



PREVENTING AND FIGHTING EARLY LEAVING
FROM EDUCATION & TRAINING WITH AI

stAI

Act before it happens: Preventing and fighting Early
Leaving from Education and Training with Artificial
Intelligence

ELET Risk Factors Desk Research - Country Name

Author: Logo of Partner Organization

PROJECT INFORMATION

Project acronym:

stAI

Project title: Act before it happens: Preventing and fighting Early Leaving from Education and Training with Artificial Intelligence

Project N°:2023-1-IS01-KA220-SCH-000157308

Sub-programme or KA:

KA220-SCH - Cooperation partnerships in school Education

Website: www.stai-edu.eu

Consortium:



SCHOOL OF EDUCATION



ARTIFICIAL
INTELLIGENCE
RESEARCH GROUP



Colegiul Național de Artă
Octav Băncilă
Iași



Table of Contents

Contents

1. ELET – General National Scope	5
1.1 Background	5
2. ELET in Iceland in the European context	5
3. ELET Risk Factors	7
2.1 Socio-Demographic Factors	7
2.1 Institutional Factors.....	11
2.2 Education Policies and Practices.....	12
2.3 Access to Education	12
2.4 Individual and Family Factors.....	13
2.5 Community and Societal Factors	13
2.7 Economic Factors.....	13
3. Current Trends, Implications and Perspectives in Addressing ELET	14
3.1 National public incentives and initiatives regarding preventing ELET	14
3.2 National private incentives and initiatives regarding preventing ELET	16
3.3 Concrete experiences/practices	16
3.4 Main challenges and obstacles to be encountered on ELET.....	17
3.5 Policy Implications and Recommendations (Policy Analysis, Best Practices and Interventions, and Future Directions for Research and Action)	19
3.5.1 Policy Analysis	19
3.5.2. Best practices and interventions	19
3.5.3. Future directions for research and actions	21
4. Main findings from interviews.....	22
4.1 Background and context	22
4.1.1. School staff	22
4.1.2 Policy makers	22
4.2 Key points from interviews with teachers and school staff	23
4.2.1 Main Risk Factors for School Leaving:	23

4.2.2 Evaluation Tools for Detecting School Avoidance/Dropout:	23
4.2.3 Challenges Related to School Transition Between Levels:	24
4.2.4 Teaching Practices to Keep Students Engaged:	24
4.2.5 Communication with Parents:	25
4.2.6 The Most Vulnerable Students for School Avoidance/Dropout:	25
4.2.7 Main Challenges Teachers and School Staff Face:	26
4.2.8 Support Systems in Schools:.....	27
4.2.9 What School Authorities Can Do to Reduce Risks:.....	28
4.3 Key points from interviews with policy makers	28
4.3.1 Should school dropout/avoidance be explored/tackled?	28
4.3.2 Primary causes/main risk factors of school dropout/school avoidance	28
4.3.3 Challenges schools face in implementing prevention actions	29
4.3.4 Actions that can be taken to prevent ELET	29
4.3.5 Role of technology and data analytics.....	30
References	31

