

# ABOUT THE NEW ISCED 2011 CLASSIFICATION

More details can be found in the publication *ISCED 2011 Operational Manual: Guidelines for Classifying National Education Programmes and Related Qualifications* (OECD/Eurostat/UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264228368-en>.

## The need to revise ISCED

The structure of education systems varies widely between countries. In order to produce internationally comparable education statistics and indicators, it is necessary to have a framework to collect and report data on education programmes with a similar level of educational content. UNESCO's *International Standard Classification of Education* (ISCED) is the reference classification for organising education programmes and related qualifications by education levels and fields. The basic concepts and definitions of ISCED are intended to be internationally valid and comprehensive of the full range of education systems.

The ISCED classification was initially developed by UNESCO in the mid-1970s, and was first revised in 1997. Due to subsequent changes in education and learning systems throughout the start of the 21st century, a further review of ISCED was undertaken between 2009 and 2011 involving extensive global consultation with countries, regional experts and international organisations. The revision took into account important shifts in the structure of higher education, such as the Bologna process in Europe, expansion of education programmes for very young children, and increasing interest in statistics on the outcomes of education, such as educational attainment. The revised ISCED 2011 classification was adopted by the UNESCO General Conference at its 36th session in November 2011.

## Major changes between ISCED 2011 and ISCED-97

The ISCED 2011 classification is an important step forward in a long-term consultative process designed to improve the comparability of international statistics on education. The classification is used for the second time in this edition of *Education at a Glance*. The major changes between ISCED 2011 and ISCED-97 are the following:

- ISCED 2011 classification presents a revision of the ISCED-97 levels of education programmes (ISCED-P) and introduces for the first time a related classification of educational attainment levels (ISCED-A) based on recognised education qualifications (see Indicator A1).
- ISCED 2011 classification includes improved definitions of formal and non-formal education, educational activities and programmes.
- Compared to ISCED-97 which had seven levels of education, ISCED 2011 now has nine levels of education. In fact, higher education has been restructured taking into account changes in tertiary education, such as the Bologna structure, and now comprises four levels of education compared with two levels in ISCED-97. Programmes previously classified in level 5 of ISCED-97 will now be allocated to level 5, 6 or 7 in ISCED 2011. Moreover, while the position in the national degree structure of tertiary programmes was mentioned in ISCED-97, specific coding for this dimension has been introduced in ISCED 2011 for levels 6 and 7 (bachelor's or equivalent and master's or equivalent levels, respectively).
- ISCED level 0 has been expanded to include a new category covering early childhood educational development programmes designed for children under the age of 3 (see Indicator C2).
- Each education level within ISCED has also been more clearly delineated, which may result in some changes of classification for programmes that previously sat on the border between ISCED levels (for example, between ISCED levels 3 and 4).

- The complementary dimensions within ISCED levels have also been revised. There are now only two categories of orientation: general and vocational. Programmes previously classified as pre-vocational (in ISCED-97) do not provide labour-market relevant qualifications and are now mainly classified as general education.
- ISCED-97 differentiated access to education at higher ISCED levels in two categories depending on the type of subsequent education, while ISCED 2011 identifies only one group of programmes that provide access to higher education levels. The ISCED 2011 sub-category “level completion with access to higher ISCED levels” corresponds to the combined destination categories A and B in ISCED-97. ISCED 2011 further sub-classifies programmes that do not provide access to higher ISCED levels into the sub-categories “no level completion”, “partial level completion” and “level completion”. These three sub-categories in ISCED 2011 correspond to destination category C in ISCED-97.

### Fields of education and training

Within ISCED, programmes and related qualifications can be classified by fields of education and training as well as by levels. The ISCED 2011 revision focused on the ISCED levels and complementary dimensions related to ISCED levels. Following the adoption of ISCED 2011, a separate review and global consultation process took place on the ISCED fields of education. The ISCED fields were revised, and the UNESCO General Conference adopted the ISCED 2013 Fields of Education and Training classification (ISCED-F 2013) in November 2013 at its 37th session. The *ISCED 2013 Fields of Education and Training* classification (UNESCO-UIS, 2014) is available at [www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Documents/isced-fields-of-education-training-2013.pdf](http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Documents/isced-fields-of-education-training-2013.pdf) and will be used for the first time in *Education at a Glance 2017*.

### Correspondence tables between ISCED versions

The correspondence between the levels in ISCED 2011 and ISCED-97 is shown in Table 1. For more details on the correspondence between ISCED 2011 and ISCED-97 levels, see Part I of the *ISCED 2011 Operational Manual: Guidelines for Classifying National Education Programmes and Related Qualifications*.

