

NQF state of play

 **Iceland 2022**

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Overview

Stage of development: Activation stage

NQF linked to EQF: ✓

Scope of the framework:

The NQF includes all levels and types of qualification from formal education and training, including certified adult learning. No qualification linked to EQF level 1.

Number of levels:

Seven, with sublevels at NQF levels 5 and 6

Legal basis/stage of development:

No overarching legal basis for the ISQF (its role and mandate are stated in a series of acts and decrees).

NQF/EQF website:

[Website](#)

Introduction and context

1.1. Policy context

Over recent years, education and training has seen improvements in several key indicators. Tertiary education attainment (age 30-34) is 45.5% ([1]). In 2020, the employment rate of recent graduates that had at least completed upper secondary education was 88%. Participation in adult learning also stands out at 23.9% in 2021, being only exceeded by Sweden, Finland, and the Netherlands. Early school leaving has decreased but remains a challenge. The proportion of early leavers from education and training in 2020 was 14.4% (19.6% for males and 8.9% for females). Although, 85% of those entering upper secondary education (age 15) select general education, half of the students in upper secondary schools believe that vocational education and training (VET) would be a more suitable option for them. Around 66% of them would be interested in taking more VET courses, which may suggest that an even greater proportion of students are interested in finding out whether VET could be suitable for them.

1.2. NQF legal basis

There is currently no single act or decree issued specifically for the ISQF. The framework builds on, and is integrated in, a set of acts on education and training based on the learning outcomes approach:

- a. the Compulsory School Act No 91/2008 (ISQF level 1 covers EQF level 2) ([2]);
- b. the Upper Secondary Education Act No 92/2008;
- c. the Higher Education Act No 63/2006 ([3]);
- d. the Adult Education Act No 27/2010.

In 2016, the education ministry (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture) approved the new version of the ISQF. A [statement](#) on mutual understanding for the ISQF was formally signed by all stakeholders in October 2016.

Policy objectives

The main objective is to make sure that all formally certified education and training is referenced to a level in the ISQF. According to the 2016 statement, the main purpose of the framework is to increase transparency of qualifications at national and European level. It also aims to make informal education more visible and incentivise individuals to increase their skills for the benefit of the national economy and society. The ISQF is a lifelong learning framework and aims to make the pathways through the education system clearer, to increase student mobility within the country and between countries, and to support further learning. A useful function of the framework for the public is as a link between formal and non-formal

and informal learning ([4]).

Levels, learning outcomes and qualifications

3.1. NQF structure and level descriptors

The ISQF consists of seven qualification levels, with two sublevels at levels 5 and 6 featuring different descriptors. Level 5.2 comprises bachelor's degree and a short cycle diploma degree is included at level 5.1. At ISQF level 6 a distinction is made between master and candidatus degrees with a research component at level 6.2 and degrees based mainly on courses at level 6.1. The former give access to doctoral studies, the latter usually not. There is no descriptor or qualification linked to EQF level 1. The framework has a clear division between levels 1 to 4 and levels 5 to 7. The development of these two parts of the framework has partly taken place separately, responding to the EQF and Bologna processes respectively. The links between them, and the overall coordination between the ISQF and ISQFHE, are still under discussion. Level descriptors are presented in an integrated way ([5]); they reflect knowledge, skills and competences and the importance attributed to key competences and transversal skills.

3.2. NQF scope and coverage

The ISQF is a comprehensive lifelong learning framework covering formal qualifications from general, vocational and higher education. Quality criteria for curricula in adult education, and an accreditation process that includes the levelling of adult education qualifications to the ISQF, have been developed since 2016 and curricula have been linked to the ISQF in the accreditation process.

3.3. Use of learning outcomes

Study programmes and course descriptions at upper secondary and tertiary levels are based on learning outcomes and levelled to the ISQF.

Upper secondary schools are entrusted with great responsibility and enjoy much autonomy in developing study programmes and curricula both in general education and VET, using an approach combining learning outcomes, workload and credits ([6]). Descriptions must be approved, on behalf of the education ministry, by the [Directorate of Education](#). An emphasis has been placed on approving the descriptions of upper secondary education study programmes. In this process, special attention

has been given to levelling them to the ISQF, which is one of the prerequisites for approval. All study programmes were completed in the school year 2019/20 ([\[7\]](#)).

All higher education institutions shall follow the ISQFHE, which describes the qualifications that graduates should master when they finish their studies on different levels. The ISQFHE also demands that each higher education institution describes the learning outcomes of their study programmes and courses (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020).

