

# Chapter 11

## Iceland: Getting Back on Track

### 11.1 Education System

Between 2007 and 2009, GDP per capita in Iceland dropped from 48,000 to 27,200 euros. (Eurostat 2014)

In 2008, the Icelandic economy was heavily hit. All three of its major banks collapsed, currency value dropped severely and the country entered a period of political and economic unrest. The whole economy, which focused on financial services, had to be reinvented. The crisis was dealt with relatively quickly and successfully. Many sectors have been reformed, including the education system which had already gone through some major reforms the years before. In the last decade, the higher education sector has been firmly established institutionally. It seems Iceland is now in calmer waters and can focus on building from its new structures (Box 11.1).

A fundamental principle of the Icelandic education system is that everyone should have equal opportunities to acquire an education, irrespective of sex, economic status, residential location, religion, possible handicap, and cultural or social background (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2002). This principle holds consistency with the other Nordic countries. However, due to its remote geographic location, small population and specific traditions, the education sector has a special place in Icelandic society. Education is focused on a broad development of the child, with special attention for ‘life skills’ (Box 11.2).

As in the other Nordic countries, compulsory education is carried out in an integrated primary and lower secondary school (see Fig. 11.1). Such a *grunnskóli* can be very small in rural areas, but can hold up to 1,200 pupils in Reykjavik. In grades one through seven, pupils usually have one classroom teacher, while from year eight upwards, pupils receive teaching from a number of different teachers. In recent years, a kind of differentiation has become common in grades eight to ten. The differentiation process lies largely with the pupils themselves, who form groups. ‘Pupils select a group according to ability, i.e. the best pupils choose a group where they can accelerate in the subject, then there is a group for average pupils and the

**Box 11.1: Iceland – The Basics**

- 0.3 million inhabitants
- Capital: Reykjavik
- Republic
- Centre-right coalition in power

**Box 11.2: Education in Iceland**

- Free at all levels
- Compulsory from age 6 to 16
- Integrated primary and lower secondary school in *grunnskóli*
- Four types of upper secondary school programs, students can regulate own speed
- University admission through entrance exam (*Stúdentspróf*)
- All education comes under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. Municipalities operate pre-primary and compulsory schools, upper secondary schools and higher education institutions are run by the state or private parties

weakest pupils choose a group where the subject matter is covered more slowly’ IBE (2012). Also, compulsory school pupils ‘are entitled to enroll in particular subjects at upper secondary level while still in compulsory school, as long as they demonstrate the necessary competence’ (Compulsory School Act 2008, article 26).

Upper secondary education comes in four types, ranging in approach from more theoretical to more vocational. Education is freely available to all youth aged 16–18. Schools may set admission criteria<sup>1</sup> and some schools are more popular than others, for example because of reputation, size or facilities.<sup>2</sup> Students can regulate their own speed of education, as subjects are usually taught in a unit-credit system. On average, the university entrance exam (*Stúdentspróf*) can be taken after 3 or 4 years.

While the University of Iceland was founded only in 1911, there is a long history of university attendance in Icelandic history. During the Middle Ages a significant

<sup>1</sup>The requirements for admission made by the school are prescribed in an agreement between the upper secondary school and the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. Most schools are public, but there is also a small number of private upper secondary schools (see Eurydice 2014, chapter 6).

<sup>2</sup>There are 34 upper secondary schools in Iceland. The smallest has around 100 pupils, the largest around 2,000. In rural areas, boarding options are often available. See Eurydice 2014, chapter 6 for more information.

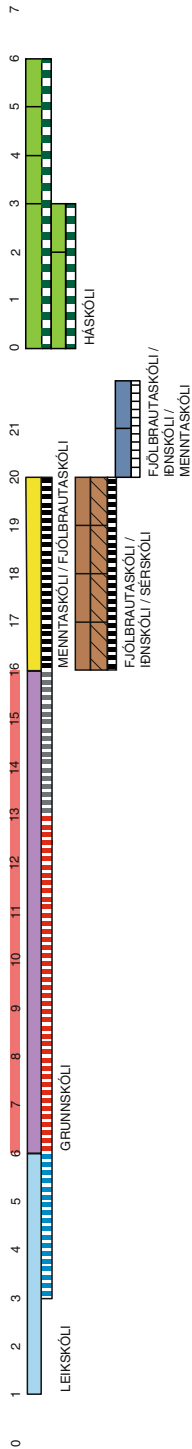


Fig. 11.1 Structure of the Icelandic education system (Eurydice 2014) see Fig. 3.1b for standardized legend

number of Icelandic young men went to European universities for their education (Jonasson 2004, p. 140). Still, it is common for Icelandic students to spend a period abroad.