1. ELET – General National Scope

1.1 Background

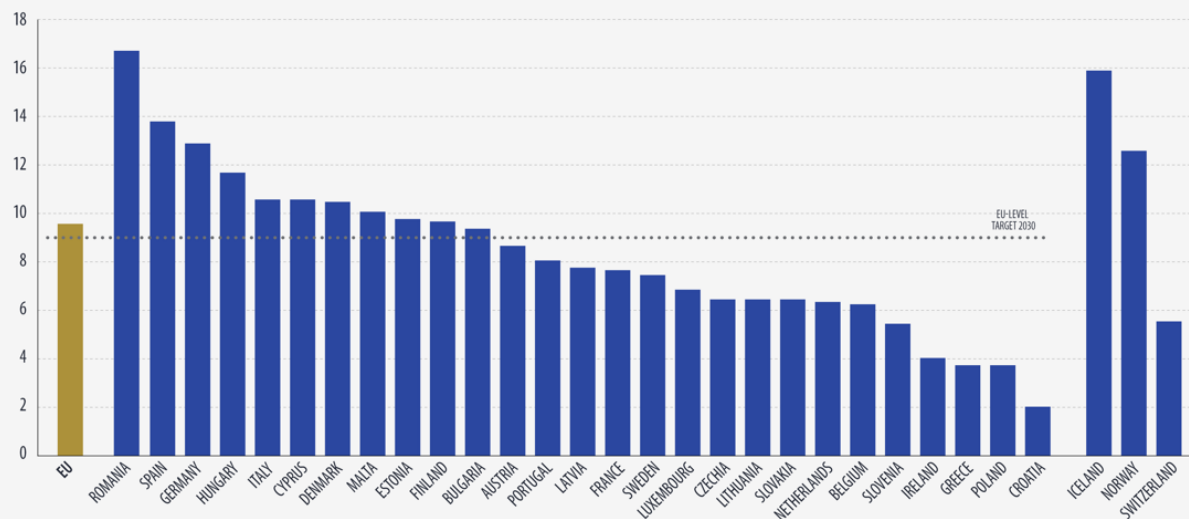
In Iceland, compulsory education starts at 6 years ends at 16 years of age and vast majority of students subsequently start secondary schools. Around 85% of children attend kindergarten before starting compulsory school (Statistics Iceland). The secondary school system is managed at the state level whereas the compulsory system is managed at the municipal level. The completion of secondary school takes a minimum of 3 years, but the system is flexible. Typically, the completion of secondary school ends with matriculation examination after the completion of 200 units. There are around 30 secondary schools in Iceland that fall into three main categories: a) traditional grammar schools, b) comprehensive schools (both academic and vocational) and c) vocational schools. More students complete traditional grammar education; in total 2406 students versus 371 student from vocational studies in the year 2023 (Statistics Iceland). In the secondary school system, students can choose between day-school and evening-school, for those having employment for example. In many secondary schools, there are special tracks for students that have not met the requirements to finish compulsory schooling, where students are given the opportunity to finish the requirements and later register to other tracks. There are shorter specialized tracks with around 100 units, or 2 years of studying, for example “service technician track” that prepares students for work at health care institutions involving different kinds of services.

2. ELET in Iceland in the European context

Iceland has one of the highest proportions of early school leaving and training (ELET) in Europe, just under 16% compared to the 9.5% average in Europe (Eurostat, 2023) (Figure 1). Eurostat defines ELET as young people aged 18-24 leaving early from education and training.

Early leavers from education and training, 2023

(% of population aged 18-24)



Croatia and Slovenia: break in time series; Croatia and Luxembourg: low reliability.

