

2018

Iceland Country Profile 2018 Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)



MENNTAMÁLASTOFNUN

Directorate of Education

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Iceland in figures

Capital and largest city	Reykjavík 64°08'N21°56'W / 64.133°N 21.933°W
Official language and national language	Icelandic
Ethnic groups	92.04% Icelandic 3.63% Polish 4.33% Other
Religion	Evangelic (State Church)
Demonym	Icelander
Government	Parliamentary Republic
President	Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
Prime Minister	Katrín Jakobsdóttir
Minister of Education and Culture	Lilja Dögg Alfreðsdóttir
Legislature	Alþingi
Nation's Formation:	
Settlement	9th century
Sturlung era (Old Commonwealth)	930–1262
Union with Norway	1262–1814
Danish monarchy	1380–1944
Constitution	5 January 1874
Sovereignty	1 December 1918
Republic	17 June 1944

Iceland's Educational Landscape 2018:

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

General overview of the Icelandic ECEC system:

Main characteristics

The right to ECEC education and accountability: The **right to receive general education** is guaranteed by article 76 of the Constitution of Iceland. The National Curriculum Guide for Preschools of 2011 is based on the Preschool Act No. 90, 12 June 2008 which is the framework legislation for the ECEC. In the Preschool Act, it is stipulated that preschool is to be defined as the first level, although non-mandatory part of the Icelandic education system. Legal entitlement for the ECEC is widely described. In Icelandic legislation it is stated that it is the **responsibility of the Icelandic municipalities to offer children preschool education** but with no age limit being specified. However, over 95% of Icelandic between ages 2 and 3 have been offered a place in a preschool in their respective municipality. Various professional services are also offered, including special education services and psychological assistance.

Accountability for the Icelandic pre-school is divided between the Ministry of Education and the municipal authorities. The Ministry formulates an educational policy for the pre-schools and publishes the National Curriculum Guidelines, while the local authorities supervise schools and pre-schools and bear the expenses involved. The pre-schools are to set their own school curriculum guidelines and it is the role of the municipality to follow closely the implementation of the guidelines for each school. The Ministry performs external review of pre-schools.

The emphasis on equality and inclusion for all students is strong: According to the framework legislation for the ECEC in Iceland (Preschool Act 90/2008), local authorities are responsible for all matters regarding the accommodation for children with special needs and disadvantaged children. Municipalities are to include these measures in their general policy on preschools within their district.

Pedagogical approach: Kindergartens in Iceland take a holistic approach to the education and care of children, intended to promote well-being and **learning through play**. The educational policy of Icelandic preschools is based on six fundamental pillars, which are elaborated on in the National Curriculum Guide.

These fundamental pillars are:

- literacy
- sustainability
- health and welfare
- democracy and human rights
- equality
- creativity

Who pays for what? Iceland is one of the OECD countries which invests most in its education system. **Expenditure on education**, for all educational levels combined, as a **percentage of GDP** compares among the **highest in Europe** or **7%** in 2017, only second after the top scorer Sweden, followed by Finland (7.1% and 6.8 % respectively).

Municipalities are responsible for financing and the operation of pre-primary schools and within the legal framework described above, the municipal authorities are also responsible for implementing the common national curriculum in their respective municipal preschools. On a local level, it is the role of politically elected school-boards, together with the leadership of the preschools to influence how this is done. Primary and lower secondary education is founded on the principle of a unified school located in the neighbourhood of the students. Children are usually offered a place in a kindergarten run by their municipality at a young age, ranging from the capacity of the municipality in question, but typically between 18 months and two-and-a-half years of age. Between ages 2 and 3, over 95% of all Icelandic children have been offered a place in a municipal- run facility. Most kindergartens are public, although self-financing centre-based ECEC provisions exist, but they are always co-funded by municipalities. While fees vary from municipality to municipality, and may depend on the parents' circumstances, the co-contribution of the municipality is always significant (in any case at least 75%) of the total cost of the operating cost.

Young children and gender equality: The Icelandic population is young in comparison with Europe's demographic situation and the participation of woman in the work force compares among the highest in the world. It is also worth noting in this context that in 2017, Iceland ranked for the 9th time in a row at the very **top of the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index**, as the country with the **smallest gender gap**, ranked by gender equality in politics, education, health and economic opportunity

International context: As Iceland is not a member of the European Union, but contributes via the EEA Agreement to the European Union's single market, Iceland has **full**

access to EU's education programmes; including Erasmus+, and the framework programme for research and innovation Horizon2020 and is an active participant. Iceland therefore **develops its policies** in this field **in line with European standards**.

