



UNESCO
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STATISTICS

**Review of the International Standard Classification of
Education 1997
(ISCED 97)**

**Proposal on the classification of secondary education
programmes for UIS regional expert meetings
2009/2010**

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ISCED Technical Advisory Panel
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Proposal overview

1. This proposal regards the revision of ISCED 97 levels 2 and 3 and some ISCED 4 programmes, namely those that are equivalent to ISCED level 3 programmes in terms of the qualifications they award.
2. In many countries, secondary education is slowly becoming universal, while at the same time becoming more differentiated especially at the upper secondary level. Therefore a differentiated classification system for secondary education programmes is indispensable for pertinent international education statistics.
3. Issues identified in the ISCED review with respect to levels 2 and 3 are:
 - It is necessary to better define 'programme orientation'. For indicator purposes, it is necessary to distinguish vocational from general programmes at ISCED levels 2 and 3. Not much use is made of the 'pre-vocational' programme orientation (neither in the mappings nor in indicator construction).
 - The review of the notion of 'programme destination' and its use in ISCED as well as indicator construction is also necessary.
 - Whereas some combinations of ISCED levels and 'programme destination' are hardly used in the ISCED mappings (e.g. ISCED 2B, 2C and 3B), some combinations of 'programme destination' and 'programme orientation' are used in ways that do not make much sense from a substantive point of view (e.g. 3C general). Programmes in 3A (vocational) and 3B as well as 2A (vocational) and 2B often look quite similar in terms of their content.
 - At ISCED level 3, many countries classify vocational programmes in the current 'A' category, which shows that vocational programmes are no longer a "dead end" (that is, terminal programmes) and give the same opportunities for further education as current general 3A programmes.
 - Some countries have several general educational programmes in the current ISCED 3 (e.g. O-Levels *and* A-Levels), although only the higher one prepares for the current ISCED 5A programmes.
 - The classification of second cycle, second chance, bridging, remedial and adult education programmes (mostly in ISCED 3 and some in ISCED 4) should be reviewed (please refer to the extended glossary handout for proposed definitions). It is necessary to provide guidelines for their classification to ensure international comparability.
 - It needs to be specified more clearly what constitutes level completion for the calculation of lower and upper secondary graduates and the measurement of educational attainment. Different duration criteria were used by different international agencies with respect to the current ISCED 3C short and long categories and some short programmes can also be found in ISCED 3B.
4. This proposal aims at improving the criteria for defining ISCED levels 2 and 3, and simplifying the way in which the complementary dimensions

(programme orientation and programme destination) are conceptualised. While it is still important to consider these two notions for data collection, production of indicators and reporting, experience over the last 13 years has shown the need to reduce the number of possible sub-categories in ISCED.

Definition of ISCED level 2

5. ISCED level 2, or lower secondary education/second stage of basic education, is typically more subject-focused than ISCED level 1, often employing more specialised teachers who conduct classes in their field of specialisation.
6. ISCED level 2 requires the completion of primary education (ISCED 1) or a demonstrable ability to handle ISCED 2 content through a combination of prior education and life/work experience.
7. The boundary between ISCED 1 and ISCED 2 coincides with the transition point in national educational structures where the way in which instruction is organised begins to change.
 - The beginning of subject-focused teaching is the main criterion for drawing the boundary between ISCED level 1 and ISCED level 2.
 - Lower secondary education (ISCED 2) begins after 4 to 7 (most often after 6)¹ years of ISCED 1 education, i.e. at age 10 to 13 (most often age 12)
 - Educational programmes spanning ISCED levels 1 and 2 (or even beyond) in an integrated structure are frequently referred nationally to as 'basic education programmes'. If basic education is divided into cycles, this may facilitate the classification of these into ISCED levels 1 and 2 (or even beyond).
 - In order to preserve the international comparability of education statistics and indicators for countries with basic education systems where no clear break point exists from an organisational point of view (e.g. subject-focused teaching, different cycles), the educational programme should be assigned to span ISCED levels 1 and 2 considering the first six years as ISCED 1 and the remaining years to ISCED 2 (and 3 if necessary).
8. National transition points should be the dominant factor for determining the boundary between ISCED levels 2 (lower secondary) and 3 (upper secondary).
 - The end of ISCED level 2 coincides with the end of compulsory full-time education in many countries. The end of ISCED level 2 is a major educational transition point in these countries: it is a first labour market entry point, and the first school-leaving certificate is awarded at the end of ISCED level 2. In countries where compulsory education extends *beyond* ISCED level 2, the end of ISCED 2 is often where choice of (or selection into) general and vocational programmes at level 3 occurs. (In yet other countries however compulsory education is shorter and the first school-leaving certificate is awarded earlier, e.g. after ISCED 1.)

¹ The ISCED mappings show that the most common duration of an ISCED 1 programme is 6 years-long world-wide.