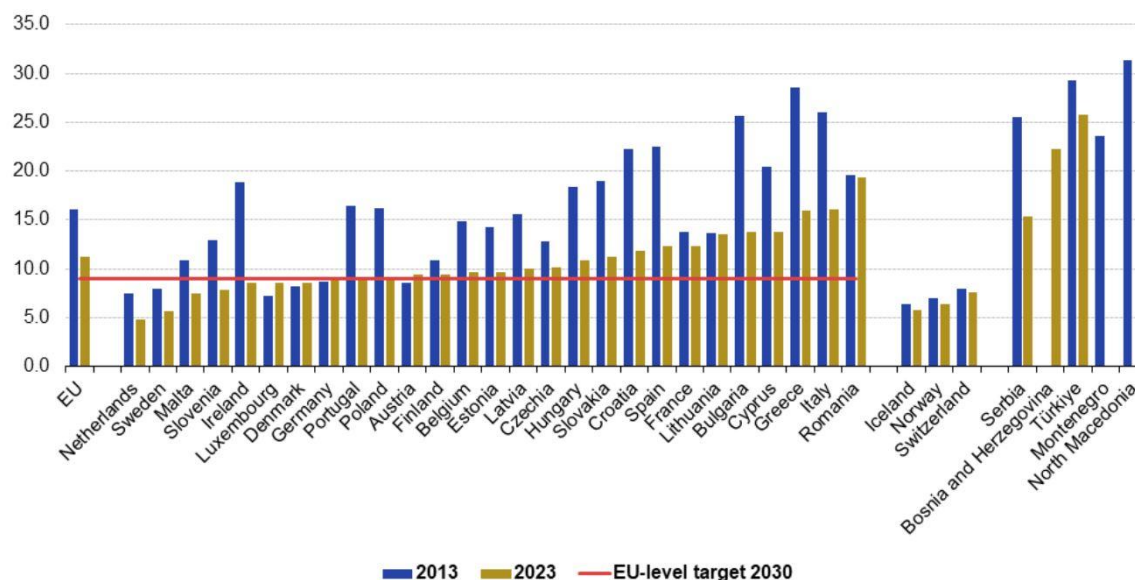
eurostat

On the other hand, the NEET rate (not in education, employment or training) is one of the lowest in Europe (Figure 2). The percentage of Icelanders aged 25-34 years with tertiary education attainment in 2023 was in the 40-45% range (Eurostat).

There are no official statistics on the problem of school avoidance in compulsory school. The Centre of Education and School services (a new institute that is part of a restructuring of Iceland's educational system) in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Children, and the Association of Icelandic Municipalities are developing a new centralized digital database (Frigg) to manage student information across all school levels. It aims to streamline student data management and improve communication between schools, families and educational institutions. One of the key roles of the database will be to keep information on student's enrollment and transitions between schools, replacing the previous fragmented system that was stored across different platforms and was in no way coordinated between schools. The database, will for the first time, provide an overview of how many students are not attending school and the assessment of the extent of school avoidance. A recent report from the Welfare Watch, a governmental advisory body in Iceland, indicates that around 2.2% of children are avoiding school, mainly because of problems with anxiety and depression and challenging conditions at home (Velferðarvaktin, 2019).

Young people (aged 15-29) neither in employment nor in education and training, 2013 and 2023

(%)



Note: Breaks in series.

Source: Eurostat (online data code: edat_lfse_20)

eurostat

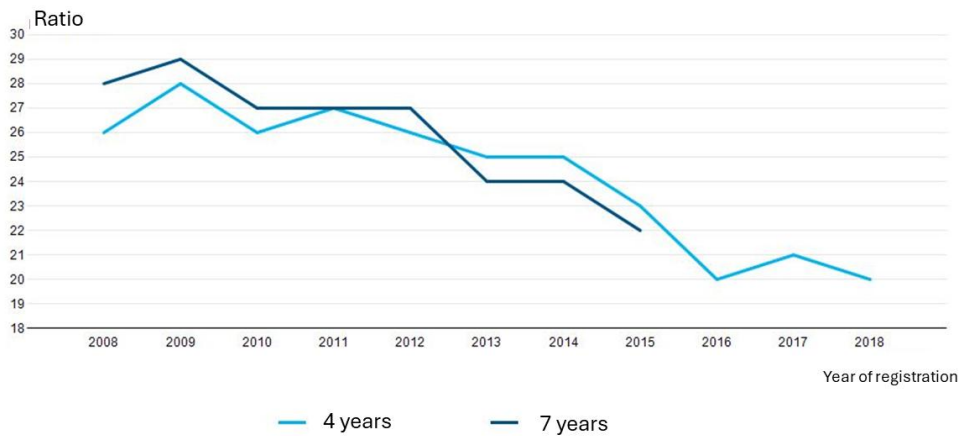
3. ELET Risk Factors

2.1 Socio-Demographic Factors

Statistic Iceland measures “cohort-dropout”, where first-year students in secondary schools (day-schools) in the autumn are tracked, and their status is assessed after four years, six years and seven years. The cohort-dropout rate after 4 years in Iceland was around 20% in 2023 and has been declining since Statistic Iceland started measuring the dropout rate in 2002. The main influencing factors influencing the dropout rate that Statistic Iceland measures are gender, parents education, background (immigration status), geographical location and type of studies (vocational) (see Figure 3 a-f)

a)

