

Education system

Iceland

described and compared with
the Dutch system

This document contains information on the education system of Iceland. We explain the Dutch equivalent of the most common qualifications from Iceland for the purpose of admission to Dutch higher education.

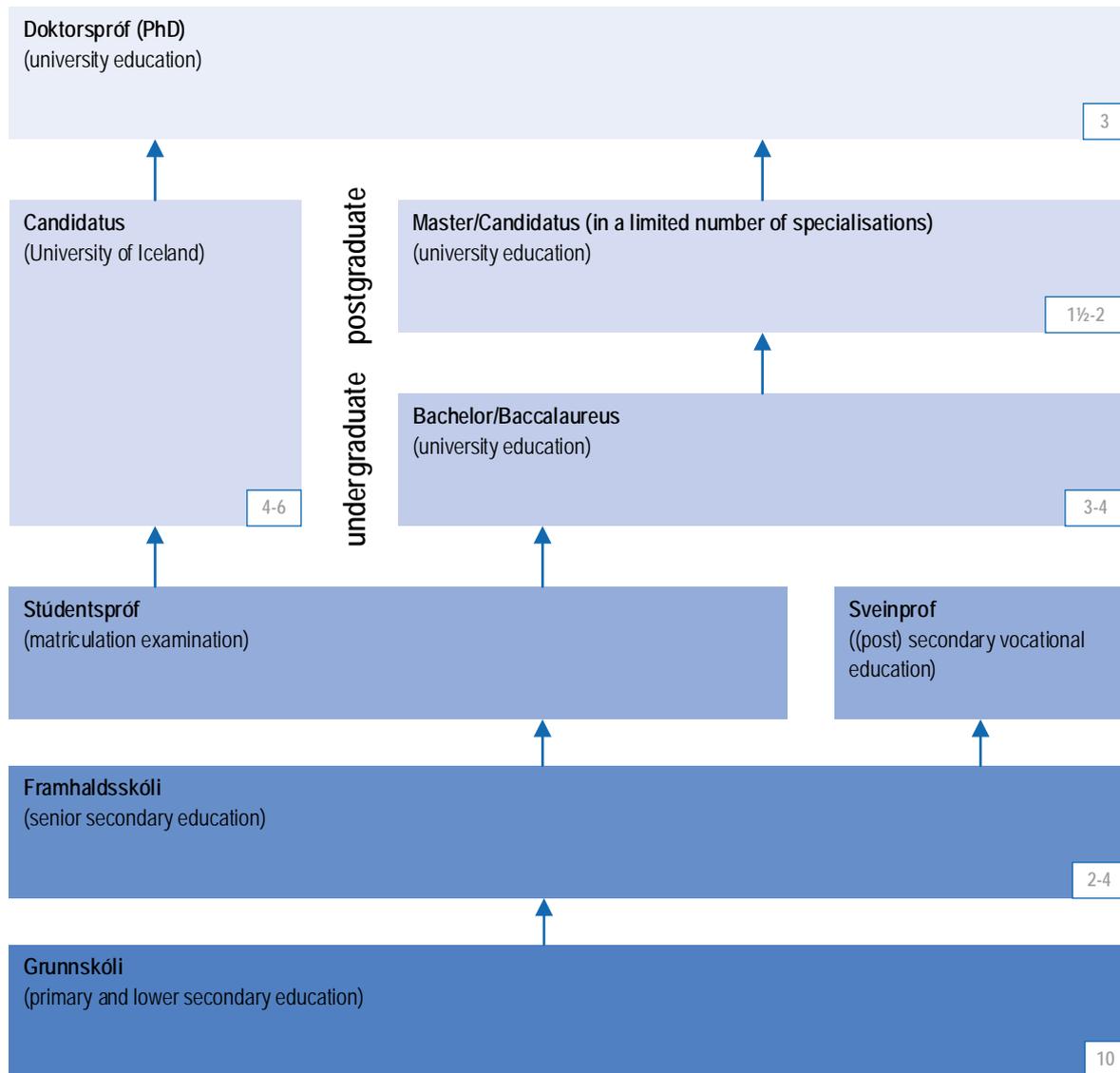
Disclaimer

We assemble the information for these descriptions of education systems with the greatest care. However, we cannot be held responsible for the consequences of errors or incomplete information in this document.



