure 5. The learning environment, PISA 2012



Source: OECD (2013), *PISA 2012 Results: What Makes Schools Successful (Volume IV): Resources, Policies and Practices*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264201156-en>.



EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT: USING STUDENT ASSESSMENT AND SCHOOL EVALUATION TO IMPROVE STUDENT OUTCOMES

Defining effective **evaluation and assessment** strategies is important to improve student outcomes and develop a better and more equitable school system. There is a high level of use of evaluation and assessment activities in Iceland, for summative purposes at the central level and for formative purposes in schools.

The [Ministry of Education, Science and Culture](#) is responsible for **system evaluation**, school evaluations and national assessments of students. Laws on the four levels of education (pre-primary, compulsory, upper secondary and higher education) all highlight the importance of systematic internal evaluation to measure and improve quality. The Education Directorate (*Menntamálastofnun*), established in 2015, is responsible for national co-ordinated examinations at compulsory level in Grades 4, 7 and 10. It also carries out international comparative work, for example, the OECD's PISA and TALIS studies.

School evaluation laws on [pre-primary](#), [compulsory](#), [upper secondary](#) and [higher education](#) stipulate that the ministry is to conduct comprehensive external evaluation at these levels. By law, since 2008, municipalities are responsible for their own school evaluation and school activities at pre-primary and compulsory school levels. The Minister of Education, Science and Culture is expected to deliver comprehensive reports to the Parliament on pre-primary, compulsory and upper secondary education every three years. All schools or institutions are also required to systematically evaluate internal activities with active participation of staff, students, pupils and parents, as relevant. They are expected to publish information on internal evaluations, compliance with the school curriculum guide and plans for improvement.

Iceland has no specific legislation on **teacher appraisal**, and an above-average proportion of teachers reported that they are generally not formally appraised (20.7%, compared to the TALIS average of 7.4%). Of schools where the principal reported formal appraisal practices, a below-average proportion of teachers reported that their classroom practice is observed (72%, compared to the TALIS average of 94.9%). Similarly, a smaller proportion of Icelandic teachers than their peers in other TALIS countries reported that the feedback they received led to an improvement of their teaching practice (44.7%, compared to the TALIS average of 62.0%).

Among all countries participating in PISA 2012, Iceland has one of the largest shares of students in schools whose principals and/or teachers have considerable responsibility in establishing **student assessment** policies – 63.3%. All students in Grades 4, 7 and 10 must also undergo national examinations in Icelandic and mathematics. These examinations are prepared, graded and organised by the Education Directorate. Results of the national student assessments are distributed under certain conditions: students receive their own marks, but selected results for all examinations are published only in schools with more than ten students in a specific grade.

The challenge: Strengthening an integrated assessment and evaluation framework aligned with efficient teacher appraisal.

Recent policies and practices

Iceland increased Icelandic classes in the reference timetable introduced in the updated [National Curriculum Guides for Compulsory Schools](#) (2015). Reading skills will be measured regularly by the literacy advisory task force of the Education Directorate, from pre-school to the end of primary school, according to targets in reading skills outlined in the ministry's White Paper.

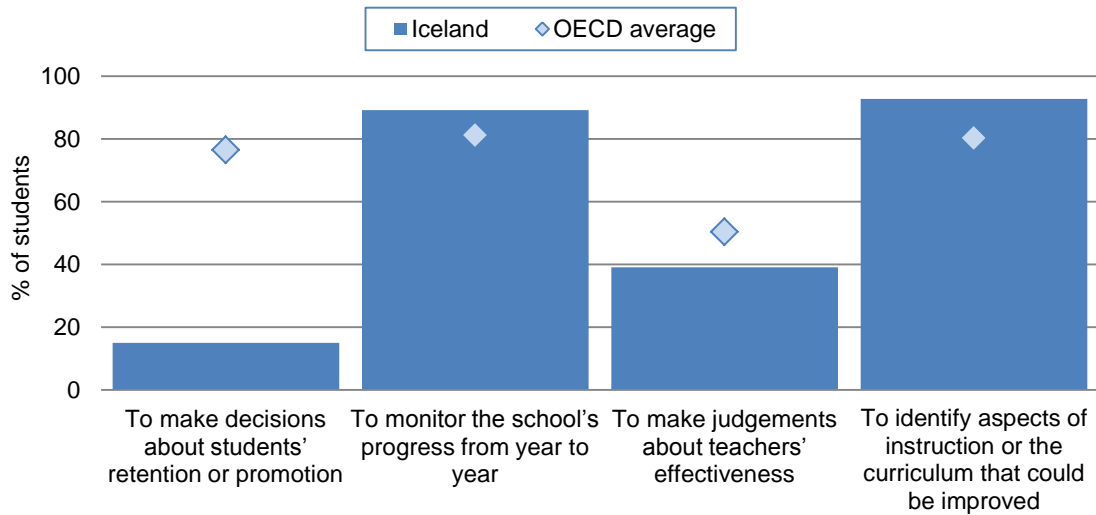
In 2011, the Association of Municipalities and the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture set up a formal co-operation agreement on the financing and execution of external evaluation in compulsory education.