- In countries with no national break-point that would facilitate classifying the programme between ISCED 2 and ISCED 3, the cumulative duration after the beginning of ISCED 1 should be used (world-wide, it is considered that ISCED 2 finishes after 8-10 years of cumulative duration since the beginning of ISCED 1).

Definition of ISCED level 3

9. ISCED level 3, or upper secondary education, offers more specialised instruction than ISCED level 2, often employing more highly qualified teachers who conduct classes in their field of specialisation.
10. ISCED 3 requires the completion of lower secondary education (ISCED 2) or a demonstrable ability to handle ISCED 3 content through a combination of prior education and life/work experience. A certificate for successful completion of ISCED level 2 may be required for entering some or all ISCED 3 programmes in a specific country.
11. For drawing the boundary between ISCED 2 and 3, see above.
12. The assignment of educational programmes to levels 2 and 3 is not always straightforward and an analysis of the ISCED mappings shows inconsistencies across countries. Therefore the following proposal is made to clarify the classification of secondary education programmes:
 - Only those general education programmes concluding with a general education certificate that gives *direct* access to educational programmes in tertiary education should be classified as upper secondary education. General secondary education programmes that do not give direct access to tertiary education should be classified as lower secondary education according to the criteria given above for level 2. This identifies the boundary between ISCED levels 2 and 3 in difficult cases, especially if there are two transition points within secondary education in a specific country.
13. National transition points should be the dominant factor for determining the boundary between ISCED levels 3 (upper secondary) and blocks 0 and tertiary education (see proposal on ISCED levels 4/5/6).
 - The end of ISCED level 3 marks the end of secondary education, which is defined by the acquisition of educational certificates permitting direct entry to tertiary education. It is an important labour market entry point, and the kind of programme attended in ISCED level 3 and the certification awarded upon successful completion is crucial for individuals' future educational opportunities.
 - ISCED level 3 programmes typically end 12 or 13 years after the beginning of ISCED 1 or at around age 18, but exit from upper secondary education may range from after 11 to 14 years of schooling (or age 17 to age 20) across countries.

Complementary dimensions at ISCED levels 2 and 3

14. The two complementary dimensions ‘programme orientation’ and ‘programme destination’ are retained from ISCED 97. They are however simplified to dichotomies based on access to a specific higher level of education (or not) and re-defined orientation categories. They are also combined to form a limited number of sub-categories at ISCED levels 2 and 3.
15. Programme orientation distinguishes “general” from “technical and vocational education and training” (TVET) programmes, as defined in the glossary handout.
 - Programmes that were classified as pre-vocational in ISCED 97 (this was rare) are proposed to be included in the ‘general’ category. Pre-vocational education comprises education that is mainly designed to introduce participants to the world of work and to prepare them for entry into vocational or technical education programmes.
16. Programme destination is proposed to distinguish programmes that prepare for and/or give access to a specific higher level of education and other (mostly terminal) programmes. The labour market is always a possible destination (if compulsory schooling laws allow).
17. The concept of *blocks* is used to denote *combinations* of programme orientation, programme destination and programme duration² in order to optimise the number of sub-categories within ISCED levels 2 and 3. See figure 1.
18. Within level 2, the following blocks are proposed:
 - **Block 0:** short vocational programmes that do not give access to ISCED level 3. Completion of block 0 programmes does not count as completion of ISCED level 2.
 - **Block 1:** long vocational programmes that do not give access to ISCED level 3.
 - **Block 2:** long vocational programmes that give access to ISCED level 3.
 - **Block 3:** long general programmes that give access to ISCED level 3.
19. Within level 3, the following blocks are proposed:
 - **Block 0:** ‘short’ vocational programmes that do not give access to ISCED tertiary education (blocks 1, 2 and 3 in the proposal on the revision of ISCED levels 4, 5 and 6). Completion of block 0 programmes does not count as completion of ISCED level 3.
 - **Block 1:** ‘long’ vocational programmes that do not give access to ISCED tertiary education. These programmes may give access to block 0 programmes in post-secondary education.
 - **Block 2:** vocational programmes that give access to ISCED tertiary education.