Cohort-dropout rate: 4 and 7 years after registering

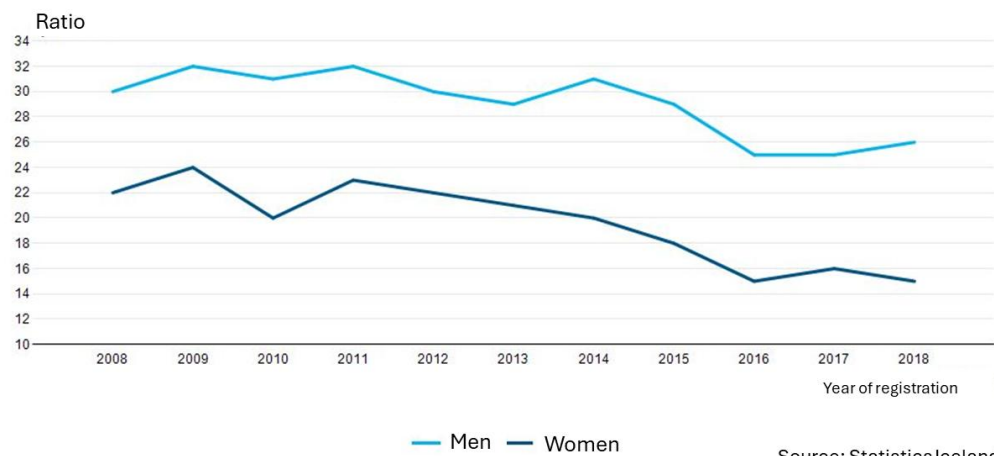


Source: StatisticsIceland

- The 4 and 7 year drop-out rate has been declining since 2008, but is still standing at around 20% 4 years after starting secondary school in 2018.

b)

Cohort-dropout rate for men and women from

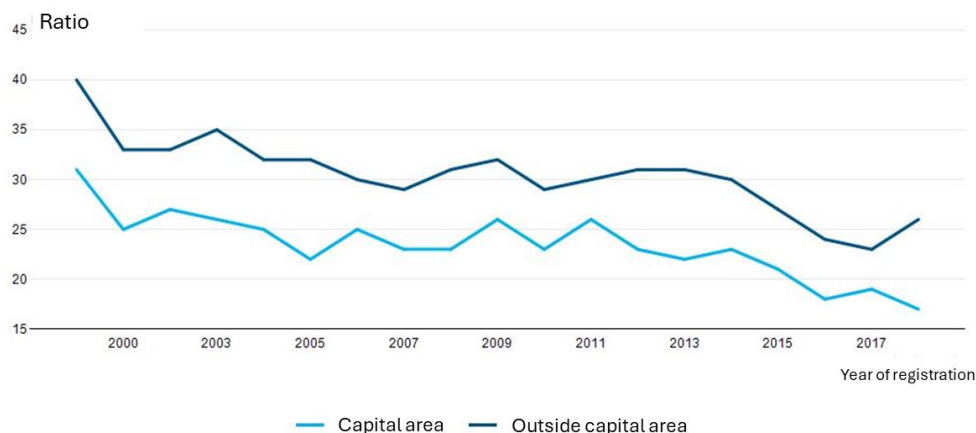


Source: StatisticsIceland

- Men are more likely (~26%) compared to women (15%)

c)