In 2010, the ministry established the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education to administer development of a [Quality Enhancement Framework](#) for Iceland's higher education sector. In undertaking this work, the board has worked closely since 2010 with the Icelandic Quality Council for Higher Education, also established by the ministry.

The Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education released the [Quality Enhancement Handbook for Icelandic Higher Education](#) in 2011. It aims to support higher education institutions in enhancing the quality of the student learning experience and awarding high standards of degrees. Provisions for quality control of teaching and research in higher education were laid down in the [Higher Education Act](#) (2006).



Figure 6. Percentage of students in schools where the principal reported the following uses for student assessments, PISA 2012



Source: OECD (2013), *PISA 2012 Results: What Makes Schools Successful (Volume IV): Resources, Policies and Practices*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264201156-en>.



GOVERNANCE: DECENTRALISATION TO BOOST CAPACITY OF SCHOOLS

The Icelandic parliament, the *Althingi*, is legally and politically responsible for the school system. The *Althingi* determines the basic objectives and administrative framework of the educational system. The **Ministry of Education, Science and Culture** guides the education system, and education is delivered by municipalities. The ministry is responsible for implementation of legislation relative to all school levels, from pre-primary and compulsory education through upper secondary and higher education levels, as well as continuing and adult education. This includes creating curriculum guidelines for pre-primary, compulsory and upper secondary schools, issuing regulations and planning educational reforms.

Other bodies also help to shape education policy:

- The Education Directorate was established in 2015 by merging the Educational Testing Institute and the National Centre for Educational Materials (*Menntamálastofnun og nýtt hlutverk*), under the auspices of the ministry. Its mandate is to advise on educational policy relating to school development and curricula, as well as providing wide-ranging services to schools from pre-primary to upper-secondary level. It develops and publishes educational materials and distributes them free of charge to students at the compulsory level. A special task force within the directorate is directly responsible for promoting the literacy objectives of the ministry's White Paper, by carrying out standardised literacy tests and advising teachers and schools on how to improve teaching methods.
- The school board of each upper secondary school is appointed by the Minister and is composed of three representatives nominated by the ministry and two representatives nominated by the municipality. Representatives of teachers and students are observers in the school board.
- The Icelandic Teachers' Union aims to safeguard the rights and interests of its members, encourage co-operation between them, and strengthen professional and trade union awareness. It also works to improve teacher training and continuing education for its members.

The educational system has been decentralised to a large extent regarding responsibilities and decision-making. **Municipalities** are responsible for pre-primary and compulsory education, and most schooling decisions in lower secondary education are taken at school level. Apart from being represented in the school boards of upper secondary schools, local municipalities have no administrative responsibilities at upper secondary or higher education levels. Early childhood education is under the responsibility of pre-school boards in all municipalities.

Iceland's **public compulsory schools** (*grunnskóli*) combine primary and lower secondary levels. They have a comparatively high share of decision-making compared to schools in other countries. Schools in Iceland take 62% of decisions related to their activities (compared to the OECD average of 41%) (Figure 7). Education in Iceland has traditionally been delivered in public institutions, and there are relatively few private institutions in the school system. Autonomy over resource allocation, curriculum and assessment in Iceland's schools is above the OECD average on issues such as hiring and dismissing teachers, as well as on establishing student assessment policies.

The management of **tertiary education** institutions varies widely among institutions. Iceland has seven higher education institutions, of which the largest is the University of Iceland. While the University of Iceland has been autonomous for a long time (as the nation's sole university), recent developments have further increased the autonomy of all establishments. This is largely as a result of the introduction of long-term planning to the internal budgeting processes of these institutions.