With the exception of images and illustrations, the content of this publication is subject to the Creative Commons Name NonCommercial 3.0 Unported licence. Visit www.nuffic.nl/en/home/copyright for more information on the reuse of this publication.

Education system Iceland



 Duration of education

■ Evaluation chart

The left-hand column in the table below lists the most common foreign qualifications with corresponding levels in the national qualifications framework. The other columns show the Dutch equivalent along with the comparable levels in the Dutch and European qualifications frameworks.

Degree or qualification and ISQF level	ISQF level	EQF level	Dutch equivalent and NLQF level	NLQF level	EQF level
Sveinprof, obtained at a lǫnskóli or Sérskóli	2-3	3-4	MBO diploma (qualification level 2-4)	2-4	2-4
Stúdentspróf (Matriculation Examination), obtained at a Menntaskóli	3	4	VWO diploma	4+	4
Bachelor/Baccalaureus	5	6	HBO or WO bachelor's degree	6	6
Master	6	7	HBO or WO master's degree	7	7
Candidatus	6	7	HBO or WO master's degree	7	7

NB

- The information provided in the table is a general recommendation from which no rights may be derived.
- ISQF = Icelandic National Qualifications Framework. NLQF = Dutch Qualifications Framework. EQF = European Qualifications Framework.
- The EQF/[NLQF level](#) is not so much a reflection of study load or content; rather, it is an indication of a person's knowledge and skills after having completed a certain programme of study.
- Information about Dutch equivalent qualifications can be found on our website: [the Dutch education system](#).
- [The Cooperation Organisation for Vocational Education, Training and the Labour Market \(SBB\)](#), evaluates statements on foreign qualifications and training at VMBO and MBO level. The evaluation may vary if SBB evaluates the diploma for admission to VET schools or the labour market in the Netherlands.

■ Introduction

Iceland is an island nation, situated on the border between the Atlantic Ocean and the Arctic Ocean, to the north west of the European continent. The country has a parliamentary democracy based on the Scandinavian model. It has a population of over 300,000.

The Icelandic education system is divided into 4 sectors: pre-school education, compulsory education, secondary education and higher education. In 2008, the Icelandic parliament adopted 5 legislative proposals, which serve as a basis for all education levels and teacher hiring policies. In the year 2010 the supplementary Adult Education Act was adopted, which sets out legislation in the area of adult education.

On the basis of the new legislation, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture issued three new National Curriculum Guides (one for each level of education). This framework establishes a detailed overview of activities and objectives within the pre-school, compulsory and secondary education systems.

The Icelandic parliament bears political and legal responsibility for the country's school system. The parliament determines basic objectives and frameworks for the education system. All forms of education fall under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.

The individual municipalities are responsible for the adequate performance of pre-school and compulsory education institutions. Secondary and higher education is regulated by the state. Adult education at secondary and higher education level is provided by public institutions, private institutions, businesses and organisations.

Compulsory education starts at the age of 6 and lasts until completion of the *grunnskólar* at age 16. Icelandic pupils leave the general secondary education system at age 19 to 20, after having completed 3 to 4 years of senior secondary school. Primary and secondary education is provided in Icelandic (one secondary school offers IB programmes in English), while higher education is provided in both Icelandic and English.

The academic year runs from September to the end of May.

■ Primary and secondary education

In Iceland, primary and junior secondary education have been merged into a single form of education – compulsory education – which lasts 10 years (6 to 16 age group). This is followed by senior secondary education, which lasts 3 to 4 years.

Upon reaching the end of compulsory education, (at age 16) pupils may take part in nationally coordinated examinations. However, participation is not compulsory.

Pupils taking part in these examinations are free to determine the amount of examination subjects. Compulsory education leads to attainment of a certificate, listing the results of the national examinations and all other subjects completed during the final school year.

Iceland recently initiated a series of education reforms. These measures concern the duration and structure of senior secondary education and are expected to have been fully implemented in the course of 2015. In view of the fact that the education system is now in a transitional phase, this module describes both the old (still current) and new system.