**Table 1. Comparison of levels of education between ISCED 2011 and ISCED-97**

ISCED 2011		ISCED-97	
01	Early childhood educational development		-
02	Pre-primary education	0	Pre-primary education
1	Primary education	1	Primary education or first stage of basic education
2	Lower secondary education	2	Lower secondary education or second stage of basic education
3	Upper secondary education	3	(Upper) secondary education
4	Post-secondary non-tertiary education	4	Post-secondary non-tertiary education
5	Short-cycle tertiary education	5	First stage of tertiary education (not leading directly to an advanced research qualification) (5A, 5B)
6	Bachelor's or equivalent level		
7	Master's or equivalent level		
8	Doctoral or equivalent level	6	Second stage of tertiary education (leading to an advanced research qualification)

## Definition of ISCED levels

### Early childhood education (ISCED level 0)

ISCED level 0 refers to early childhood programmes that have an intentional education component. ISCED level 0 programmes target children below the age of entry into primary education (ISCED level 1). These programmes aim to develop cognitive, physical and socio-emotional skills necessary for participation in school and society.

Programmes offered at ISCED level 0 are often differentiated by age. There are two categories of ISCED level 0 programmes: ISCED 010 – early childhood educational development, and ISCED 020 – pre-primary education. ISCED 010 has intentional educational content designed for younger children (typically in the age range of 0 to 2 years), while ISCED 020 is typically designed for children from the age of 3 years to the start of primary education (ISCED level 1). For international comparability purposes, the term “early childhood education” is used to label ISCED level 0 (for more details, see Indicator C2 in *Education at a Glance 2015*).

Programmes classified at ISCED level 0 may be referred to in many ways, for example: early childhood education and development, play school, reception, pre-primary, pre-school or *educación inicial*. For programmes provided in *crèches*, day-care centres, nurseries or *guarderías*, it is important to ensure that they meet the ISCED level 0 classification criteria specified.

**Primary education (ISCED level 1)**

Primary education usually begins at age 5, 6 or 7, and has a typical duration of six years. Programmes at ISCED level 1 are normally designed to give pupils a sound basic education in reading, writing and mathematics, along with an elementary understanding of other subjects, such as history, geography, natural science, social sciences, art and music. The beginning of reading activities alone is not a sufficient criterion to classify an education programme at ISCED level 1.

Programmes classified at ISCED level 1 may be referred to in many ways, for example: primary education, elementary education or basic education (stage 1 or lower grades if an education system has one programme that spans ISCED levels 1 and 2). For international comparability purposes, the term “primary education” is used to label ISCED level 1.

**Lower secondary education (ISCED level 2)**

Programmes at the lower secondary education level are designed to lay the foundation across a wide range of subjects and to prepare children and young people for more specialised study at upper secondary and higher levels of education. The beginning – or the end – of lower secondary education often involves a change of school for young students and also a change in the style of instruction.

In some education systems, programmes may be differentiated by orientation, although this is more common at upper secondary level. Vocational programmes, where they exist at this level, generally offer options for young people wishing to prepare for direct entry into the labour market in low- or semi-skilled jobs. They may also be the first step in vocational education, giving access to more advanced vocational programmes at the upper secondary level.

Programmes classified at ISCED level 2 may be referred to in many ways, for example: secondary school (stage one/lower grades), junior secondary school, middle school or junior high school. If a programme spans ISCED levels 1 and 2, the terms elementary education or basic school (second stage/upper grades) are often used. For international comparability purposes, the term “lower secondary education” is used to label ISCED level 2.

**Upper secondary education (ISCED level 3)**

Programmes at the upper secondary education level are more specialised than those at the lower secondary level and offer students more choices and diverse pathways for completing their secondary education. The range of subjects studied by a single student tends to be narrower than at lower levels of education, but the content is more complex and the study more in-depth.

Programmes offered are differentiated by orientation and often by broad subject groups. General programmes are usually designed for students planning to continue to academic or professional studies at the tertiary level. Students will often begin to specialise in specific fields, such as the sciences, humanities or social sciences, even if they are expected to continue to take some courses in basic subjects like the national language, mathematics and, perhaps, a foreign language. There can also be general programmes at ISCED level 3 that do not provide access to tertiary education, but these are comparatively rare. Vocational programmes exist both to offer options to young people who might otherwise leave school without any qualifications from an upper secondary programme and for those wishing to prepare for skilled worker and/or technician jobs.

Second chance or re-integration programmes that either review material already covered in upper secondary programmes or provide opportunities for young people to change streams or enter an occupation requiring an upper secondary qualification that they did not earn during their previous studies, are also classified at this level.