The challenge: Promoting a governance system focused on support and capacity building.

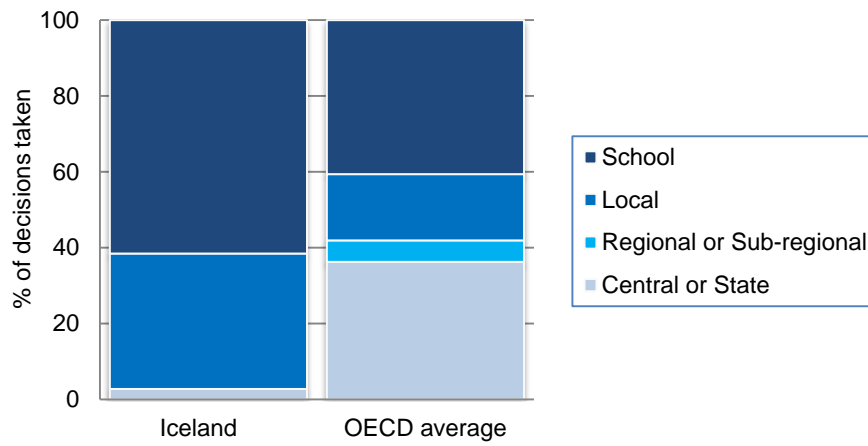
Recent policies and practices

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture introduced a National Agreement on literacy ([National Literacy Pact](#)) as part of actions to follow up on the [White Paper on Education Reform](#), published in 2014 (See Spotlight 1).

To reach its targets, the National Curriculum Guide for compulsory schools was updated in 2015 with the introduction of [new amendments](#). The agreement was prepared in co-operation with municipalities, compulsory schools and parents. It aims to bring together different stakeholders to improve literacy and reading skills of compulsory students and to support the learning community and local schools, as well as teachers and other school staff.



Figure 7. Percentage of decisions taken in public lower secondary schools at each level of government, 2011



Source: OECD (2012), *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2012-en>.



FUNDING: HIGH PUBLIC FUNDING MAINLY FOR COMPULSORY EDUCATION

Iceland's public expenditure on education as a proportion of GDP is among the highest in OECD countries. Public and private expenditure as a proportion of GDP from primary to tertiary level reached a post-2000 peak of 6.4% in 2005, but had fallen by 2012 to 5.8% (which however was still above the OECD average of 5.3% in 2012). Between 2007 and 2010, Iceland reported some decreases in the central budget for education due to the economic crisis. These mainly concerned compulsory education (primary and secondary education) and education for students over age 25, but central budgets for vocational education and training programmes have also been affected.

Iceland targets its education funding at the compulsory education level, which can increase equity and produce a more efficient investment. Iceland has higher expenditure in **primary education** than other OECD countries and other levels of education. In 2012, Iceland spent USD 10 003 per student per year on primary education (compared to the OECD average of USD 8 247). At the same time, Iceland's annual expenditure per student on secondary and tertiary education remained below the OECD average (USD 8 724 compared to the OECD average of USD 9 518 on secondary education, and USD 9 377 compared to the OECD average of USD 15 028 on tertiary education).

Expenditure on educational institutions is mainly funded from public sources (92.1%) and the share of private expenditure (7.9%) is below the OECD average (16.5%). Local authorities pay for construction and operation of **pre-primary and compulsory schools**, and almost all private schools receive public funding. State contributions towards the operation of schools at the upper-secondary and tertiary level are determined in the annual budget passed by Parliament.

At **tertiary** level, both public and private universities are mostly funded by the government, receiving individual allocations from the state budget under the same funding model. Under the [Act on Public Higher Education Institutions](#), higher education institutions may charge registration and some other fees, and private institutions can also charge fees. Student loans are available to students at tertiary level and for VET students at upper-secondary level.

Budget cuts have affected the implementation of new legislation and the National Curriculum Guidelines. Despite this, the state partially finances various forms of continuing and adult education, such as evening classes in upper secondary school, distance learning and lifelong learning centres. Grants are made from the state-financed [Vocational Education Fund](#) for continuing vocational training in business and industry. Iceland also allocates funds for continuing education for civil servants (e.g. for in-service training of upper secondary school teachers).

The challenge: Ensuring effective allocation of funding to respond to the challenges of the economic crisis and to the increased student population at tertiary level.