Cohort-dropout: Geographical location

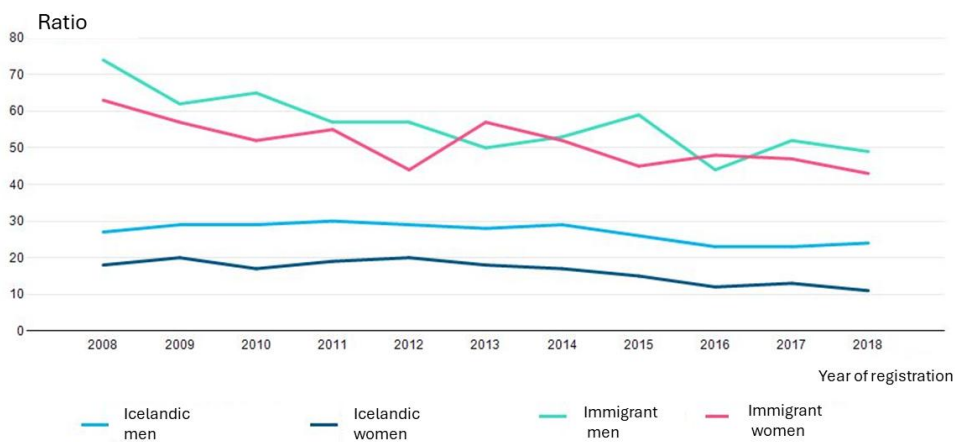


Source: StatisticsIceland

- Students outside the capital area are more likely to leave school early, in the capital area the rate is around 17% compared to around 25% outside the capital area.

d)

Cohort-dropout rate: Background (immigration) and gender

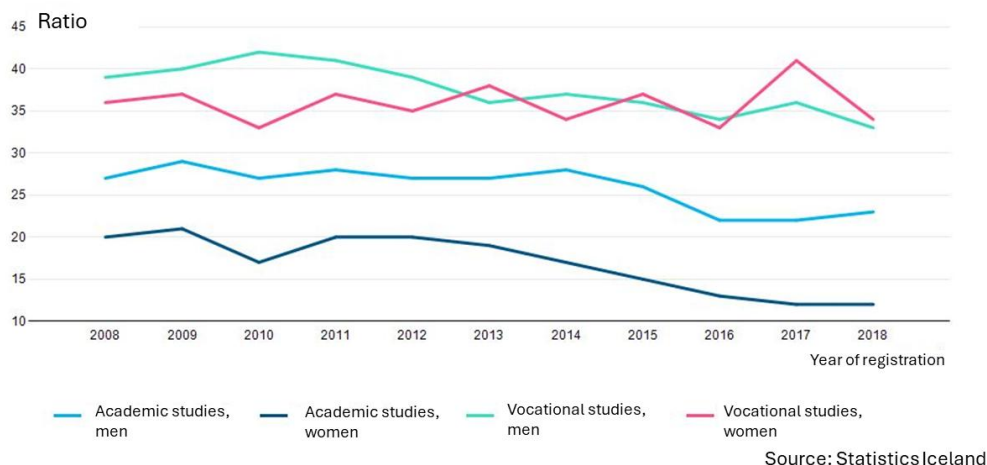


Source: StatisticsIceland

- Students with an immigration background are far more likely to leave school early (women ~40% and men ~50%) compared to students with an Icelandic background (women ~10% and men ~24%).

d)

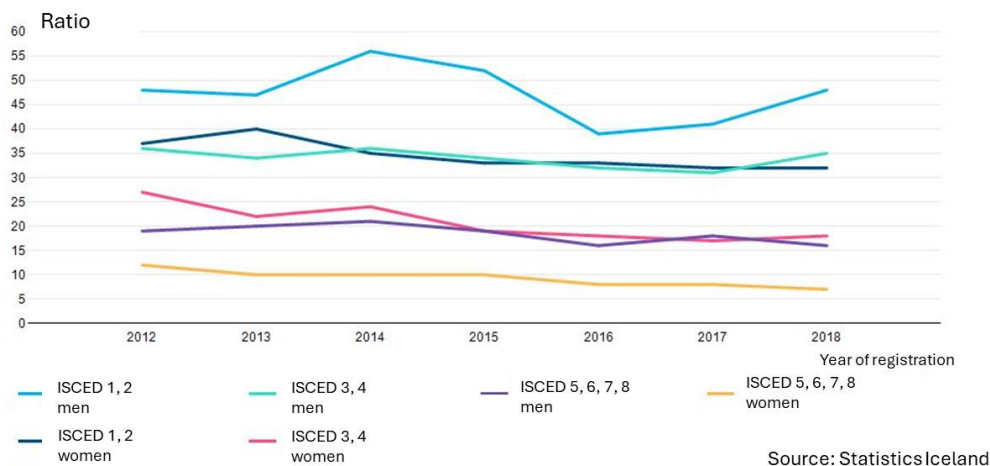
Cohort-dropout rate: Academic versus vocational studies