All tertiary education institutions are referred to locally as *háskoli*. There are four institutes operated by the state, while private parties with state support operate an additional three (Eurydice 2014, chapter 7.1). The (public) University of Iceland is by far the largest institution, followed by the (private) Reykjavik University (see Table 11.1, in sect. 11.4). HEIs can set their own admission criteria. In practice, criteria differ per subject. For popular courses, such as medicine, law and economics, entrance exams are held. The public institutions are free, while the private ones charge tuition fees.

The higher education sector in Iceland is still young and in the last decade, it has been under reform.<sup>3</sup> After the 2008 banking crisis an international expert panel was brought in to conduct a review of the system. They recommended reshaping the education and research landscape and effectively bring it back to two universities, with some regional campuses (Taxell et al. 2009). This recommendation has not been followed, but in 2010 the government adopted a new policy in which universities must form a strong collaborative network (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture [Iceland] 2010). In 2011, new national curricula came into effect. In basic school, greater emphasis is placed on design-, arts and crafts-, vocational and technical studies. Upper secondary schools have more freedom in designing programs. The arts and cultural education sector also went through a thorough review, following a 2009 report (Bamford 2009). Here talent development was explicitly named a goal, especially in music.

Recent education policy is also shaped by the Iceland 2020 paper, which was published in 2011. This policy statement was drawn up after a dialogue between hundreds of individuals, interest groups and authorities, following the banking crisis. The paper contained a vision for the future ‘for Iceland to become a fully-fledged member of the group of Nordic welfare states, which guarantee social security and the equality of citizens’ (Government of Iceland 2011). Education was named ‘a key factor’ and the importance of equality was restated, ‘A sound education and universal equality are the preconditions that will enable the nation to successfully embrace this future’ (ibid).

## 11.2 Culture and Policy Towards Excellence

While the egalitarian culture remains strong, as seen in the offer of educational opportunities, Iceland also has a tradition of appreciating talent, especially within the arts. There are different competitions between schools. In lower secondary school, a talent competition in arts exists, with the annual *Skrekkur* competition for 13- to 15-year-olds as most famous example. In upper secondary schools, an annual

---

<sup>3</sup>New legislation regulating the sector has been passed in 2006 and 2008.

quiz competition called *Gettu betur*, has been broadcast on public television since 1986. Teams of three students from each of Iceland's gymnasiums compete against each other. This competition has been won 18 times by Iceland's most famous gymnasium, Menntaskólinn í Reykjavík. For several years an annual music competition between all secondary schools in the country has also been held.

Some special provisions for talented children were made by local authorities in the past. From 1985 to 1997, the City of Reykjavik supported The Curriculum Enrichment Service, an extensive program offering extra opportunities to gifted children aged 6–16. The program was stopped due to political reasons (Freeman and Josepsson 2002, p. 39).<sup>4</sup> From 2000 to 2004 a program called *Gifted children – Appropriate assignments (Bráðger börn – Verkefni við hæfi)* was offered by the Education Centre of Reykjavik in a collaboration with the University of Iceland and National Parent's Association in Iceland, and in 2003/2004 a working group was asked by the government to prepare a report on provisions for gifted children in elementary schools (Fræðslumiðstöð Reykjavíkur 2004) (Box 11.3).

### Box 11.3: Local Terminology

The following local terms are used to refer to gifted/honors education:

- *Bráðger börn* (gifted children)
- *Dýpkun* (enrichment)
- *Afburðanámsmenn* (outstanding students)

In a 2009 European report, researchers concluded that while 'there is not a specific centralised policy concerning the education of gifted learners (...) the National Curriculum Guidelines for Compulsory Education envisages that gifted learners are entitled to enriched learning opportunities to develop individual skills and talents, for example by providing pupils with accelerated and distant learning in upper secondary school courses and in specific subject matters' (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education 2009, p. 14).

