

NQF state of play

 **Iceland 2024**

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Overview

Stage of development: Activation stage

NQF linked to EQF: ✓

Scope of the framework:

The NQF covers formal qualifications from general, vocational and higher education. Adult education programmes, offered by upper secondary schools, leading to formal qualifications are placed on level 2 and mainly on level 3. No qualification linked to EQF level 1.

Number of levels:

Seven, with sublevels at NQF levels 5, 6 and 7

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. Early school leaving remains a challenge. The proportion of early leavers from education and training in 2020 was 15.8%. In 2022, only 32.6% of learners were enrolled in upper secondary vocational education programmes. However, in 2023, the employment rate of recent VET graduates (age 20-29) was 88.2% the third highest among Eurostat countries. In 2023, tertiary education attainment (levels 5-8 age 30-34) was 44.4%. In 2022, participation in adult learning (in the last 12 months, age 25-64) was also standing out at 53.1%, being only exceeded by Sweden ([1]).

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 and Children) 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.

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, 6 and 7 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. At ISQF level 7 a distinction is made between the Master of Philosophy (sublevel 7.1) and Doctoral degree (sublevel 7.2. Level 7.1 will be awarded in exceptional cases and a completion of a research project worth at least 90 ECTS credits. Doctoral degrees at sublevel 7.2 is awarded after the completion of at least 180 ECTS credits including a research project which meets international criteria for doctoral theses and has been successfully defended ([4]). There is no descriptor or qualification linked to EQF level 1 which is equivalent to completion of lower secondary education. 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 covers 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 to the ISQF, have been developed since 2016 and curricula have been linked to the ISQF. Adult education programmes, offered by upper secondary schools, leading to formal qualifications are placed on level 2 and mainly on level 3. The framework is in principle open to qualifications awarded outside formal education and training, but no such qualification has been yet included. This task has been put forward as an action in the governmental annual action plan (*Fjármálaáætlun*). Provided that stakeholders agree, the work on including qualifications in the ISQF,

especially at level 2, will advance ([6]). The ISQF is also open to but does not include microcredentials, modules and international qualifications. The latter are more often recognised by the labour market and skills assessment services (ENIC NARIC). Regarding microcredentials, although the policy discussion acknowledges that they should become part of the education and training system, the work of adjusting the ISQF to include them has not begun yet.

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. 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 should 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 & Cedefop, 2020).

Institutional arrangements and stakeholder involvement

The education ministry coordinates developments of the ISQF. The day-to-day responsibility for the implementation of the framework has been transferred to the Icelandic Centre for Research (*Rannís*) from the Directorate of Education. The Directorate of Education is responsible for qualifications up to ISQF level 4 (EQF level 5), including the certification of upper secondary and adult education programmes. 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 & Cedefop, 2024). 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 non-formal and informal learning is based on a [regulation](#) introduced in 2011. The [Education and Training Service Centre \(ETSC\)](#) works under contract with the education ministry to ensure the implementation and quality of validation arrangements. The ETSC uses a standardised process of competence analysis to link them with ISQF level descriptors. This process is the basis for all curriculum and validation pathways. The ISQF serves as a key element in linking non-formal and formal learning for individual pathways (Lárusdóttir, 2024).

The main target of validation arrangements is opening pathways for adults with little formal education to re-enter upper secondary education, aiming mainly at reducing the length of their studies. All formal curricula in upper secondary education include learning outcomes for each subject, which considerably facilitates validation. The process focuses on assessing competences using credit-based units. Assessment results are documented, and credit units registered into a general databank for upper secondary schools. In very few cases, validation can lead to a full qualification in some sectors. Credentials awarded through validation can be combined, leading to an ISQF qualification as long as the credit units are registered in the databank (Lárusdóttir, 2024). Similar validation arrangements exist in formal adult education. Within the labour market, there is an initiative applying validation arrangements for specific jobs in a given industry to support the re- and up-skilling of employees; validation leads to a certification that could be considered as a microcredential (*Fagbréf Atvinnulífsins*) (Lárusdóttir, 2024).

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 (Lárusdóttir, 2024). Universities are taking important steps in recognising prior learning of adults working in sectors facing future labour shortages, such as pre-school education, nursing and the care of elderly people. Each university is autonomous regarding its academic work and decisions ([9]).

