



Educational and vocational guidance in Iceland

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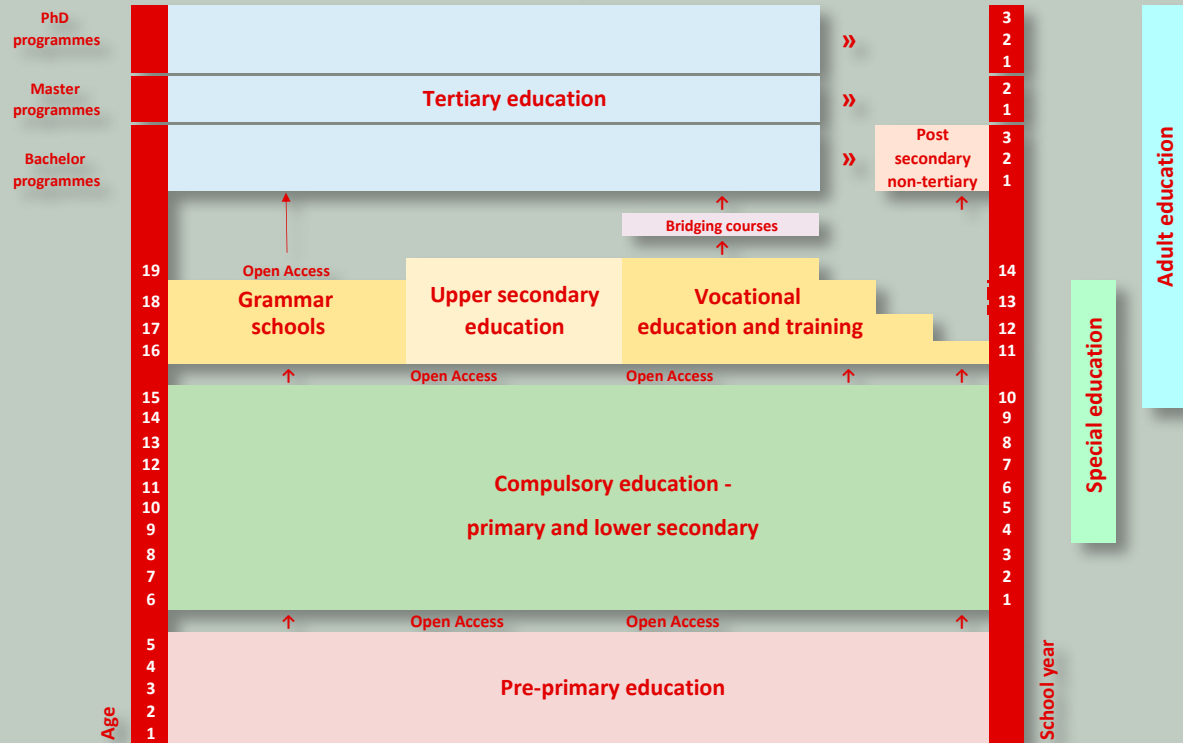
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The Icelandic education and training system



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1. Overview

Educational and vocational guidance in Iceland is offered both in schools and on the labour market. Counselling within the educational system has been the most dominant factor over the years but vocational guidance at Public Employment Services, Lifelong Learning Centres, Vocational Training Centres, and at workplaces has grown considerably in recent years.

A certified guidance councillor must obtain a specific licence from the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. According to Act number 35/2009, only people who have completed a relevant university education in the field of guidance and counselling can apply for such certification.

A master's degree for counsellors is offered at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Iceland; the same degree for all those who wish to become counsellors, whether in schools or at the labour market. The necessary pre-requisite is a B.A., a B.Ed. or a B.S. degree. Some counsellors employed in Iceland have received their education abroad, in countries like Canada, the United States, or in one of the Nordic countries.

Continuous education and guidance training counsellors exists in various forms; both at the University of Iceland and offered by the Icelandic Educational and Vocational Guidance Association in the form of lectures and seminars on specific relevant issues. Annually, the Association celebrates the Day of the Counsellor, where attention is drawn to a relevant topic for all counsellors. The Euroguidance Centre offers an annual course for counsellors which guides those who want to study or work abroad, and also holds an annual conference on subjects related to guidance.