An explicit focus on excellence in another policy area appeared in 2007, when the Science and Technology Policy Council identified particular fields 'where Icelanders have the potential of achieving a specific success internationally' and issued a call for proposals for ideas for Centres of excellence or research clusters in these fields (Rannis 2014). Three Centres were eventually allocated grants: the GEORG center focusing on geothermal energy and the EDDA center focusing on equality and diversity, both located at the University of Iceland; and the independent

---

<sup>4</sup>In an overview of provisions in Iceland, Freeman (2002, p. 97–98) concluded that since then 'there has been no special provision for the gifted in Iceland because the political atmosphere forbids any taint of élitism'. Still, in an effect study conducted in 2000 comparing participants and non-participants, the participants not only had a more positive attitude to education and life in general, but also a stronger self-concept. See Freeman and Josepsson 2002 for more information.

Icelandic Institute for Intelligent Machines. Focus is clearly on research, but a spin-off effect may be that Icelandic higher education institutions become more familiar with competition for funding and the concept of excellence (Box 11.4).

#### **Box 11.4: Key Players in Excellence**

The key players in excellence in education in Iceland include:

- Ministry of Education, Science and Culture
- Rannis – Icelandic Research Council
- Menntaskólinn í Reykjavík (upper secondary school)
- University of Iceland

In addition, the new educational institution ‘Keilir – Atlantic Centre of excellence’ was founded in 2007. The objective of this private non-profit institute is ‘to prepare students, who have a vocational training and/or sufficient practical experience in industry, with the knowledge and competency necessary for further studies at university level’. It is owned by the University of Iceland and a number of Icelandic companies (Keilir 2014).

### **11.3 New Developments**

Some recent developments may lead to more focus on talent development in the Icelandic education system. The new government, that came into power after the 2013 elections declared increased continuity between the different school levels as a primary goal. Ideally, students can begin university studies at least 1 year earlier than is customary. Currently, Icelandic students start university studies at the age of 20 or older (Statistics Iceland 2012). New programs may be developed for talents, to stimulate them to progress through the education system faster.

Also, Iceland faced disappointing PISA results. In the 2012 report, Iceland reached its lowest scores ever compared to preceding reports. The government expressed worry, especially about the negative trend in reading skills (Björnsdóttir 2013). New policies may develop to reverse this trend.

### **11.4 Honors Programs per Higher Education Institution**

At the time of writing, no honors programs were found at Iceland’s seven higher education institutions (see Table 11.1). However, some provisions for talented students are worth mentioning.

At the University of Iceland, students run a company that does contractual work for outside agencies in which students are hired to work on projects related to their field of study (Eurydice 2014, chapter 7.2.1).

**Table 11.1** Higher education institutions in Iceland

| Higher education institution             | Webpage                                    | No. of students, 2011 <sup>a</sup> | Honors education offer |
|--|--|------------------------------------|------------------------|
| University of Iceland                    | <a href="http://hi.is">Hi.is</a>           | 13,919                             | No                     |
| Reykjavík University <sup>b</sup>        | <a href="http://ru.is">Ru.is</a>           | 2,468                              | No                     |
| University of Akureyri                   | <a href="http://unak.is">Unak.is</a>       | 1,493                              | No                     |
| Bifröst University                       | <a href="http://bifrost.is">Bifrost.is</a> | 431                                | No                     |
| Iceland Academy of the Arts <sup>b</sup> | <a href="http://lhi.is">Lhi.is</a>         | 414                                | No                     |
| Agricultural University of Iceland       | <a href="http://lbhi.is">Lbhi.is</a>       | 238                                | No                     |
| Holar University College <sup>b</sup>    | <a href="http://holar.is">Holar.is</a>     | 172                                | No                     |
| <b>Total</b>                             |  | <b>19,135</b>                      |                        |

Note: To compile this table, first the websites of all HEIs were searched with keywords to find honors programs. Then they were all approached by e-mail and/or phone to ask if they had any special provisions for talented students, matching our working definition. All institutions eventually replied

<sup>a</sup>Source: Statistics Iceland (2012)

<sup>b</sup>Private institution

Reykjavik University participates in several Nordic Master Programmes and has a double degree program in computer science with UNICAM University in Italy.<sup>5</sup> Talented students at Reykjavik University are also stimulated by a system of scholarships. Outstanding upper secondary school students can have their tuition fees for the first semester waived and students who achieve the best results in each examination period 'have a chance to be on the Dean's List and have their tuition fees for the next semester waived. As a general rule, approximately 3 % of students shall be included on the Dean's List at each time' (Reykjavik University 2014).