The current system is based around a 4-year senior secondary school phase. There is also a fast-track variant with a duration of 3 years, intended for outstanding pupils seeking to complete the entire senior secondary curriculum in 3 years.

There are 4 types of senior secondary education:

1. *Menntaskólar*: general education
2. *Fjölbrautaskólar*: general education and vocational education with theoretical and practical subjects
3. *Iðnskólar*: vocational education with theoretical and practical subjects
4. *Sérskólar*: specialised vocational education

General education (this includes types 1 and 2) has a duration of 4 years and is concluded with a matriculation examination, the *Stúdentspróf*. This examination is applied as an entrance requirement by all Icelandic higher education. There are 3 general education programmes of study leading to matriculation: foreign languages, natural sciences and social sciences. The examination subjects within each programme are divided into 3 groups: general subjects compulsory for all pupils within that programme, specialised subjects unique to specific profiles and elective subjects.

Secondary vocational education (this includes types 3 and 4) is provided at schools offering general secondary education (*Fjölbrautaskólar*), industrial vocational education and specialised vocational education (*Iðnskólar* and *Sérskólar*). The duration of these programmes varies, but is generally 4 years.

Pupils with a vocational or art education profile may take supplementary general subjects in order to qualify for the matriculation examination. Pupils that decide to take up a trade rather than pursue further education will be required to take a trade examination. These trade examinations fall within the responsibility of the relevant professional sector (trade). Various professional associations submit

proposals on these vocational education examinations. Pupils who have successfully completed a trade examination will be awarded a *Sveinpróf* certificate.

Pupils at all types of senior secondary schools take tests at the end of each semester or school year. These end-of-semester/year tests do not extend to all subjects; the final result is based on continuous testing and assignments.

In terms of level, the *Stúdentspróf* obtained at a *Menntaskóli* (ISQF level 3/ EQF level 4) is comparable to a VWO diploma. A full description of all [ISQF levels](#).

In terms of level, the *Sveinpróf* obtained at a *Iðnskóli* or *Sérskóli* is (ISQF level 2-3/EQF level 3-4) is comparable to an MBO diploma at qualification level 2, 3 or 4, depending on the specialisation. A full description of all [ISQF levels](#).

The main difference between the new and the old system is the shift from a centrally regulated curriculum to a decentralised one. The curriculum is now developed by secondary schools according to a general framework laid out by the central government.

There are 4 qualification levels in the new system:

1. Level 1 (30-120 credits): general secondary education
2. Level 2 (90-120 credits): general and short-term vocational education
3. Level 3 (150-240 credits): matriculation examination and vocational education
4. Level 4 (30-120 credits): supplementary post-secondary vocational education

The scope of each level may vary from half a year (30 credits) to 2 to 4 years (120 to 240 credits). In order to pass the matriculation examination (*Stúdentspróf*), a total of at least 200 credits must be obtained.

■ Admission to higher education

In principle, prospective students must have successfully completed the matriculation examination and obtained the *Stúdentspróf* in order to be admitted to a higher education institution. Higher education legislation basically offers higher education institutions the freedom to apply their own individual (supplementary) admission criteria. For example, some programmes may require minimum amount of credits for some matriculation examination subjects. Universities also apply quota (*numerus clausus*) for certain popular programmes (such as the bachelor's programme in nursing offered by the University of

Akureyri), and entrance examination (like the bachelor's programmes in medicine and physical therapy at the University of Iceland).

■ Higher education

Iceland has 7 higher education institutions:

1. *Háskóli Íslands* (University of Iceland)
2. *Háskólinn á Akureyri* (University of Akureyri)
3. *Háskólinn á Hólar* (Holar University College)
4. *Landbúnaðarháskóla Íslands* (Agricultural University of Iceland)
5. *Háskólinn á Bifröst* (Bifröst Business University)
6. *Háskólinn í Reykjavík* (University of Reykjavík)
7. *Listaháskóli Íslands* (Iceland Academy of the Arts)

The first 4 institutions are state regulated. The latter 3 are private institutions subsidised by the state. The 7 higher education institutions differ in terms of the extent to which students conduct research, the number and type of programmes on offer and the type of degrees awarded. The largest of the seven is the University of Iceland (*Háskóli Íslands*).