Recent policies and practices

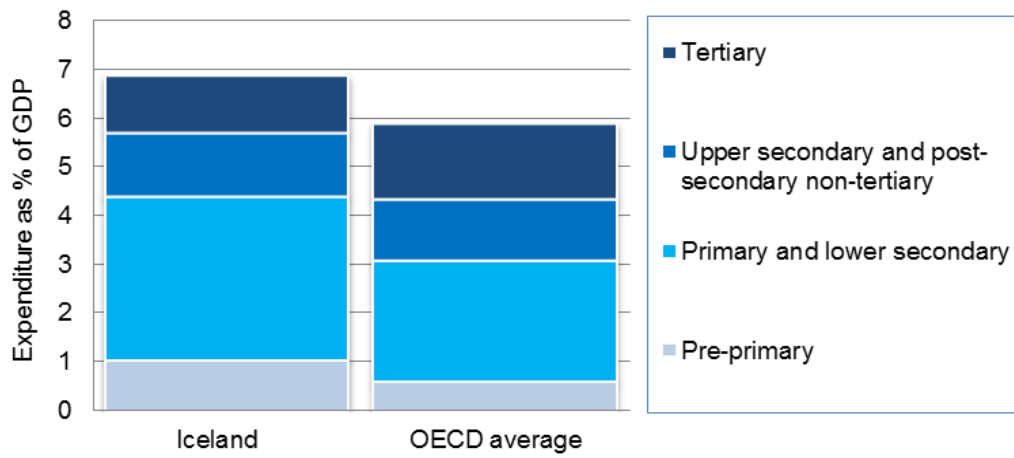
In 2011, as a consequence of the 2008 crisis and the inability of many firms to offer training places, Iceland developed a framework providing incentives for companies to train and support students in the workplace: 54 companies were allocated IKR 54.4 million (around EUR 470 000) to train 182 students. In 2012-14, an additional IKR 450 million (EUR 2.8 million) was allocated to the workplace training fund.

The [Icelandic Student Loan Fund](#) (*Lánasjóður íslenskra námsmanna*) is a public study loan programme through which money is lent at low interest rates to all tertiary level students and to secondary school vocational students to cover their living costs. It is financed by repayment, government subsidies and bank loans. The fund provides assistance for the period of study, generally for two semesters of equal length for full-time studies. All income forming the student's tax base is reduced by 10% of the amount of assistance during the study period. The rate of support for students living with low-income parents may be raised to 100% if the income of both parents is under the prescribed threshold. Some merit-based grants for second-cycle graduate students are provided by universities and by the [Icelandic Research Fund](#).

A grant-aided institution, the [Education and Training Service Centre](#), targets 16-24 year-olds who have dropped out of education and have not been able to find a job. The objective is to provide a range of training and education opportunities for them, for which they are paid a salary equivalent to unemployment benefits.



