

How to ensure the competitiveness of our educational systems: Iceland

The Icelandic White Paper on Educational Reform: Improving Education and Competence in a New Century

Introduction

We live in a period of rapid technological development, globalisation and natural and societal change. Regardless of what we think the future may bring us, most will agree that a good education will stand us in good stead to face its many and unforeseen challenges. A solid educational background makes it easier for young people to find their way in a complex and ever-changing world, and lays the foundations for a strong national economy and a modern welfare society.

In June 2014 The Icelandic Minister of Education, Science and Culture put forward a White Paper on Educational Reform that aims to provide the country's youth with the education required for life and work in modern society.

As it stands the Icelandic education system has many strengths when viewed in an internationally comparative context, most notably the relative similarity or equality of achievements across schools, the satisfaction and happiness of the pupils within the system, and the flexibility allowed to individual institutions and local governments.

However, the education system has been facing declining literacy rates amongst pupils leaving compulsory school and a comparatively slow progress of students through upper secondary school. As a consequence, reading comprehension, mathematical and scientific literacy have all declined over the past decade and have now fallen below the OECD average. Only 44 percent of students enrolled in Icelandic upper secondary schools graduate on time, a much lower percentage than in comparable countries. Furthermore, relatively few students enrol in vocational programmes, and those who do are even less likely to graduate on time.

Few but straight-forward, ambitious and achievable goals

The White Paper focusses on identifying where efforts to strengthen the Icelandic education system need to be directed and which strategies are most likely to provide students with the education mandated by law and National Curriculum Guides. It sets two principal goals to be met by the Icelandic education system in 2018:

That 90 percent of pupils in compulsory education will meet minimum reading standards (currently 75 percent).

To reach this goal the Paper proposes to increase the time allocated to Icelandic in the reference timetable of the National Curriculum Guide for compulsory schools. Furthermore that standards be developed for the levels of reading proficiency to be attained by pupils at each stage of compulsory schooling, and that reading literacy should be measured regularly from the preschool level to the end of compulsory schooling.

That 60 percent of students complete their upper secondary studies on time (currently 44 percent).

This goal can be reached by several measures, including revisiting the duration of study programmes and shortening studies leading to final examinations, tackling drop out, and restructuring vocational education and training programmes with the aim of simplifying basic programmes shortening vocational and training programmes and developing a tertiary vocational education level. Programmes leading to the matriculation examination should have a standard duration of three years. A screening of risk factors affecting school drop-outs are to be conducted among the students of all upper secondary schools.

Implementation

The Minister of Education, Science and Culture has held a set of meetings around Iceland to publicise and discuss the White Paper, with the last to go ahead in late October 2014. The meetings are open to all, and have been lively and well attended, showing a great interest among educators, local government and the general public in the Icelandic education system. The Ministry has organised three working groups, coordinated by a Ministerial project management committee, to implement the strategic goals of the White Paper. The first focuses on improving literacy, the second on redeveloping the time-frames of upper secondary education, and a third on reform of vocational education. These working groups have a mandate to consult as many stakeholders as possible in their work. This will be achieved through both focus groups and round-table discussions, as appropriate. In addition two consultative stakeholder groups are being established to advice on the one hand the project management committee and on the other a high level group to advice the Minister directly.

Further information

The White Paper is currently being translated into English and will be available from this website, which also contains links to the Icelandic version, and other relevant information (in Icelandic). <http://www.menntamalaraduneyti.is/frettir/forsidugreinar/nr/8048>