The University of Iceland, University of Akureyri and University of Reykjavík offer academic programmes in various disciplines, as well as a number of professionally-oriented programmes. The other 4 institutions offer specialised education in fields such as technology, education, agriculture, arts and business. The universities are authorised to award academic degrees independently.

The structure of the higher education system is divided into an undergraduate and postgraduate phase. Undergraduate programmes include *diploma* programmes and bachelor's programmes, while the postgraduate phase is comprised of master's programmes and *candidatus* programmes.

■ University and higher professional education

Iceland has 4 universities: *Háskóli Íslands* (University of Iceland), *Háskólinn á Akureyri* (University of Akureyri), *Háskólinn í Reykjavík* (University of Reykjavík) and *Landbúnaðarháskóla Íslands* (Agricultural University of Iceland). In addition to academic programmes at bachelor's and master's level, the latter institution offers vocational programmes at secondary education level and the *Háskólinn í Reykjavík* offers preparatory studies at secondary education level.

Two of the other 3 accredited Icelandic higher education institutions offer specialised higher education in a specific discipline: the Iceland Academy of the Arts provides higher art education at bachelor's and master's level, while Bifröst Business University offers business-oriented bachelor's and master's programmes, as well as preparatory studies at secondary education level. Finally, Holar

University College provides an extremely broad range of study programmes, ranging from secondary vocational education to bachelor's programmes.

Diplóma/Grunndiplóma

Programmes leading to the *Diplóma* or *Grunndiplóma* certificate have a duration of 1 year, 1½ or 2 years. These professionally-oriented programmes are offered by the University of Iceland (mainly in languages), Iceland Academy of the Arts and Holar University College.

Bachelor/Baccalaureus

Academic bachelor's programmes generally have a duration of 3 years, although some may also have a duration of 4 years (180-240 ECTS), depending on the specialisation. The name of the degree awarded upon completion of the programme will specify the relevant specialisation. The most common academic bachelor's degrees are: Bachelor of Arts (BA), Bachelor of Science (BS), Bachelor of Education (BEd). Some degrees are exclusively awarded by specific universities, such as the *Baccalaureatus Philologiae Islandicae* (BPhIs). The University of Iceland awards this degree to international students who have completed a bachelor's programme in Icelandic language, literature and history. In terms of level, this degree is comparable to a BA.

In terms of level, the *Bachelor* (ISQF level 5/EQF level 6) is comparable to a WO or HBO bachelor's degree, depending on the type of study programme.
A full description of all [ISQF levels](#).

Master

Academic master's programmes are offered in various disciplines, and have a duration of 1½ to 2 years (90-120 ECTS). The name of the degree and relevant abbreviation will specify the relevant discipline: Master of Arts (MA), Master of Science (MSc), Master of Education (MEd) and Master of Law (ML).

Some universities also offer shorter programmes at master's level, 1 to 2 semesters (30-60 ECTS). These programmes do not give admission to PhD studies. Master of Business Administration (MBA) is an example of such a programme.

In terms of level, the *Master* (ISQF level 6/EQF level 7) is comparable to a WO or HBO master's degree, depending on the type of study programme.
A full description of all [ISQF levels](#).

Candidatus

The degree of *Candidatus* is exclusively awarded by the University of Iceland and qualifies recipients to practise a specific profession. This is an

academic/professional degree in the disciplines of medicine, dentistry, obstetrics and psychology. *Candidatus* programmes generally have a duration of 2 to 3 years, but in dentistry it is 6 years (integrated bachelor's-master's programme). In terms of academic level, the *Candidatus* is deemed equivalent to a *Master*.

In terms of level, the *Candidatus* (ISQF level 6/EQF level 7) is comparable to a WO or HBO master's degree, depending on the type of study programme. A full description of all [ISQF levels](#).