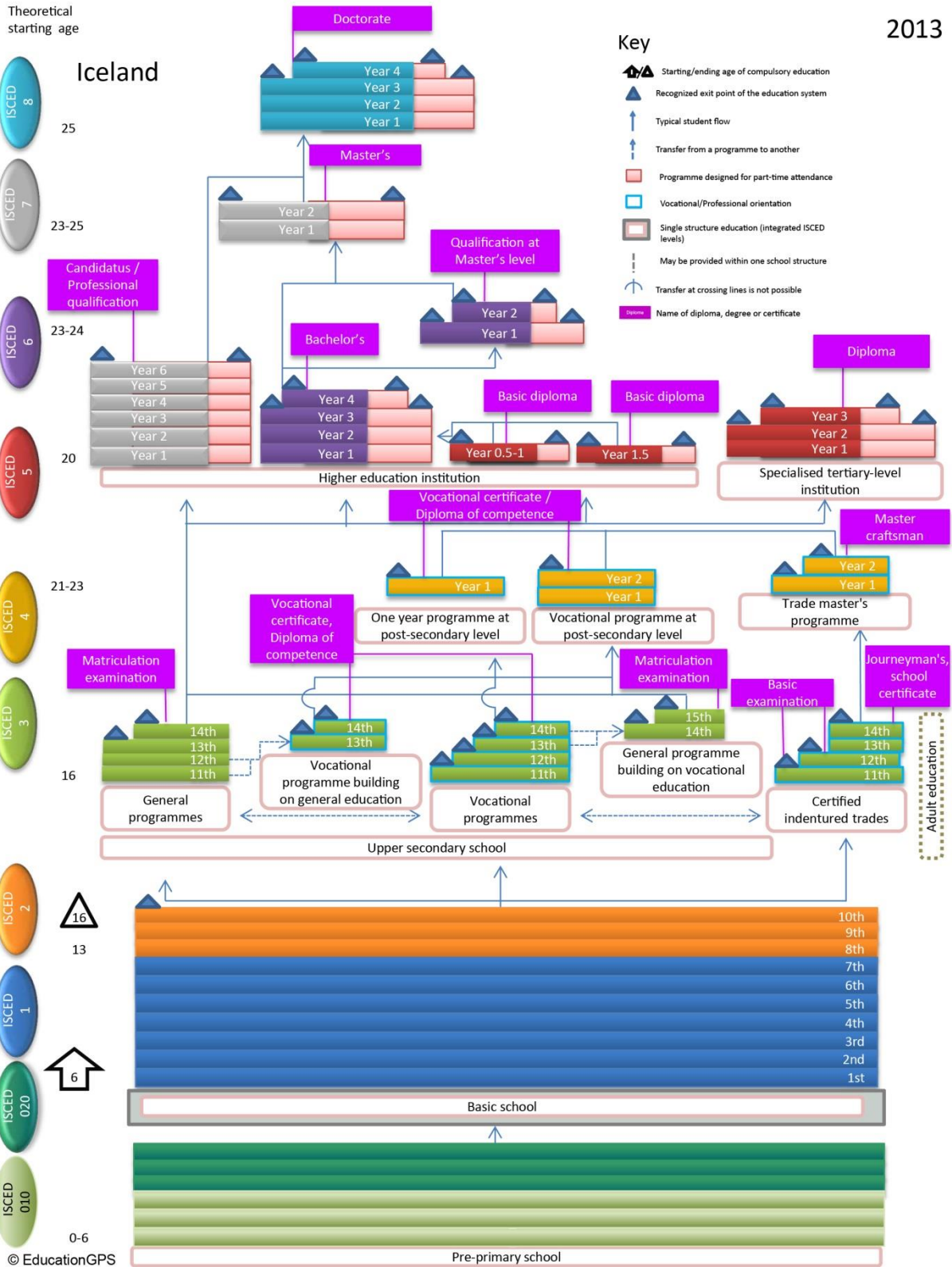
Figure 8. Expenditure on educational institutions as a percentage of GDP, by level of education, 2012



Source: OECD (2015), *Education at a Glance 2015: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2015-en>.



ANNEX A: STRUCTURE OF THE ICELANDIC EDUCATION SYSTEM



Source: OECD (2012-13), "Iceland: Overview of the education system", *OECD Education GPS*, http://gpseducation.oecd.org/Content/MapOfEducationSystem/ISL/ISL_2011_EN.pdf.



