



# VET STUDY VISIT REYKJAVÍK, ICELAND

28 - 29 March 2012

## Visit details

### Study visit participants:

Vera Kovariková (expert from the Czeck Republic)

Berthold Van Leeuwen (Project Advisory Group member from the Netherlands)

Ragnheiður Bóasdóttir (expert from Iceland and host)

Thordis H. Olafsdóttir (expert from Iceland and host)

Gudni Olgeirsson (Representative Board Member from Iceland)

Bryndís Sigurjónsdóttir (National Coordinator from Iceland)

Mary Kyriazopoulou (European Agency staff member)

### Programme

#### 1<sup>st</sup> day

#### Meeting at the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture:

#### Welcome, introduction to the education system in Iceland and the system for students with SEN

The meeting began with a welcome and introduction from Gudni Olgeirsson, the Agency's representative board member from Iceland and Þórir Ólafsson, the head of the department of upper secondary schools in the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture in Iceland. Emphasis was placed on the importance of the meeting in terms of exchanging and sharing experiences with colleagues from other countries and learning from each other. An introduction to the Icelandic education system was then presented, including both a general overview and a view of the education and VET system for students with SEN.

Iceland is an island of 103,000 sq.km with a population of 310,575. Job activity is very high, with an unemployment rate steady at approximately 9% since 2008. GDP is high despite the country being severely hit by the crisis in 2008. A fundamental principle of the Icelandic education system is that everyone should have an equal opportunity to receive an education irrespective of sex, economic status, residential location, disability or cultural or social background.

Pre-school education is not obligatory, however 95% of children aged 2-5 years old do attend pre-school classes. Compulsory school spans ten years, from 6-16 years old, and covers primary and lower secondary education. It is a single structure system with no streaming or selection by ability. Upper Secondary education, from 16-20 years old, is not obligatory, however 95% of students do attend. Most schools run a mixture of general and VET Programmes and most use a unit-credit system. Since 1997 there has been an increase of 112% in the number of students attending high school.



According to the recent Compulsory School Act of 2008, the role of compulsory schooling, in cooperation with the home, is to encourage pupils' general development and prepare them for active participation in a continuously developing democratic society. Compulsory school practice and methods should be characterised by tolerance and affection, the Christian heritage of Icelandic culture, equality, democratic cooperation, responsibility, concern, forgiveness and respect for human values.

Upper secondary schools prepare pupils for employment and further studies. Education comes under the competence of the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture. Local municipalities are responsible for pre-schools and primary and lower secondary schools (function and funding), while the state runs the upper secondary schools and schools at the higher education level. The education system has been moving towards decentralisation in respect of both responsibilities and decision making.

The recent legislation (2008) has generally raised the bar for teacher education; a Masters Degree is now the minimum requirement for teachers at all school levels, instead of a 3 year Bachelor Degree.

Legislation adopted in the field of education since 2006 includes: Act on Higher Education (2006), Acts on Pre school Education, Primary school Education and Upper Secondary Education (2008), Act on Teacher Education (2008), Act on Adult Education (2010).

The main objectives of the new legislation are: a greater focus on the needs and abilities of the individual learner (reducing drop-out), making education more attractive (especially VET), relevant and effective, strengthening quality assurance with a focus on learning outcomes and the equal status of academic and vocational education.

According to the Upper Secondary School Act (2008), pupils with disabilities and pupils with emotional and social difficulties shall be provided with instruction and special study support. Specialised assistance and appropriate facilities shall be provided as required. Pupils with special needs shall study side by side with other pupils wherever possible. The Ministry of Education, in agreement with an upper secondary school, shall authorise the implementation of special study programmes for pupils with disabilities. Schools shall strive to provide special support to pupils with specific study difficulties or illnesses.

The targeted 1, 2 and 3 programmes in upper secondary schools are four year programmes aimed at students with disabilities. Their main objectives are to offer education on an individual level, establish pupils' independence and enable them to participate in the world of work where possible and enjoy the quality of life that active and independent participation in social life brings. A special curriculum for targeted programmes is currently being revised. In 2011, there were 32 upper secondary schools with 29,389 pupils, of whom 370 were pupils with SEN. 24 upper secondary schools offered targeted programmes. Few other upper secondary schools accept pupils with SEN without offering targeted programmes ([see Presentation on Education-in-Iceland.pdf](#)).

### **Visit to the upper secondary school Borgarholtsskóli**

Borgarholtsskóli is a public mainstream upper secondary school in Reykjavik. It has 1500 students in total, aged from 16 – 20 years. Students with SEN are included in mainstream programmes with additional support provided on the basis of their individual needs where required. The school offers a variety of studies, both in general education, academic education, vocational education training and education for students with SEN. There are currently 23 students with SEN (moderate, severe mental or multiple disabilities) following



special programmes. Some of these students attend classes for subjects within mainstream courses.

Borgarholtsskóli offers the 23 students with SEN a four-year programme in which the first and second years are focused on maintaining and improving the skills and knowledge already available. During the third and fourth years the students receive vocational education training with a focus on connecting the student with the labour market.

Last year Borgarholtsskóli initiated a pilot project based on various teaching methods. The basic method is the Talent Assessment model, adopted from the USA, which aims to give students independence in society. The vocational training used is carried out both in school and on the labour market. 23 third and fourth year students participated in the pilot, of whom 8 were selected to participate in a new VET project aimed at teaching students how to work independently and making them aware of their strengths and capabilities. The 8 students were selected on the basis of their capabilities (as students able to work independently). The training focused on types of behaviour in various situations: at work, during breaks, during daily life (i.e. a focus on social skills, not only academic and professional skills).

In the new project, the training of vocational skills is embedded within the programme. During their third and fourth years, students spend one day per week carrying out practical training in a company and another day reflecting on and discussing their experiences in the classroom. It is a systematic approach and uses individual curricula, IEPs and Individual Transition Plans. There is also co-operation between this project and the assistants' programme (VET programme enabling students to become assistants for disabled people, the elderly etc) which aims to prepare assistants and SEN students for real working life. There is good co-operation with 3 companies (cemetery, grocery firm, wholesale firm) for students' practical training.

The idea for this project was taken from a US model and adapted to the situation in Iceland. In the process of implementing the project, some ideas were also borrowed from the Rose project in the UK. Throughout the training and following the students' graduation there is co-operation with the supported employment service in order to find jobs for the young people ([see Presentation on VET for students with SEN Upper-Secondary-School.pdf](#)).

### **Visit to two businesses: cemetery, wholesale company**

We visited 2 businesses where students with SEN carry out their practical training and we spoke with the employers. Students work onsite for one day a week for 2 years. In the cemetery, students assist in planting shrubs, collecting leaves and recycling funeral wreaths. They usually take lunch breaks and coffee breaks with the staff. So far, they have not experienced any problems. If needed they can always ask for support and advice from the project staff.

The wholesale firm is a family company with 12 employees and 10 students with SEN doing their practical training. The company has been cooperating with the school for many years without problem. The employer has stated that he is very happy with the cooperation and he would like to employ a young person with SEN after their graduation if there is a vacancy.