In a broad sense, guidance has mostly been the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture whereas the Ministry of Social Affairs has developed vocational guidance within the Public Employment Services. Other actors who have influenced the development of guidance include local authorities, experts in the field of guidance, trade unions, the confederation of employers, and various other associations, such as the Icelandic Educational and Vocational Guidance Association.

The division of guidance affairs is based upon different users, different subjects, different settings and different ways of funding. No formal channels exist in the co-operation of

the actors responsible, but most innovations in the field of guidance have occurred when ministries, professionals and the social partners have combined resources.

In April 2003, the Icelandic Educational and Vocational Guidance Association agreed at its general meeting that the tasks of counsellors were to be the following¹:

- **receiving new pupils/students.** Students will be introduced to the school and its study paths, teachers and older pupils/students (possibly a students' association). The working order of the school will be explained as well as the rules, services and social activities;
- **co-operation between homes and schools.** In order to increase this co-operation, students' legal guardians will be introduced to the school. Such introduction will be carried out in co-operation with teachers and other staff, older pupils/students, and parents' associations. If parents need further assistance, they will be offered interviews and guidance;
- **assistance with finding a job (specifically for counsellors in workplaces and/or in employment services).** Job seekers will be assisted by offering them help in getting an overview of their possibilities in the labour market and advised on how best to conduct themselves while looking for a job, writing job applications and how to prepare and behave during a job interview.

More detailed working guidelines can be found in an annex.

¹ Neither the government nor the municipalities have officially accepted these as the (only) tasks of counsellors and they should therefore be viewed more as unilaterally accepted working guidelines.



2. Guidance in compulsory schools

Compulsory education, which extends to primary and lower secondary levels and covers children aged 6-16, is regulated by the Compulsory School Act number 91/2008. It is possible for students to take courses at upper-secondary school level during their last two years in compulsory schools if they have shown that they are able to master the subjects in question.

According to the Compulsory School Act, all compulsory school students have the right to educational and vocational counselling, provided by specialists in the field. In the same legislation, it is stipulated in the National Curriculum, set by the Ministry of Education,

Science and Culture that there shall be an emphasis on the education of the possibilities of further studies and work, with an introduction to the labour market. It is furthermore stipulated that school principals shall lead the work of counsellors and other specialists, e.g. health care professionals.

Municipalities are responsible for the operation of compulsory education. However, the Minister of Education, Science and Culture issues a National Curriculum Guide which is revised at regular intervals. It includes aspects such as:

- pupils' self-awareness, moral conscience, social awareness and awareness of civil responsibility and duties;
- physical and mental well-being,
- healthy lifestyle and a responsible attitude to living beings and the environment;
- training in the use of Icelandic in all studies;
- dramatic and artistic expression;
- pupils' ability to understand causal relationships and draw logical conclusions;
- comprehension and productive and creative work, innovation and entrepreneurial studies;
- a good balance between academic and practical studies;
- the use of play as a means of learning and development for children;
- education that is useful to pupils in their daily lives as well as in future studies and employment;
- the preparation of both sexes equally for active participation in society, family life and work;
- a variety of ways to acquire knowledge through the use of technological media, information and communication technology, and library and source work;
- school counselling and the presentation of different occupations and study programmes as an aid in the choice of future studies and employment.

In all their work, schools are to promote a healthy lifestyle and take into account the personality, degree of maturity, abilities, skills and interests of each individual.

According to a survey carried out in November 2014, only 69% of compulsory schools in Iceland offered some sort of guidance and counselling². 32% of these schools however employed someone as a counsellor who did not have the education specified by the Act; kindergarten teachers, developmental therapists, specialised teachers, occupational therapists, social workers, social scientists, principals, teachers and former administrators. The reasons for this situation are several: there are not always enough counsellors available everywhere in Iceland, the schools do not have enough funds to employ fulltime counsellors and some principals have chosen to use other staff on their payroll instead of hiring new people.