Demography and education: When comparing Iceland's educational ECEC landscape to that of others, the small size of the population is important to keep in mind. With a population of only around a third of a million or 350.000 inhabitants, Iceland is one of Europe's smallest independent nations. Added to this is Iceland's very low population density, ranking among the lowest in Europe. There are 74 municipalities in Iceland, out of which 42 have fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, 5 fewer than 100 inhabitants. In 2016 (latest available data from Statistics Iceland) there were 254 preschools operating around the country. Today, more than 63% of the country's inhabitants live in Reykjavík or in the surrounding communities.

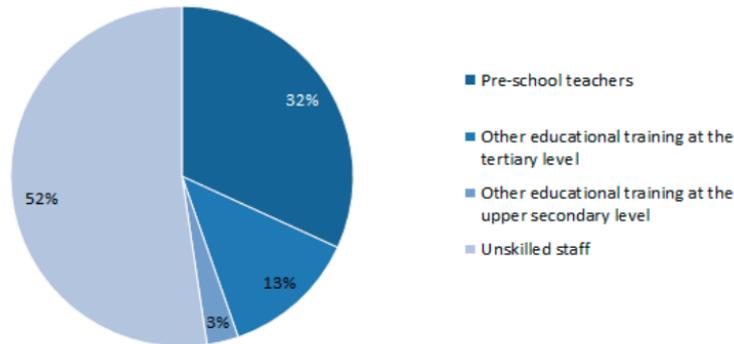
Number of pupils per teacher record low: In 2009, amendments were made on the existing regulation on preschools' settings (Regulation 655/2009) which opened for more flexibility regarding child-teacher ratio. The goal was to keep the same low child-to-teaching ratio as before but allow for the school's leadership to take into consideration the circumstances and the composition of the group year by year. The minimum requirements on the adult-child ratio were removed and it put in the hands of leadership of the preschool, in consultation of the respective municipality to decide on the size of child-teacher ratio. This is usually done by using an equation where the children's age, special needs and the length of stay is computed into the equation, presented in figure called *child equivalents* (Icelandic: *barngildi*). Studies and reports from preschool leadership indicate that since 2009, Icelandic preschools have managed to maintain this record low child-to-teaching ratio (normally between 1:4 and 1:6). In 2015 this ratio stood at 5.4 children per adult for children over 3 years of age (lowest among Eurostat countries) and 3,2 per adult for children under 3 years of age (lowest among Eurostat countries) as per latest available Eurostat data of 2017.

Current challenges within the ECEC system:

Lack of skilled teachers in preschools:

According to Statistics Iceland, a ratio of only 31.9% of staff working in education and childcare were licenced pre-primary school teachers in December 2016. This is a matter of grave concern, especially as cohorts of teachers are aging and the number of applicants for the five-year Masters' education needed to become a licenced preschool teacher would need to double, only to sustain the needed ratio required by law. It helps that the number of staff with other pedagogical education was high e.g. compulsory school teachers, social pedagogues, staff with a diploma in pre-primary education and assistant pre-school teachers. However, unskilled staff accounted for more than one-half (52.3%) of staff working in education and childcare in December 2016, as per Statistics Iceland in September 2017.

Personnel in education and childcare by education 2016



Source: Statistics Iceland 2017

More demand than supply for preschool places. Generally, demand is higher for pre-school places than offered supply. This applies to most municipalities, as close to all parents re-enter the labour force when parental leave time ends (after 9-12 months after birth). Most families experience a "gap time" before their children are offered a place in a municipal pre-school (typically between ages 18 months to 2 years). This varies between municipalities and there is no major structural difference to be found between rural and urban areas. During this time, many find an available place in a home-based child-care facility which is also co-financed by municipalities. In 2017, around a quarter of 1 - 2-year-old children were in a home-based ECEC setting. Centre-based provisions in Iceland are under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. During this "gap time" it is also common that grandparents lend a hand in taking care of the babies. As per the latest available data from Statistics Iceland 95% of children have been offered a place in a pre-school between the ages 2 + and 3 years of age.

Small language community, the nation is diversifying: Icelandic is the national language and the language of instruction in Icelandic preschools. Icelandic is one of Europe's smallest languages, second after the Faeroese language. There are no minority languages in Iceland, yet the nation is diversifying at a strong speed. In recent years, immigration to Iceland has been on a steep rise. Among pre-schoolers, 12.6% spoke a foreign first language. In comparison, 3.8% of pre-schoolers spoke a foreign language in the year of 1998. The most numerous pupils with a foreign mother tongue in 2016 were Polish speaking pupils (38,7%), thereafter pupils speaking Philippine languages, English and Thai.

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