- Students are more likely to leave school early from vocational studies (women ~34% and men ~33%) compared to academic studies (women ~13% and men ~23%).

e)

Cohort-dropout rate: Parent's education



Hagstofan (e.d)

- Students with parents that have completed education at the ISCED scale of 5-6 (university education) are less likely to leave school early (women ~6% and men ~15%) compared to ISCED levels 3 and 4 (women ~17% and men ~35%) and ISCED levels 1 and 2 (compulsory education) (women ~32% and men ~48%)

In summary, the main influencing factors where we have statistical data on early school leaving in Iceland are being male, having parents with lower education levels, being an immigrant and living outside the capital area.

2.1 Institutional Factors

The school environment can have an influence on school-dropout and school avoidance. Some interviewees argued that Icelandic classrooms are too big, in compulsory schools it is common that classes have 20-25 students, and even more in secondary schools. In some schools, a *team-teaching* approach has been applied, where 2-3 teachers combine classes in one space. Although the approach seems to increase collaboration and professional growth of teachers (Sigurgeirsson, 2020), some interviewees doubted the benefits of the approach for students, especially those with special needs.

Schools in rural areas of Iceland sometimes face challenges related to limited resources and smaller student populations, leading to fewer specialized services. In some areas, the ratio of teachers with a teaching license (have completed formal teaching education) is as low as 64%, compared to around 87% in the capital area (Hagstofan, 2022).

According to the latest findings from TALIS in Iceland in 2018, the Teaching and Learning International Survey, teachers in Iceland reported high levels of job satisfaction, enjoying a sense of community and purpose in their work. But high levels of stress and heavy workload were one of the concerns teachers had. Compared to other OECD countries, teachers experienced more difficulties with classroom management and student discipline. Teachers received less formal feedback on their teaching than in other countries, but the feedback they did receive was viewed positively (Ólafsson 2018). These findings aligned with the teachers interviewed that generally had good support from school authorities but dealt with challenges related to the diverse student body where a big portion of students are students with special needs and multilingual children.

2.2 Education Policies and Practices

The new assessment tool that is being developed but not yet implemented (**Námsferill**) will provide a more flexible, individualized approach to assessing student knowledge, skills, and competencies. The new system is designed to give schools more autonomy in determining how and when to administer assessments, allowing for a more tailored and student-centered approach. Formative assessment practices are increasingly used, where feedback is given throughout the learning process to help guide students' progress and development. This aligns with the broader educational goal of student-centered learning, reducing the pressure of high-stakes exams.

The National Curriculum for compulsory schools in Iceland emphasizes flexibility with a strong focus on student engagement and the development of skill relevant in the modern world. Schools are encouraged to integrate critical thinking, creativity, sustainability and global awareness into their teaching.

Support services for students exist in most schools, but the availability of services is less in rural areas. In each school there is an education and career

2.3 Access to Education

- **Geographic accessibility**

Around 37% of the population in Iceland live outside capital area (Hagstofa Íslands, 2024) where access to education can be more limited than within the capital area. Some areas are quite rural, but free school buses are available everywhere if schools are not within walking distance. In the smallest schools, classes are often combined because of few students.

- **Affordability**

Most schools in Iceland are public schools, but there are a few private schools at all school levels. Therefore, affordability is not a hindrance. In Reykjavík, all material students need for schools is free of charge (books, pencils etc). In secondary schools, the cost of buying books can be high, but some books are available electronically for a lesser cost. There are low registration fees in secondary schools and universities, but not compulsory schools.

- **Educational pathways**

The different educational pathways are described in chapter 1.1., but in addition adult and continuing education is supported in Iceland, and there are opportunities for individuals that have not completed formal education to upskill later in life. Non-formal education is available through programs offered by the Education and Training Service Centre (ETSC) for example.