Another interesting phenomenon in this survey is that 56% of the compulsory schools that replied say that they do not offer any form of tuition on possible jobs and studies in the future. Only 20% of the schools offered such tuition as a subject on their timetable and 23% left it up to their teachers or counsellors how and when they taught something of this nature. No general curriculum in this field is available for all compulsory schools.

² Results from a survey carried out by a group of student at counselling at the University of Iceland. A questionnaire was sent to all 176 compulsory schools in the country and 65% of them answered it.



3. Guidance in upper secondary schools

Upper secondary education is the responsibility of the state but there are a few private schools, which receive public subsidies.

The Upper Secondary School Act number 92/2008 allows for varied admission requirements to different programmes according to course demands. Anyone who has completed compulsory or equivalent education or is 16 years old can access upper secondary school, where the state is obliged by law to offer him/her at least two years of education, even though they are not obliged to take it.

The duration of upper secondary school programmes is between one and four school-years. The number of pathways available varies a bit from one year to the next but around 80 pathways are on offer each year, the great majority of them vocational pathways.

Some schools offer what is called “a general programme”, which is specifically for students who have not completed the necessary pre-condition in Icelandic, English and mathematics to be able to continue studying. These students combat various forms of learning difficulties and the length of the programme varies according to the students’ individual needs. Some of these students need assistance in a single subject but are able to attend regular classes in others, while others need counselling and assistance in several subjects. Many are dealing with problems such as dyslexia, physical or psychological disorders (e.g. ADHD), history of substance abuse and lack of discipline. The main objective with these general programmes is that students become gradually capable of moving into other programmes. It is however obvious that many students are not able to do so and will need individual support throughout their lives.

Upper secondary schools can be divided into two main types; those that offer some sort of vocational education and training and those who do not (grammar schools). Graduates from the latter can enter universities but do not have direct rights to certain jobs.

Schools offering vocational education and training base almost all their educational offers on periods at a workplace as well as at the school. The length and the share of the workplace training differs from one pathway to another.

The schools can be divided up into the following categories:

- Comprehensive schools, offering both general and vocational education and training. Graduates with general education (who hold the Matriculation exam) can enter universities. Those who graduate with vocational education and training can be divided into two groups: those with legally recognised certified qualification and those who do not.

In the former case, graduation is a pre-requisite of getting a job e.g. as a skilled journeyman. In the latter, anyone can take up the trade in question, although those who graduate from these studies have priority over those who do not. In reality, it is rare for an unqualified person to get such a job. In order to enter universities, vocational students must add on to their general education, e.g. languages and mathematics;

- Agricultural schools. Agricultural school students graduate with valid working qualifications and can continue studying at agricultural universities;
- Art schools. Graduates get neither certain job rights nor the rights to further studies in Iceland;
- Household schools. There are a few, small schools which offer training in various household related subjects, such as cooking, serving food, cleaning, needlework, sewing, etc. They are boarding schools and traditionally all students have been female but in the latter years, males have also started studying there. Graduates get up to 30 credits that should help them get jobs in e.g. canteens. These credits do not give access to any further education and training;
- Special schools for certain professions, e.g. fire fighters, police officers and custom officers. The training in these school is job related and is a necessary pre-requisite for getting the job in question.

Some vocational schools offer specific bridging courses for those who want to enter universities but do not have a matriculation exam.

In the Upper Secondary School Act it is stipulated that ‘Students have the right to educational and vocational counselling carried out by specialists in the field³’.

According to the Act, the main tasks of the guidance counsellors are to:

- organise and implement career educational programmes;

3 Here, it must be added that due to financial cuts in upper secondary schools following the economic crisis of 2008, guidance counsellors are most often the only support staff hired by them. Thus, there are usually no psychologists, social workers or support teachers on the payroll and therefore counsellors often have to play all these roles.

- provide information and counselling on educational opportunities and career pathways;
- participate in various activities in order to enhance pupils’ welfare and conditions;
- supervise the clients’ educational progress and suggest solutions when needed;
- support teachers when dealing with school-related problems and advise them in supervising classes;
- contact parents and legal guardians of students under the age of 18 when needed;
- report every year on the activities undertaken.