Programmes classified at ISCED level 3 may be referred to in many ways, for example: secondary school (stage two/upper grades), senior secondary school or (senior) high school. For international comparability purposes, the term “upper secondary education” is used to label ISCED level 3.

**Post-secondary non-tertiary education (ISCED level 4)**

Programmes at the post-secondary non-tertiary education level are not significantly more complex than those at the upper secondary level. They generally serve to broaden rather than deepen the knowledge, skills and competencies already gained through successful (full) level completion of upper secondary education. They may be designed to increase options for participants in the labour market, for further studies at the tertiary level, or both.

Usually, programmes at ISCED level 4 are vocationally oriented. They may be referred to in many ways, for example: technician diploma, primary professional education or *préparation aux carrières administratives*. For international comparability purposes, the term “post-secondary non-tertiary education” is used to label ISCED level 4.

### **ISCED 2011 tertiary education levels (ISCED levels 5-8)**

Tertiary education builds on secondary education, providing learning activities at a high level of complexity in specialised fields of study. Tertiary education includes what is commonly understood as academic education but also includes advanced vocational or professional education.

There is usually a clear hierarchy between qualifications granted by tertiary education programmes. It comprises ISCED levels 5 (short-cycle tertiary education), 6 (bachelor’s or equivalent level), 7 (master’s or equivalent level) and 8 (doctoral or equivalent level). The content of programmes at the tertiary level is more complex and advanced than in lower ISCED levels.

#### ■ **Short-cycle tertiary education (ISCED level 5)**

The content of ISCED level 5 programmes is noticeably more complex than in upper secondary programmes giving access to this level. ISCED level 5 programmes serve to deepen knowledge by imparting new techniques, concepts and ideas not generally covered in upper secondary education. By comparison, ISCED level 4 programmes serve to broaden knowledge and are typically not significantly more advanced than programmes at ISCED level 3.

Programmes classified at ISCED level 5 may be referred to in many ways, for example: higher technical education, community college education, technician or advanced/higher vocational training, associate degree, *bac+2*. For international comparability purposes, the term “short-cycle tertiary education” is used to label ISCED level 5.

#### ■ **Bachelor’s or equivalent level (ISCED level 6)**

Programmes at ISCED level 6, or bachelor’s or equivalent level, are longer and usually more theoretically oriented than ISCED level 5 programmes. They are often designed to provide participants with intermediate academic and/or professional knowledge, skills and competencies, leading to a first degree or equivalent qualification.

They typically have a duration of three to four years of full-time study at the tertiary level. They may include practical components and/or involve periods of work experience as well as theoretically based studies. They are traditionally offered by universities and equivalent tertiary educational institutions.

Programmes classified at ISCED level 6 may be referred to in many ways, for example: bachelor’s programme, licence or first university cycle. For international comparability purposes, the term “bachelor’s or equivalent level” is used to label ISCED level 6.

#### ■ **Master’s or equivalent level (ISCED level 7)**

Programmes at ISCED level 7, or master’s or equivalent level, have a significantly more complex content than programmes at ISCED level 6 and are usually more specialised. The content of ISCED level 7 programmes is often designed to provide participants with advanced academic and/or professional knowledge, skills and competencies, leading to a second degree or equivalent qualification. Programmes at this level may have a substantial research component but do not yet lead to the award of a doctoral qualification. The cumulative duration of studies at the tertiary level is usually five to eight years or even longer.

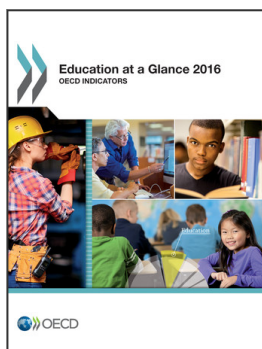
Programmes classified at ISCED level 7 may be referred to in many ways, for example: master’s programmes or magister studies. For international comparability purposes, the term “master’s or equivalent level” is used to label ISCED level 7.

#### ■ **Doctoral or equivalent level (ISCED level 8)**

Programmes at ISCED level 8, or doctoral or equivalent level, are designed primarily to lead to an advanced research qualification. Programmes at this ISCED level are devoted to advanced study and original research and are typically offered only by research-oriented tertiary educational institutions, such as universities. Doctoral programmes exist in both academic and professional fields.

The theoretical duration of these programmes is three years full time in most countries, although the actual time that students take to complete the programmes is typically longer.

Programmes classified at ISCED level 8 may be referred to in many ways, for example: PhD, DPhil, D.Lit, D.Sc, LL.D, doctorate or similar terms. For international comparability purposes the term, “doctoral or equivalent level” is used to label ISCED level 8.



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