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The education ministry coordinates developments of the ISQF. In 2018, day-to-day responsibilities for the implementation of the framework were transferred from the Icelandic Centre for Research (*Rannís*) to the Directorate of Education, which is also tasked with certifying provision in upper secondary and adult education. The Directorate of Education is responsible for qualifications up to ISQF level 4 (EQF level 5). All higher education institutions are accredited by the education ministry and are responsible for ISQF levels 5, 6 and 7 (EQF levels 6, 7 and 8) (European Commission and Cedefop, 2020). The Directorate has worked closely with education providers to ensure that all new education offers are referenced to a relevant qualification level and lead the work of developing an online manual/guidebook for educational providers.

A wide range of stakeholders from education and training, and from the labour market, has been involved in developing the ISQF. For instance, stakeholders jointly worked to develop the proposal of the updated version of the ISQF, which was adopted by the education ministry in 2016. The Statement on mutual understanding for the ISQF was formally signed by all stakeholders ([8]) in October 2016. The statement emphasised the willingness of all involved parties to work together on the implementation and promotion of the framework, and on the development of methods to define learning outcomes and link non-formal learning to the ISQF. An example of this is the cooperation, between the Directorate of Education and the newly founded Skills Centre for Tourism. The Directorate has supported the centre in developing educational opportunities for the tourist industry (Harðarson H. et al., 2019).

Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways

5.1. Recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning and learning pathways

Validation of prior learning (VPL) is a systematic process whereby all knowledge and competences an individual has gained through various activities – such as work experience, work-related learning, non-formal and informal learning, formal learning, social activities, and family life – are formally documented and validated ([9]). VPL and its practices are based on a [regulation](#) introduced in 2011. The [Education and Training Service Centre \(ETSC\)](#) works according to contract with the education ministry to ensure quality and to guarantee that approved methodology for validation is implemented by providing counselling to partners, coordinating training for validation staff and publishing guidelines and checklists. VPL projects are conducted in cooperation with lifelong learning centres distributed around the country.

The main objective of the national validation strategy is opening pathways for people with little formal education, focusing mainly on reducing the length of studies based on curricula subjects at upper secondary level and formal adult education where a system of credit-based units is in place. The process focuses on assessing competences using these credit-based units. Assessment results are documented, and credit units registered into a general databank for upper secondary schools and formal adult learning. It is possible to obtain a full qualification through validation. In some sectors however, this is rarely the case and a full qualification as a skilled worker is not granted until a trade – or journeyman's examination – is completed.

The methodology of validation of prior learning is not generally used at university level, but some universities do, to some extent, consider work experience of candidates during intake procedures. A committee has been working on developing VPL in higher education; it presented its findings in a report in June 2018 (Eypórsdóttir, 2018). The committee's proposals on the development of VPL in higher education include better coordination of laws and regulations and cooperation between faculties. It also suggests that an independent third party, such as ETSC, could conduct the validation.

Validation against standards in specific jobs has not been linked to a credit system or modularised structure of qualifications. However, standards have been developed for specific jobs for validation purposes. The standards used are based on a formal process linking competences to jobs through competence analysis conducted with main stakeholders. This has proven to be successful in the service and tourism sectors, for example.

NQF implementation and impact

6.1. Stage of implementation

The ISQF is in the activation stage. Implementation structures are in place; the main working methods and instruments are being put in place and the framework is gradually playing a role in improving transparency and comparability of qualifications at national and international level and supporting reform of education and training systems at national level. The roles and responsibilities between stakeholders have been formally agreed.

6.2. Indicating EQF/NQF levels

ISQF and EQF levels are indicated on some qualifications issued in upper secondary vocational education and for the Europass certificate. They are included in diplomas and Europass supplements in higher education. Levels are not indicated on diplomas from compulsory education. The ISQF/EQF levels are indicated on certificates of upper secondary qualifications and in adult education.

6.3. NQF dissemination

The Directorate of Education works closely with upper secondary schools and adult educational providers on a manual to ensure that the issues and questions most often raised by educational providers are correctly addressed. The [guidebook](#) has been seen as an important tool as advisors, overseeing the referencing process, have discovered that educational providers are not sure about the methodology and need more guidance and directions.

Also, a graphic description on the ISQF and its relation to the EQF has been made by a graphic designer and it has been published on the specific [website](#) for the ISQF.