ANNEX B: STATISTICS

#	List of key indicators	Iceland	Average or total	Min OECD	Max OECD
Background information					
<i>Political context</i>					
1	Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP, 2012 (EAG 2015)	6.4%	4.8%	3.5%	7.7%
<i>Economy</i>					
2	GDP per capita, 2012, in equivalent USD converted using PPPs (EAG 2015)	40 464	n/a	16 767	91 754
3	GDP growth 2013 (OECD National Accounts)	3.9%	1.2%	-3.2%	4.3%
<i>Society</i>					
4	Population density, inhab/km ² , 2014 (OECD Statistics)	3.3	142	3.1	507
5	Population aged less than 15 as a percentage of total population, 2010 (OECD Factbook 2014)	20.9%	18.6%	13.1%	29.6%
6	Foreign-born population as a percentage of total population, 2013 or latest available year (OECD Factbook 2015)	11.5%	n/a	0.3%	43.7%
Education outcomes					
7	Mean performance in mathematics (PISA 2012)	493	494	413	554
8	Annualised change in mathematics performance across PISA assessments (PISA 2012) ^{4,5}	-2.2	-0.3	-3.3	4.2
9	Annualised change in reading performance across PISA assessments (PISA 2012) ^{4,5}	-1.3	0.3	-2.8	4.1
10	Annualised change in science performance across PISA assessments (PISA 2012) ^{4,5}	-2.0	0.5	-3.1	6.4
11	Enrolment rates of 3-4 year-olds in early childhood education and primary education as a percentage of the population of the same age group, 2013 (EAG 2015)	96%	81%	22%	100%
12	% of 25-64 year-olds whose highest level of attainment is lower secondary education, 2014 (EAG 2015)	26%	15%	0.4%	33%
13	% of 25-34 year-olds whose highest level of attainment is at least upper secondary education, 2014 (EAG 2015)	74%	83%	46%	98%
14	% of 25-34 year-olds whose highest level of attainment is tertiary education, 2014 (EAG 2015)	41%	41%	24%	68%
15	% of 25-64 year-olds whose highest level of attainment is vocational upper-secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education, 2014 (EAG 2015)	25%	26%	6%	67%
Unemployment rates of 25-34 year-olds by educational attainment, 2014 (EAG 2015)					
16	Below upper secondary	7.9%	19.1%	4.7%	55.9%
	Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary	7.1%	10.2%	3.7%	36%
	Tertiary education	4.6%	7.5%	2.9%	32.5%
Students: Raising outcomes					
<i>Policy lever 1: Equity and quality</i>					
17	First age of selection in the education system (PISA 2012)	16	14	10	16
Students performing at the highest or lowest levels in mathematics (%), (PISA 2012)					
18	Students performing below Level 2	21.5%	23%	9.1%	54.7%
	Students performing at Level 5 or above	11.2%	12.6%	0.6%	30.9%
Variance in mathematics performance between schools and within schools as a percentage of the OECD average variance in mathematics performance (PISA 2012)					
19	Between-schools percentage of variance	10%	37%	6%	65%
	Within-schools percentage of variance	90%	63%	34%	90%
20	% of students reporting that they have repeated at least a grade in primary, lower secondary or upper secondary schools (PISA 2012)	1.2%	12.4%	0.0%	36.1%



#	List of key indicators	Iceland	Average or total	Min OECD	Max OECD
21	Percentage of variance in mathematics performance in PISA test explained by ESCS (PISA 2012) ⁴	7.7%	14.8%	7.4%	24.6%
22	Score difference in mathematics performance in PISA between non-immigrant and immigrant students AFTER adjusting for socio-economic status (PISA 2012) ⁴	31	21	-29	66
23	Score differences between boys and girls in mathematics (PISA 2012) ⁴	-6	11	-6	25
<i>Policy lever 2: Preparing students for the future</i>					
Adjusted mean proficiency in literacy among adults on a scale of 500 (Survey of Adult Skills, 2012)					
24	Among 16-65 year-olds (adjusted)	m	270.7	249.4	293.6
	Among 16-24 year-olds (adjusted)	m	278.0	260.0	297.0
Upper secondary graduation rates in % by programme of orientation, 2013 (EAG 2015)					
25	General programmes	m	52%	19%	82%
	Pre-vocational/ vocational programmes	m	46%	4%	93%
First-time graduation rates, by tertiary ISCED level, 2013 (EAG 2015)					
26	Short tertiary (2-3 years), ISCED 5	m	11%	0%	28%
	Bachelor's or equivalent, ISCED 6	m	36%	9%	61%
	Master's or equivalent, ISCED 7	m	17%	3%	40%
	Doctorate or equivalent, ISCED 8	m	1.7%	0.2%	3.6%
27	% of 15-29 year-olds not in education, employment or training, 2012 (EAG 2015)	9%	16%	7%	32%
Institutions: Improving schools					
<i>Policy lever 3: School improvement</i>					
28	Mean index of teacher-student relations based on students' reports (PISA 2012)	0.21	0.00	-0.42	0.47
29	Mean index of disciplinary climate based on students' reports (PISA 2012)	-0.03	0.00	-0.33	0.67
% of teachers above the age of 50 by education level, 2013 (EAG 2015)					
30	Primary education	36%	31%	16%	57%
	Lower secondary education	36%	34%	17%	63%
	Upper secondary education	m	38%	26%	73%
Number of teaching hours per year in public institutions by education level, 2013 (EAG 2015)					
31	Primary education	624	772	569	1 129
	Lower secondary education, general programmes	624	694	415	1 129
	Upper secondary education, general programmes	544	643	369	1 129
Ratio of actual teachers' salaries to earnings for full-time, full-year adult workers similarly educated, 2013 (EAG 2015)					
32	Primary education	m	0.78	0.52	0.99
	Lower secondary education, general programmes	m	0.80	0.52	1.01
	Upper secondary education, general programmes	m	0.82	0.48	1.20
33	Growth rate of teachers' salaries between 2005 and 2013 in lower secondary education, 2013 (EAG 2015)	-11%	2%	-32%	31%
34	% of lower secondary education teachers who report a "moderate" or "large" positive change on their knowledge and understanding of their main subject field(s) after they received feedback on their work at their school (TALIS 2013)	37.4%	53.5%	26.7%	86.2%