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD - *Doktorspróf*)

Candidates with a *Candidatus* or master's degree certificate are eligible to pursue a doctorate degree. Doctoral programmes are offered by the University of Iceland, the University of Akureyri, the University of Reykjavik and the Agricultural University of Iceland. In order to qualify for a doctorate (PhD), candidates must have completed at least 3 months of study and research following attainment of their master's degree, and written a dissertation.

■ Assessment systems

Both secondary schools and higher education institutions generally express performances in numbers from 0 to 10, whereby 5 is the lowest passing mark.

Qualification	Definition
9-10	Very good – excellent
7 - 9	Good – very good
6 - 7	Very satisfactory – good
5 - 6	Satisfactory – very satisfactory
5	Unsatisfactory

The Icelandic higher education system has applied the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) since 2008. More information on ECTS is available in the [ECTS User's Guide](#) issued by the European Commission.

More information about the value of foreign grades can be found on our [website](#) (in Dutch only).

■ Bologna process

Information on the current situation can be found on the [website](#) of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

■ Qualification frameworks

In March of 2014, Iceland adopted and introduced the Icelandic National Framework of Qualifications (ISQF). The ISQF currently comprises 7 levels, ranging from secondary education through attainment of the doctorate. The ISQF is linked to the European qualifications framework (EQF). The reference process is coordinated by the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture and implemented by the Icelandic National Contact Point (NCP), a ministerial body.

[Website](#) of the Icelandic ENIC-NARIC, featuring a description of the ISQF.

National [report](#) on the linkage between the ISQF and European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning.

■ National Framework of Qualifications

The chart below shows the Icelandic National Framework of Qualifications (ISQF). The ISQF comprises 7 levels, and is linked to the EQF.

ISQF level	Examples of Qualifications	EQF level
7	Doctorate degree	8
6	Masters and Candidatus degree	7
5	Bachelors degree	6
4	Diploma at higher education level	5
3	Matriculation examination	4
2	Upper secondary school leaving certificate and other final examinations	3
1	Upper secondary school leaving certificate, other final examinations, compulsory school	1 & 2

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

■ Quality assurance and accreditation

In order to operate in Iceland, higher education institutions must obtain accreditation and undergo an external evaluation procedure. The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture is responsible for the external evaluation of all higher education institutions. The Ministry is charged with both the monitoring and improvement of educational quality.

Quality assurance comprises a systematic external evaluation of teaching and research activities on the basis of a three-year plan. The Ministry is also authorised to conduct interim evaluations of an institution or specific faculty at the discretionary authority of the Minister. A [quality manual](#) was developed in order to improve the quality of higher education: the Quality Enhancement Framework.

The scope of external evaluations may extend to entire institutions, individual faculties or specific study programmes. The outcome of the evaluation must be published in the form of an evaluation report, which must include a statement from the institution regarding implementation of the proposed improvement areas.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture may commission a committee, institution, business or other relevant national or international organisation to conduct these external evaluations. The implementation of external evaluations will be assigned to an independent body. Evaluations are conducted in collaboration with both Icelandic and international experts, and student representatives.

All higher education institutions are obliged to conduct internal quality assurance audits. The Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education has published a Quality Enhancement Framework in an effort to support higher education institutions in the continuous improvement of their education. The framework is available on the Rannis [website](#) (The Icelandic Centre for Research).

An overview of all accredited higher education institutions is available on the [website](#) of the Icelandic ENIC-NARIC.

■ International treaties

Iceland signed the Lisbon Convention in 1997 and ratified it in 2001.

■ Composition of file

Secondary education qualifications comprise a certificate and an accompanying grade list, signed by the school director.

Upon completion of a higher education programme, a diploma and grade list are issued.

■ Diploma Supplement

The international Diploma Supplement has been in use at all Icelandic universities since 2005.

More information on the Diploma Supplement is available on the European Commission [website](#).

■ List of higher education institutions

[Website](#) of the Icelandic ENIC-NARIC, featuring a list of accredited higher education institutions.

■ Useful websites

- [Website](#) of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture.
- [Website](#) of the Icelandic ENIC-NARIC.
- The Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education [quality manual](#) (2nd edition, 2017).