Around 90% of all compulsory school graduates start upper secondary education but the dropout rate is very high and Iceland has one of the highest percentage of early school leavers in Europe. Almost a third of all adults in the labour market had only compulsory education in 2015. This percentage has been falling slightly in recent years but it is still far too high, according to a White Paper on Improvements in Education, published by the Ministry for Education, Science and Culture in 2014.

One of the main reasons for the high dropout rate seems to be that many students work alongside their studies, which increases the likelihood of low success rates at the school, which again increase the likelihood of dropping out. In other words, most early school leavers can be defined as either ‘positive leavers’ (leaving in order to take up a job) or ‘opportune leavers’ (have not decided on what they want but take an available job and may later return to school).

The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture appointed a special task force early in 2007 to put forth suggestions on how to decrease school dropout. The group’s main recommendations were to increase educational and vocational counselling, both in compulsory and upper secondary schools, to ensure that all guidance counsellors have the relevant university education and to appoint a special project manager in the Ministry of Education who would be in charge of implementing counselling policies. It is also recommended that a national forum on counselling be established.

Counsellors have also have stressed the need for more career education already in the first three grades of compulsory school where students get much more detailed information on what it means to hold a certain position. Thus, it is hoped that it will be easier for them to find a path that suits their interest instead of wasting a lot of time trying one path after another, never completing any of them.

The Icelandic Educational and Vocational Guidance Association has the main objectives of enhancing counselling, increasing cohesion between counsellors, and advancing their interests in the broadest sense. Additionally it is there to enhance research in the field of guidance, and to further co-operation with foreign counsellors.



4. Guidance at post-secondary non-tertiary level

Post-secondary IVET is still fairly limited, but growing. Different courses are offered at various institutions which provide certification for well-defined professions. The age of students varies because many have spent some years on the labour market.

As education and training varies at this level, guidance is also of various types. Usually the same system applies here as in upper secondary education.



5. Guidance in universities

Seven institutions offer tertiary education. Four of them are run by the state, the other three are private. To be allowed admission, students are required to have passed the matriculation examination, have finished other equivalent education or have, in the view of the university in question, acquired equivalent maturity and knowledge. The universities can impose further admission requirements, including admission tests.

Degrees on offer are diploma, bachelor, master and doctorate. Typical study time varies and it is common that people (re)enter university after several years of working. The main norm is that bachelor's studies take three years, master's degree another two and doctoral studies another two or three.

All universities offer guidance services, the most usual being:

- personal counselling;
- group counselling;
- management of services for students with disabilities;
- counselling on study-related problems and facilitating learning environment;
- evaluating and designing research in given fields, providing information on educational opportunities locally and internationally;
- (at the University of Iceland) teaching and training students e.g. at the guidance study programmes mentioned above. Other universities offer workplace training for students in counselling.

Guidance counsellors working at university level refer their clients to databanks on the Internet and to specialised information offices.

Open consulting hours are on offer at both the University of Iceland and the University of Reykjavík, which also offer e-guidance and have their own Facebook pages.

Annually, the University Day is held, where all the universities in Iceland introduce their education offers and counselling services. Additionally, upper secondary schools are visited and a special emphasis is placed on visiting schools outside Reykjavík.



6. Guidance for adults

Education and training for adults can be divided into two main categories: training on offer for all and training specifically aimed at the unemployed.

6.1. Employed adults

The access to lifelong learning courses is supported in labour market agreements between employers and employees. The social partners have signed extensive contracts on the rights of all employees to education and training, partly funded by specific funds set up with this aim, from which employers can apply for subsidies towards training and workplaces for offering training programmes for their staff. Both employers and employees contribute to these funds. With improvement in technology, distance education has flourished and many schools now offer a combination of distance and on-campus education and training.