#	List of key indicators	Iceland	Average or total	Min OECD	Max OECD
Policy level 4: Evaluation and assessment to improve student outcomes					
35	Percentage of lower secondary education principals who report that they use student performance and student evaluation results (including national/international assessments) to develop the school's educational goals and programmes (TALIS 2013)	82.1%	88.8%	58.5%	99.5%
% of students whose school principals reported that assessments are used for the following purposes (PISA 2012)					
36	To make decisions about students' retention or promotion	15%	77%	1%	98%
	To monitor the school's progress from year to year	89%	81%	48%	100%
	To make judgements about teachers' effectiveness	39%	50%	14%	88%
	To identify aspects of instruction or the curriculum that could be improved	93%	80%	49%	99%
% of lower secondary education teachers reporting appraisal/feedback from the school principal on their work with this frequency (TALIS 2013)					
37	Once every two years or less	46.9%	33.9%	3.2%	88.8%
	Once per year	43.9%	41.5%	9.5%	82.1%
	Twice or more per year	9.3%	24.7%	1.0%	49.6%
Systems: Organising the system					
Policy level 5: Governance					
% of decisions taken at each level of government in public lower secondary education, 2011 (EAG 2012)					
38	Central or state government	3%	36%	0%	87%
	Regional or sub-regional government	m	6%	0%	36%
	Local government	36%	17%	0%	100%
	School government	62%	41%	5%	86%
Policy level 6: Funding					
Annual expenditure per student by educational institutions, for all services, in equivalent USD converted using PPPs for GDP, 2012 (EAG 2015)					
39	Pre-primary education	10 250	8 008	3 416	19 719
	Primary education	10 003	8 247	2 577	20 020
	Secondary education	8 724	9 518	2 904	20 617
	Tertiary education	9 377	15 028	7 779	32 876
Relative proportions of public and private expenditure on educational institutions, 2012 (EAG 2015)					
40	Public sources	92%	83%	60%	98%
	All private sources	8%	17%	2%	40%
	Index of change in expenditure on educational institutions, public sources, (constant prices, 2005=100)	98	114	75	165
	Index of change in expenditure on educational institutions, all private sources, (constant prices, 2005=100)	105	137	76	538
Notes					
1. The average, total, minimums and maximums refer to OECD countries except in TALIS and the Survey of Adult Skills, where they refer to participating countries.					
2. "m": included when data is not available.					
3. "NP": included if the country is not participating in the study.					
4. Statistically significant values of the indicator are shown in bold (PISA 2012 only)					
5. The annualised change is the average annual change in PISA score points from a country's/economy's earliest participation in PISA to PISA 2012. It is calculated taking into account all of a country's/economy's participation in PISA. See www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-overview.pdf .					
6. "n/a": included when the category is not applicable.					



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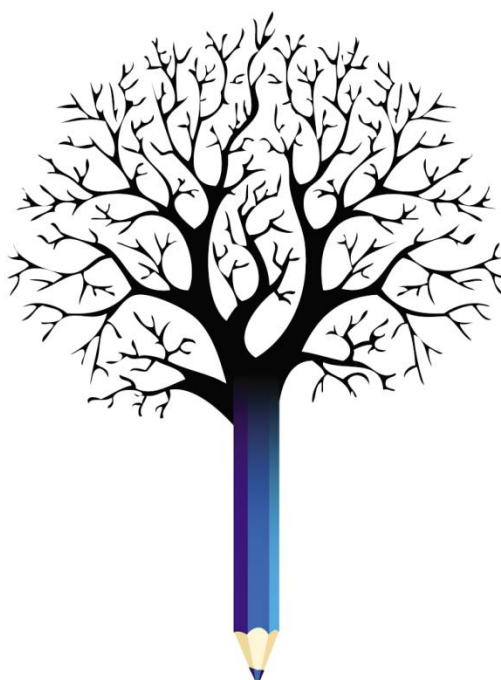
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