6.4. Qualifications databases and registers

Menntabrunur, the Icelandic database on education, was intended to be the national database but was never fully developed. Negotiations concerning another [website](#) *Næsta skref* providing guidance, which can take over the role, are ongoing.

6.5. Awareness and use of the NQF

Education and training providers, practitioners in guidance, quality assurance and recognition bodies are fully aware of the ISQF and use it in their work. The employment service is also fully aware of the ISQF as all labour market stakeholders took part in developing and revising the framework. The ISQF is less well-known to end users like workers, jobseekers, learners, and students who have not been involved in development or use of the framework.

6.6. Monitoring and evaluating the NQF

There has not been an evaluation of the ISQF.

6.7. Impact of the NQF

The introduction of learning outcomes has played an important role in providing transparency of standards and promoting a more open mindset towards validation of non-formal and informal learning and given stakeholders a common ground for discussions. The ISQF is used in the recognition of foreign qualifications ([10]).

Referencing to the EQF

The first version of the Icelandic NQF was referenced to the EQF in December 2013; the referencing report included the self-certification report to the QF-EHEA. It is not foreseen that Iceland will present an updated reference report to the EQF AG.

Important lessons and future plans

The development of the ISQF has been closely linked to extensive reforms of the education system, including changes in legislation and education policy. The focus on the learning outcomes principle and the ISQF levels has been central to these changes. The ISQF, through the systematic application of learning outcomes, is seen as a tool for reviewing the overall functioning of education and training. The statement on mutual understanding for the ISQF has proved to be a great success. It has become a vital part of the framework's implementation, promoting cooperation among representatives of education and the labour market.

The focus on implementing the ISQF has in recent years moved towards non-formal adult education. The levelling of adult education qualifications to the ISQF has become part of their accreditation process, promoting quality assurance in adult learning.

The Directorate of Education has continued to assist the education ministry with the development of the ISQF. The main challenge in this respect has been to support schools in referencing curricula and education content to the correct ISQF/EQF level. Another challenge is to raise ISQF awareness among end-users, for example learners, employers and employees.

Main sources of information

[URLs accessed 9.6.2023]

[Directorate of Education](#)

[ISQF/EQF website](#)

[Ministry of Education, Science and Culture](#)

Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (2014). *Reference report of the Icelandic Qualifications Framework ISQF to the European Qualifications Framework for Life Long Learning EQF*.

National qualification framework (NQF)

NQF LEVEL	QUALIFICATION TYPES	EQF LEVEL
7	Doctoral degree (Doktorspróf)	8
6.2	Master and candidatus degree (Meistarapróf)	7
6.1	Degree at master level but without a research report (Próf á meistarastigi)	
5.2	Bachelor degree (Bakkalárpróf)	6
5.1	Diploma degree (short cycle) (Diplómapróf)	
4	Vocational examination for professional rights - level 4 / Additional studies of vocational subjects (Próf til starfsréttinda á fjórða þrepi / Viðbótarnám á framhaldsskólastigi)	5
3	Matriculation examination (Stúdentspróf) Other final examinations (Önnur lokapróf) Vocational examination for professional rights - level 3 (Réttindapróf í starfsmenntun)	4
2	Upper secondary school leaving certificate (Framhaldsskólapróf) Other final examinations (Önnur lokapróf) Vocational qualification for professional rights (Próf til starfsréttinda á öðru þrepi)	3
1	Compulsory school final examinations (Grunnskólapróf) Special education programmes (Nám fyrir nemendur á starfsbraut)	2

Acronyms

EQF	European qualifications framework
ETSC	Education and Training Service Centre
ISQF	Icelandic qualifications framework
ISQFHE	Icelandic national qualifications framework for higher education
NQF	national qualifications framework
QF-EHEA	Qualifications frameworks in the European Higher Education Area
VET	vocational education and training
VPL	validation of prior learning

References

[URLs accessed 9.6.2023]

European Commission and Cedefop (2020). *Survey on implementation, use and impact of NQF/EQF: Iceland* [unpublished].

Eypórsdóttir I.D. et al. (2018). *Real skills assessment at university level: results of a working group on real skills assessment at the university level*.

Harðarson H. et al. (2019). *Hæfni er grunnur að gæðum* [Competence is the basis of quality].

Jónsson, S.A. (2019). *Vocational education and training in Europe; Iceland*. Cedefop ReferNet VET in Europe reports (2018).

Lárusdóttir, F.M. (2019). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2018 update: Iceland*.

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