Adult education and training for all can be divided into:

- Basic training for people with limited formally recognised skills. Employees can get grants for work-related training which can give them increased salaries or better working conditions. At upper secondary level people under the age of 18 enjoy priority but if there are free spaces, anyone under the age of 25 can apply for studies. People over 25 can only apply for vocational studies. It is also possible to attend classes in the evenings and usually the ratio of lessons per unit is only half of what it is in the day-time schools. Validation of prior learning (VPL) has grown rapidly in recent years and is built on the idea that people can get skills they have mastered on the labour market validated towards shortening formal education. Counsellors play a vital role in this respect and assist groups of students throughout their studies. Adults entering upper secondary schools have access to the same guidance service as younger students.
- The Lifelong Learning Centres facilitate adult learning in general and offer e.g. courses at upper secondary or university education, often through distance education. The Centres offer educational and vocational guidance to people living in their communities. In recent years, their counsellors have visited workplaces in their vicinity, offering guidance towards further education and training. This is done in co-operation with the Education and Training Service Centre which assists the Centres with support and training for their counsellors. Companies can also ask for assistance and co-operation when planning their human resources development.
- Further education and training for those already with some qualifications. There are several possibilities for those with vocational qualifications to upgrade their knowledge and skills, in universities, the vocational schools mentioned above and in special training centres operated by social partners. Two main training centres, owned by the social partners, offer continuous training built on a needs analysis among their owners. Both places offer extensive guidance and counselling.
- Training at the workplace. This is a growing field, and only larger companies provide it regularly as yet. The vocational training funds mentioned above can subsidise such training. Some larger companies have established human recourse development

departments which help employees plan their careers. Training at the workplace can be in many forms, e.g. tailor-made courses set up by the company at the work place, contracts with for-profit or non-profit educational providers and counsellors, and/or home assignments using specific computerised educational packages. Most work places in Iceland are however too small to be able to offer such training on site and therefore tend to encourage their staff to seek training elsewhere and even subsidise such training. All trade unions encourage their members to develop their career planning by participating in lifelong learning courses and to update their skills according to personal needs and the needs of the labour market. The unions publish information leaflets or newsletters and have access to confidential representatives who form an extensive network. Some unions offer their members professional guidance in individual interviews conducted by contracted counsellors.

- Hobby courses. There is a wide variety of provision of training for individual requirements and it has been very fashionable to undergo some sort of such training. Participants pay all costs and private companies carry out the training. No guidance is on offer at these training centres.

6.2. Unemployed adults

Unemployment hardly existed in Iceland for decades, until the financial crash in 2008 when it rose sharply, reaching a peak in 2010. To try to combat that, various initiatives in education and training were started, aimed specifically at the unemployed. Many of them have now run their course but what is still available is:

- the right to attend university without losing unemployment benefits, provided that the student is not registered for more than 10 ECTS;
- study at upper secondary school if the student is registered for 9 units or less in an evening school or at distance learning, or 6 units or less if the course leads to a trade for which it is possible to obtain a study loan;
- it is also possible to attend a wide variety of evening classes without losing any benefits; training at the workplace is also an option where the unemployment fund pays the

unemployment benefits for up to 6 months if an employer pays the remaining salary costs. The same applies for people who can be hired on a trial basis for up to 6 months;

- unemployed people can also receive unemployment benefits while developing their own business idea for up to 6 months.