The Iceland Academy of the Arts (IAA) is a special case. In arts education, focus on talent development remains strong and consistent with the Icelandic tradition of appreciation of talents in arts. Over the last few years, about one in every four applicants has been granted admission.<sup>6</sup> IAA also runs a special diploma program in the Department of Music, meant for young talented students from the age of 16 who play an instrument at a high level, but have not yet completed a formal education from the secondary system in Iceland. Their courses at IAA are evaluated as part of their studies at the secondary school.<sup>7</sup>

This concludes our chapter on Iceland and also the part of this report about the Nordic countries. While these countries share the same basic structure for compulsory education, the development in higher education with respect to stimulating excellence has proven to be varied. Development of honors education is strong in Denmark, but in the other countries only a few small-scale programs in Finland were found. However, in most countries incentives exist to change this situation and move towards more differentiation within education. The Nordic Talent Network might also play a role in the further development of programs for gifted and talented students.

<sup>5</sup> However, for this program, no special admission procedure is in place.

<sup>6</sup> Although comparable statistics are not available for all Icelandic higher education study paths, this is considered a very strict selection.

<sup>7</sup> Personal communication from Björg J. Birgisdóttir, Director of Academic Affairs (February 2014).

**Open Access** This chapter is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Noncommercial License, which permits any noncommercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.

## Literature<sup>8</sup>

- Bamford, A. (2009). *Arts and cultural education in Iceland*. Reykjavik: Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. Retrieved from: [http://www.menntamalaraduneyti.is/media/MRN-pdf\\_reports/ann\\_bamford.pdf](http://www.menntamalaraduneyti.is/media/MRN-pdf_reports/ann_bamford.pdf). 5 Mar 2014.
- Björnsdóttir, I. R. (2013). Icelandic pupils doing worse. *Reykjavik Grapevine*, 3/12/2013. Retrieved from: <http://www.grapevine.is/News/ReadArticle/Icelandic-Pupils-Doing-Worse>. 4 Mar 2014.
- Compulsory School Act [Iceland]. (2008). no. 91. Retrieved from: [http://eng.menntamalaraduneyti.is/media/MRN-pdf\\_Annad/Compulsory\\_school\\_Act.pdf](http://eng.menntamalaraduneyti.is/media/MRN-pdf_Annad/Compulsory_school_Act.pdf). 21 May 2014.
- European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education. (2009). *Gifted learners – A survey of educational policy and provision*. Retrieved from: [www.pef.uni-lj.si/fileadmin/Datoteke/CRSN/branje/Gifted\\_Learners\\_A\\_Survey\\_of\\_Educational\\_Policy\\_and\\_Provision\\_\\_2009\\_.pdf](http://www.pef.uni-lj.si/fileadmin/Datoteke/CRSN/branje/Gifted_Learners_A_Survey_of_Educational_Policy_and_Provision__2009_.pdf). 24 Jan 2014.
- Eurostat. (2014). *Statistics database*. Available at [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/statistics/search\\_database](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/statistics/search_database). Used January 2014.
- Eurydice. (2014). *Eurydice – European Encyclopedia on national education systems*. Retrieved from: <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfs/mwikis/eurydice/index.php>. Data for different countries gathered November 2013–May 2014. Last checked 22 May 2014.
- Fræðslumiðstöð Reykjavíkur. (2004). *Bráðger börn í grunnskóla – Skýrsla starfshóps*. Retrieved from: [reykjavik.is/sites/default/files/yomis\\_skjol/skjol\\_utgefid\\_efni/bradger\\_born\\_skyrsla\\_starfshops.pdf](http://reykjavik.is/sites/default/files/yomis_skjol/skjol_utgefid_efni/bradger_born_skyrsla_starfshops.pdf). 11 May 2014.
- Freeman, J. (2002). *Out-of-school provisions for the gifted and talented around the world. A report for the Department of Education and Skills. Part one: The research*. Retrieved from: [www.joanfreeman.com/pdf/Text\\_part\\_one.pdf](http://www.joanfreeman.com/pdf/Text_part_one.pdf). 24 Jan 2014.
- Freeman, J., & Josepsson, B. (2002). A gifted programme in Iceland and its effects. *High Ability Studies*, 13(1), 35–46.
- Government of Iceland. (2011). *Iceland 2020 – Governmental policy statement for the economy and community*. Reykjavik: Prime Minister’s Office. Retrieved from: <http://eng.forsaetisraduneyti.is/media/2020/iceland2020.pdf>. 5 Mar 2014.
- IBE (International Bureau of Education). (2012). World data on education (7th ed., 2010/2011 – update 2012. Iceland. UNESCO document IBE/2012/CP/WDE/IC). Retrieved from: [http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Publications/WDE/2010/pdf-versions/Iceland.pdf](http://www.ibe.unesco.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/WDE/2010/pdf-versions/Iceland.pdf). 5 Mar 2014.
- Jonasson, J. T. (2004). Higher education reforms in Iceland at the transition into the twenty-first century. In I. Fägerlind & G. Strömqvist (Eds.), *Reforming higher education in the Nordic countries – Studies of change in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden* (pp. 137–188). Paris: International Institute for Educational Planning.
- Keilir. (2014). *Educational offers*. Retrieved from: <http://www.keilir.net/en/keilir/educational-offers>. 5 Mar 2014.