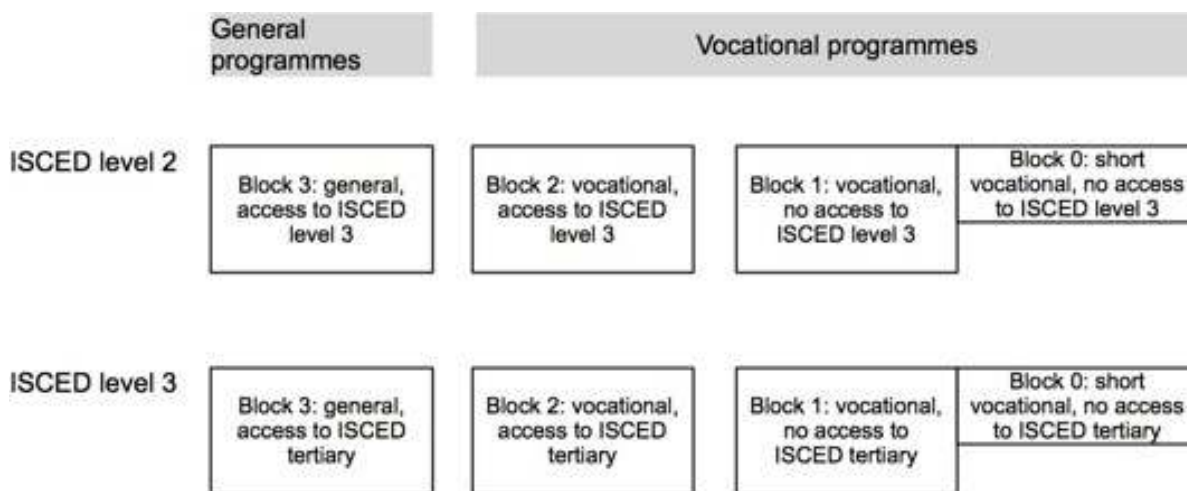
² At the current stage of the discussion on the review of ISCED 2 and 3, duration is used to differentiate two categories in the *vocational - no access* category (see figure 1). This distinction is important for the implications different durations have on what constitutes *level completion* for the calculation of lower and upper secondary graduates and the measurement of educational attainment. Because the notion of ‘level completion’ applies to all ISCED levels, this is being addressed by the TAP in the re-drafting of paragraphs 1-36 of ISCED 97.

- **Block 3:** general programmes that give access to ISCED tertiary education.

20. ISCED levels 2 and 3 can additionally be sub-differentiated using fields of education and training.

21. The following figure shows the categories of educational programmes at ISCED levels 2 and 3 using the new conceptions for orientation and destination.

Figure 1: Blocks in secondary education (ISCED 2 and ISCED 3)



22. Suggested classification procedure:

1. Draw a distinction between general and vocational programmes first.
2. Then distinguish, within the vocational programmes,
 - a) those that give direct access to a higher level of education (=block 2 in proposal above) and
 - b) those that do not give direct access to a higher level of education. Within the latter, we need to distinguish
 - b1) those that are 'long' and thus considered as level completion (=block 1 above) and
 - b2) those that are short and thus not considered as level completion (=block 0 above).

Recommendations

23. The regional meetings organised by UIS are invited to discuss the implications of the following recommendations for their region and give specific feedback to the ISCED TAP.
24. Second cycle, second chance, bridging, remedial and adult education programmes (see extended glossary handout) should be classified strictly according to their level of content. The ISCED level of these programmes should be the same as that of an equivalent 'mainstream' programme.
 - This implies that many of the programmes formerly classified as 4A or 4B general or vocational will now be classified as ISCED 3, blocks 2 (for vocational programmes) and 3 (for general programmes). The programmes could be identified as second cycle, second chance, remedial and adult education programmes in the ISCED mappings.
25. Each country's ISCED mapping needs to identify at least one direct general education pathway from ISCED level 1 to tertiary education. Direct means that no level has to be completed twice. Post-secondary non-tertiary education (former ISCED level 4, block 0 in the proposal on ISCED 4/5/6) is not part of the direct pathway.
26. New blocks are defined to simplify the definition and use of sub-categories within levels 2 and 3. The blocks are defined by the complementary dimensions programme orientation, destination, and duration³.
 - The complementary dimension 'programme orientation' is simplified by summarising the categories 'general' and 'pre-vocational'. It is necessary to discuss the new definitions of general and TVET education in this context. This is addressed during the TVET session during the ISCED regional meetings.
 - The complementary dimension 'programme destination' is simplified into two categories: programmes that *provide access* to a specific higher level and those that *do not provide access* to a specific higher level.
 - Given the classification of programmes with different durations in ISCED 2 and 3, it is necessary to provide guidelines to ensure the international comparability of the graduates and educational attainment indicators. This should be done in coordination with the work on Educational Attainment, which is part of the ISCED review as well.
 - The blocks established by cross-classifying levels and complementary dimensions should be considered as the most detailed application of the classification.
27. Some countries (e.g. in the Caribbean) have two types of general upper secondary programmes in ISCED 97 currently classified as 3A and 4A. The 3A programme (e.g. CSEC O-Level) is substantially shorter (in cumulative terms) than 3A programmes in most other countries. Accordingly, it gives access to university studies in the respective country only, but not abroad (e.g. in the UK, a common destination for students from the Caribbean). The 4A programme (e.g. CSEC A-Level or CAPE) is

³ For level completion.

very similar to 3A programmes in other countries and accepted for university entry there.