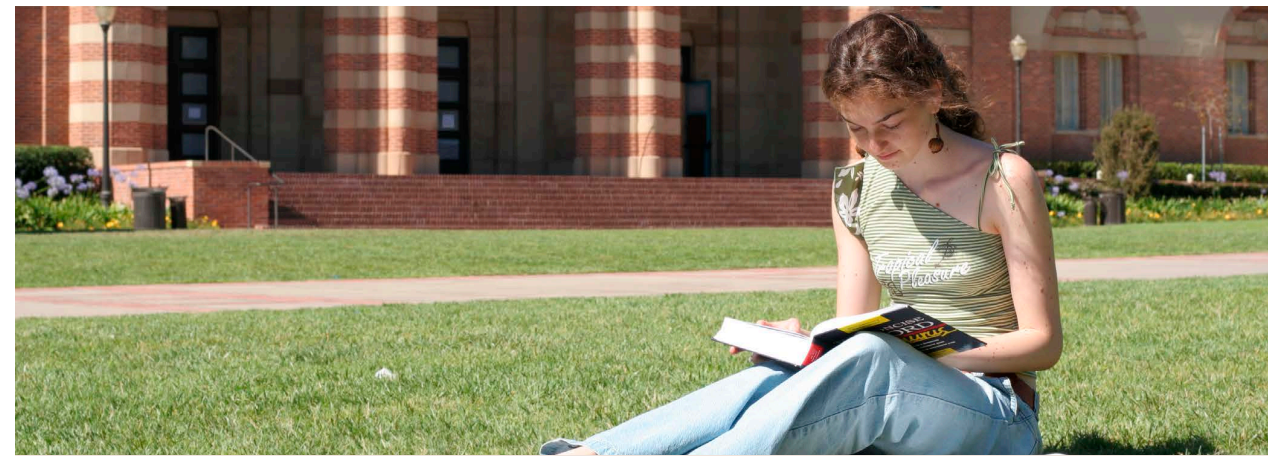
Guidance services for all those who seek assistance, unemployed or otherwise in transition are offered mainly by Public Employment Services which are state funded. The Ministry of Social Affairs has overall responsibility and the Directorate of Labour supervises and co-ordinates a network of nine Employment Services located in the main regions. Their main task is, according to legislature on Labour Market Measures, to assist job-applicants and the unemployed and to provide information or counselling on career development, career pathways, and educational or vocational opportunities. Counsellors working in each one of these centres assist in the making of CV's and giving advice concerning job interviews etc. The counsellors also provide information and advice on studies in secondary schools as well as on higher education level and on the possibilities of lifelong learning and continuing education.



7. Other guidance services

The list below does not give a complete picture of what is on offer but gives a general idea:

- Local authorities have established cultural and information centres in some places which are meant to serve local communities or special groups e.g. youth or senior citizens. In some cultural centres access is granted to computer facilities and information on various opportunities are accessible. Professionals are contracted or work as volunteers within these institutions. The largest such example of this is Hitt Húsið – an information and cultural centre for young people in Reykjavik, where educational and vocational guidance is offered e.g. along with other types of guidance, such as social work, birth control, financing etc.
- Virk starfsendurhæfing is a special service for people who have left the labour market because of health problems but wish to return in a new capacity. There, counsellors offer various services, e.g. information on the possibilities which exist and what is necessary to learn or do in order to achieve that.
- Several labour unions offer guidance services, both for people who are looking for a new job and people who want to study more in order to master their current position better.



8. Trends and perspectives

The demand for educational and vocational guidance has multiplied during the last decades as study supply becomes more and more varied. In all the recommendations given to the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture on changes in education and training, it is recommended that guidance be further strengthened.

The demand for counsellors to be well trained in their field has also increased. With the commencement of the Career Counselling and Guidance Education at the Department of Social Sciences of the University of Iceland in 1990, it became possible to study guidance and counselling as a separate subject. Since 2004 it has been possible to obtain a master's degree in the subject. Each year the number of students applying for these studies has far exceeded the places on offer.

At the time of the writing of this pamphlet, a working group on guidance, had recently delivered some proposals to the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture towards a new policy on guidance. The main recommendations are:

- Lifelong guidance for studies and work;
- Lifelong career management;
- Easy access to guidance;
- Constant development of guidance services and assessments of their quality;
- Co-operation between all partners in the field⁴.

Counsellors have for many years asked for a database on educational offers. Three different projects are now in different stages of implementation to meet this request:

- The Education and Training Service Centre has opened a website called “The Next Step” (<http://www.naestaskref.is/frontend/heim.aspx>). It offers brief descriptions of over 200 jobs and what education and training is necessary to be able to apply for them. Possibilities on Validation of Prior Learning are made visible on the website as well as contacts for further career counselling and guidance. The website is seen as a first phase and the plan is to add elements such as e-guidance and surveys on interest and skills.
- Framabraut (<http://framabraut.is/>) is a web on educational offers for adults. It is based on input from course providers.
- Rannís is developing a database on educational opportunities (partly funded by the EU) which will be linked to the Ploteus portal (operated by the EU). Each pathway in upper secondary and tertiary education will get their own field with relevant information. Later in 2015, the EU plans to call for proposals for another database, this time on qualifications and Rannís will apply for this funding.