---

<sup>8</sup>**Note:** Literature used to prepare this book is included on this list. Some of the entries are in local languages and have not been read completely by the researchers. Instead, they have been searched with keywords to retrieve relevant information.



- Ministry of Education, Science and Culture [Iceland]. (2002). *The educational system of Iceland*. Retrieved from: [observal.eucen.eu/node/583/file\\_preview/file\\_text\\_text](http://observal.eucen.eu/node/583/file_preview/file_text_text). 25 Feb 2014.
- Ministry of Education, Science and Culture [Iceland]. (2010). *Policy on public universities*. Retrieved from: <http://samstarf.hi.is/sites/samstarf.hi.is/files/Policy%20on%20Public%20Universities.pdf>. 4 Mar 2014.
- Rannis. (2014). *Strategic research programme for centres of excellence and research clusters*. Retrieved from: [www.rannis.is/funding/strategic-research-programme-for-centres-of-excellence-and-research-clusters/](http://www.rannis.is/funding/strategic-research-programme-for-centres-of-excellence-and-research-clusters/). 5 Mar 2014.
- Reykjavik University. (2014). *Scholarships for students*. Retrieved from: <http://en.ru.is/services/student-services/scholarships-and-awards/deans-list/#sthash.Xc9btyAg.dpuf>. 4 Mar 2014.
- Statistics Iceland. (2012). *Registered students at university and doctoral level by schools, type of study 2007–2011*. Retrieved from: [www.statice.is/?PageID=1297&src=https://rannsokn.hagstofa.is/pxen/Dialog/varval.asp?ma=SKO04100%26ti=Registered+students+at+university+and+doctoral+level+by+schools%2C+type+of+study+2007-2011++%26path=../Database/skolamal/hsNemendur/%26lang=1%26units=Number](http://www.statice.is/?PageID=1297&src=https://rannsokn.hagstofa.is/pxen/Dialog/varval.asp?ma=SKO04100%26ti=Registered+students+at+university+and+doctoral+level+by+schools%2C+type+of+study+2007-2011++%26path=../Database/skolamal/hsNemendur/%26lang=1%26units=Number). 6 Mar 2014.
- Taxell, C., Yelland, R., Gillespie, I., Linna, M., & Verbeek, A. (2009). *Education, research and innovation policy a new direction for Iceland*. Retrieved from: [http://samstarf.hi.is/sites/samstarf.hi.is/files/Education%2C\\_research\\_and\\_innovation\\_policy.\\_Skysla\\_erlendrar\\_serfradinefndar\\_mai\\_2009.pdf](http://samstarf.hi.is/sites/samstarf.hi.is/files/Education%2C_research_and_innovation_policy._Skysla_erlendrar_serfradinefndar_mai_2009.pdf). 4 Mar 2014.