2.4 Individual and Family Factors

The latest findings from the Icelandic Youth study give good insight into individual and family factors. Part of the study is a recent survey (Gunnarsdóttir, Arason and Einarsdóttir, 2023) that aimed to explore reasons behind early school leaving from secondary schools. The survey was sent out to 2000 individuals from 18-24 years old, half of which had completed studies or were still studying and half that had not completed studies (school-group) and were not currently studying (ELET). Key findings from the survey include:

- A relatively lower proportion of individuals had parents that had completed a **university degree** in the ELET group compared to the school-group
- In the ELET group, 28% lacked **financial support from parents** compared to 12% in the school group.
- **Well-being** in primary school was significantly worse in the ELET group, with 36% of them reporting feeling very bad or rather bad compared to 14% in the school group.
- 83% of the school group reported receiving much or very much **encouragement from their parents**, compared to 70% in the ELET group.
- A relatively higher proportion of the ELET group reported having experienced **bullying** (49%) compared to the school group (33%), and more women (62%) than men (43%) reported having experienced bullying.
- In a multiple-choice question about the factors influencing the ELET group's decision to quit school, the following factors were most significant: school boredom, inability to manage the coursework, little purpose in studying, **poor academic performance**, and the belief that education was not necessary for their job. In an open-ended question about the main reason for dropping out, most cited lack of interest and **mental difficulties** (>50), with some also mentioning work, finances, and home circumstances.

2.5 Community and Societal Factors

Employment opportunities for young people are plenty, and around 72% of people in Iceland from 15-24 year are receiving monthly payments (corresponding to at least one hour of work a week) (Hagstofa Íslands, 2023). It is very common for young people in Iceland to have a job alongside their studies and it can be a big attraction leave secondary school to get a full-time job, especially if there are financial struggles.

2.7 Economic Factors

The PISA study results also indicate that socioeconomic background impacts performance in the PISA 2022 assessment similarly to how it does in other Nordic countries. There are clear signs of increasing inequality in academic performance in

Iceland based on socioeconomic background, especially in reading literacy. Although it's not statistically confirmed for math literacy, it is likely that inequality in math and science literacy has also risen alongside the increase in reading inequality. When inequality in academic outcomes rises over time, students' performance becomes increasingly dependent on their parents' socioeconomic status. This trend may indicate growing class disparities in educational and career opportunities, suggesting a potential decline in social mobility, where children's opportunities are more tied to the conditions they are born into, including their parents' financial and social standing (Sigurðardóttir et al., 2023).

Socio-economic background significantly influences drop-out from secondary schools and parent's education plays a big role as can be seen on Figure 3e), but there is an increased likelihood of dropping out among those in the lower part of the income distribution, especially among those in the lowest segment. Students living with a single parent or those with a parent receiving disability benefits are at increased risk of dropping out, have lower chances of re-enrolling, and higher chances of experiencing repeated dropouts. Immigrant students, especially those who moved to Iceland at an older age, are more likely to drop out, mainly due to language barriers and weaker social ties (Stefánsson, 2022).

3. Current Trends, Implications and Perspectives in Addressing ELET

3.1 National public incentives and initiatives regarding preventing ELET

Iceland has been proactive in implementing several national policies and initiatives aimed at reducing early school leaving. These initiatives target both preventive measures and support systems for at-risk students:

Farsældarlögin (Well-being Act): The Well-being Act, enacted in 2022, is an important legislation aimed at promoting the well-being of children and young people by focusing on early intervention and cooperation across sectors. It mandates schools, social services, and healthcare institutions to collaborate closely, providing holistic support for students at risk of school avoidance and dropout.

National Database Initiatives – Frigg: The Frigg database centralizes student information across Iceland, improving the ability to track attendance and academic performance. It also helps identify early indicators of school avoidance and allows for more coordinated interventions among schools, municipalities, and social services (Frigg Nemendagrunnur, 2024).