⁴ The report is available in Icelandic at <http://www.menntamalaraduneyti.is/utgafuskra/>.



9. Sources

Legislation (<http://eng.menntamalaraduneyti.is/Acts/>):

- the Pre-primary School Act 90/2008;
- the Compulsory School Act 91/2008;
- the Upper-Secondary School Act 92/2008;
- the Adult Education Act 27/2010
- the Act on education and training (pre-primary, compulsory, upper secondary and the protection of the professional titles and rights of compulsory school teachers, upper secondary school teachers and compulsory school head teachers) 87/2008.
- Lög um náms og starfsráðgjafa (Act on educational and vocational counsellors) <http://www.althingi.is/lagas/143b/2009035.html>.

Publications:

Helga Tryggvadóttir et. al: Áætlun um náms- og starfsráðgjöf í grunnskóla með áherslu á náms- og starfsfræðslu (Plan on educational and vocational counselling in compulsory schools with an emphasis on tuition about education and jobs). University of Iceland, 2015.

Hvítbók um umbætur í menntun (White Paper on Improvements in Education): http://www.menntamalaraduneyti.is/media/frettir/Hvitbik_Umbaetur_i_menntun.pdf.

If you are interested in knowing more about guidance and counselling in Iceland, please do not hesitate to send an email to Dóra Stefánsdóttir, the Euroguidance coordinator (dora.stefansdottir@rannis.is).



10. Annex: Detailed working guidelines for Icelandic educational and vocational counsellors

As agreed in the annual meeting of Icelandic Educational and Vocational Guidance Association, April 4th 2003:

Counselling during studies and at work:

- advise on working methods:
 - guidance and education on career and time-planning;
 - guidance and education on study techniques (e.g. study methods, reading methods and exam preparation);

- guidance and education on lifestyles and habits which can lead to increased concentration, stamina and increased emotional balance;
- personal counselling and support
 - counselling and support because of temporary difficulties and/or setbacks;
 - counselling and support because of private problems;
 - guidance and counselling on stress and anxiety;
 - reference to specialists in specific matters;
 - group counselling/courses which support individuals in their studies and/or job search (e.g. making of CVs, job applications, study methods, exam anxiety);
- counselling, monitoring of students' interests and giving information on specific rights;
 - support to individuals with special needs in co-operation with other relevant agents;
 - evaluation and analysis on resources available to people with special needs;
 - co-operation with authorities, specialists and service providers concerned with people with special needs;

guidance on the choices of studies and jobs;

- evaluation of interests
 - evaluation and analysis of each person's interests, done either through interviews or with the use of measuring tools and investigations;
- evaluation and analysis on study and employment abilities:
 - evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of each person in relation to studies and employment. Is mostly carried out through interviews with clients;
- dissemination of information on the possibilities and supply of studies and jobs;
 - providing information and counselling on studies, courses, vocational training and employment choices;
 - employment education: overseeing how employment education is carried out in co-operation with teachers, employment education staff and labour market representatives;
 - introduction to studies: organisation of how the school presents its studies and the

- education and preparation of students for larger common presentations of the study system;
- creating and gathering data and information and maintaining databanks on education and employment;
- dissemination and guidance on how to use information from databanks;

development projects;

- writing reports;
- registration of interviews and subjects;
- processing numerical information on interviews and subjects;
- evaluation and planning;
 - maintenance of knowledge of the field;
 - development of new methods;
 - re-training, continuous education and training;
 - co-operation with other counsellors and interest groups;
 - guidance/self-examination:
- research and surveys;
 - evaluation of working methods;
 - surveys and follow-up of projects and subjects;
 - surveys on the conditions and attitudes of clients;
- education and dissemination of knowledge. Counsellors shall be given the necessary scope to tend to:
 - lectures;
 - writing articles;
 - press interviews;
 - meetings;
 - committee work;
 - developing educational material in their field;
 - seminars.