5.2. Credit systems

A credit is defined as the standard for the work effort of learners, whether their studies are vocational or academic, and whether they take place at school or elsewhere. It equals 18 to 24 hours of work. Each study programme is composed of a certain number of credits and assigned a level in the ISQF based on the expected learning outcomes. Study programmes with final learning outcomes at EQF level 4 are generally 150 to 240 credits. Within VET, the number of credits required for professional rights can vary from 120 credits at EQF level 3 (e.g. health care assistant), up to 290 credits at EQF level 4 (some journeyman's exams) and even further with additional VET studies at EQF level 5, such as study for master of craft, film direction, creative photography and health care assistants' specialisation in elderly care (Jónsson, 2019).

In higher education, it is compulsory for all higher education institutions to apply the ECTS structure. The diploma degree (short cycle) has 30-120 credits, the bachelor degree 180-240 credits, the master's degree 30-120 credits, master and candidatus degree 90-120 credits and the doctoral degree min. 180 credits.

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. Procedures for including qualifications in EQF

The education ministry decides on the inclusion and levelling of qualifications in the ISQF. Education and training providers are required to submit to the ministry study programme descriptions based on learning outcomes, suggesting the appropriate ISQF level. In upper secondary education specific focus groups were set up to compare the learning outcomes of the programmes with the ISQF level descriptors and verify that the suggested level descriptor was appropriate to describe the different final exams and certificates for the various study programmes (Ministry of Education, Science & Culture, 2013).

The education ministry decides on placing vocational qualifications within the ISQF in cooperation with the Occupational Councils. The role of this councils is to advise the ministry regarding vocational education at upper secondary school level in their respective occupations (Ministry of Education, Science & Culture, 2013).

6.3. 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.

6.4. 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 dissemination tool; advisors, overseeing the referencing process, have discovered that educational providers are not sure about the methodology and need more guidance and directions.

The [webpage](#) of the ISQF/EQF is hosted by the national website for Erasmus+ (erasmusplus.is), where an introductory [video](#) to the ISQF can be found, along with many links to related information and reports. Also, an [infographic](#) on the ISQF and its relation to the EQF has been published. The Ministry has also organized a conference for adult learning providers on microcredentials; it was held in cooperation conjunction with EPALE, Europass (European Commission & Cedefop 2024).

6.5. Qualifications databases and registers

The education ministry has recently launched a new project, aiming to develop a database on education which will be launched within the end of 2025. Another [website](#) *Næsta skref* provides guidance regarding study programmes in Iceland targeting both youngsters as well as adults ([10]).

6.6. Awareness and use of the NQF

Learners have a moderate level of awareness and use of the ISQF. Learners planning to study in Europe and those following a learning pathway in upper secondary education, all modules are levelled to the ISQF, are aware of and use the framework; other learners are not aware of the ISQF. The awareness among workers, jobseekers and employers is generally low, as it is not widely used in the labour market. Only citizens aiming to work in another European country or employers targeting to recruit employees from the rest of Europe are using the ISQF (European Commission & Cedefop 2024).

The education system uses the ISQF levels as a reference regarding educational progression; schools and formal education providers are therefore obliged to be well aware of the ISQF. The design, review and renewal of qualifications and curricula is also linked to the ISQF. Guidance counsellors use a lot the ISQF, as they mainly aim to support learners in selecting the most appropriate learning pathway and play a key role in validation arrangements. Regarding recognition of foreign qualifications, the ENIC-NARIC is fully aware of the ISQF and how it is used within the education system; it uses the framework in all relevant instances. Quality assurance in education is either the responsibility of ministries or of institutions with very strong links to them. So, there is awareness, but

quality assurance is not directly linked to the ISQF (European Commission & Cedefop 2024).

6.7. Monitoring and evaluating the NQF

There has not been an evaluation of the ISQF.

6.8. 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 a key tool supporting validation arrangements.

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 adult education. The levelling of adult education qualifications to the ISQF has become part of their accreditation process, promoting quality assurance in adult learning. Future priorities include the opening up of the framework to qualifications awarded outside formal education.

The Directorate of Education and RANNIS have 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. The development of a qualification database could become a cornerstone in increasing transparency and comparability of qualifications. Future priorities include the opening up of the system to microcredentials and discussions at the policy level on how to include them in the ISQF.

Main sources of information

[URLs accessed 14/3/2025]

[Directorate of Education.](#)

[ISQF/EQF website.](#)

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

Ministry of Education, Science & Culture. (2013) *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
7.2	Doctoral degree (Doktorspróf)	8
7.1	Master of Philosophy	
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

References

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

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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., (2024). *European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning 2023 update: Iceland*. European Commission and Cedefop.

Ministry of Education, Science & Culture. (2013) *Reference report of the Icelandic Qualifications Framework ISQF to the European Qualifications Framework for Life Long Learning EQF*.

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