Mentoring and Vocational Programs: There has been a growing emphasis on expanding vocational education and mentorship programs. For example, *Grunnmenntabré* provides students with an alternative pathway that is more suited to their interests and abilities, helping to reduce dropout by offering a flexible and personalized learning environment.

Strengthening Support for Foreign Students: Special programs, such as language support classes and counseling, are being implemented to help immigrant students integrate projects where ministries, municipalities and schools collaborate have been started, for example the „**from inactivity to participation**“ project (Icelandic: frá vanvirkni til þátttöku). The project aims to re-engage youth, aged 16-25 who have experienced a period of inactivity (not attending school, nor being employed). The initiative is a cross-disciplinary effort involving the leisure, welfare and education services of the municipality Árborg in the south of Iceland. The project includes ensuring accessibility of services and continuous support to overcome challenges toward active social participation. If successful, other municipalities might implement the initiative.

Initiatives aiming to reduce language barriers, which are a significant cause of dropout among foreign students. The **MEMM** program for example, an initiative that brings together various educational bodies including the Centre for Language and Literacy (Miðja máls og læsis), the Centre for Education and School Services and the Ministry of Education and Children to offer nationwide support to students with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Key elements of the program include language and cultural support, nationwide access to resources and tracking and monitoring to help measure the success of interventions and improve long-term outcomes (<https://reykjavik.is/frettir/baett-og-samraemd-mottaka-og-menntun-barna-af-erlendum-uppruna>).

Point-Based Attendance Systems: Municipalities like Reykjavík have adopted point-based systems to track student attendance. Schools monitor students' attendance closely, and interventions are triggered once students accumulate a certain number of points due to absences. This system enables earlier interventions and involves parents and social services as needed (Reykjavik, 2024).

Collaboration with Families: There is increased emphasis on engaging parents early, especially in cases where school avoidance is noticed. Programs like **PMTO** (Parent Management Training – Oregon model) help parents recognize early signs of school avoidance and equip them with strategies to support their children (Barna- og Fjölskyldustofa, 2024)

3.2 National private incentives and initiatives regarding preventing ELET

There are fewer private incentives and initiatives regarding preventing ELET compared to public ones. There are some initiatives between non-governmental organisations and community efforts, especially focusing on vocational training, mental health support and flexible learning options to retain students who are at risk of leaving school or becoming inactive.

Fjölsmiðjan: This a non-profit organization provides a non-formal learning environment for youth aged 16–24 and plays an important role for young people needing social resources. It offers hands-on training and skills development in a workshop-like setting, preparing students for work or reintegration into formal education. Fjölsmiðjan focuses on vocational skills that align with the interests and strengths of each individual, making learning more engaging and relevant for them. Fjölsmiðjan is a co-operation between the business community, social services of the municipalities, the Directorate of Labor, the upper secondary schools, the Ministry of Education and other parties. (Fjölsmiðjan, 2024).

The Icelandic Youth Association (Ungmennafélag Íslands, UMFÍ), is a non-governmental organization promotes youth participation through sports, physical activities and other community-based projects. It operates across the country, offering informal education, leadership training and programs aimed at fostering personal development and active citizenship among young people. One of their key initiatives is the *Youth in Action* program, which encourages young people to take part in community projects (UMFÍ, 2024).

The Education and Training Service Center (ETSC) (Fræðslumiðstöð atvinnulífsins) runs informal learning programs to provide training for people that have not completed formal education with the aim to better secure their position on the labor market. One of the main roles of ETSC is to write curricula and programs that meet the needs of learners and the labor market. The ETSC programs include vocational courses and programs tailored for people with dyslexia and programs in basic skills like math and Icelandic that can work as a starting point for adults with limited schooling to re-enter education. Although, not a private entity, it works closely with various public and private sectors.

3.3 Concrete experiences/practices

There are several surveys/studies that focus on youth health, education and behavior that prove important insights into various aspects of the lives of the Icelandic youth and help inform policy decisions and improve youth outcomes. Key examples include:

- **The Icelandic Youth Study** (Íslenska Æskulýðsrannsóknin). The survey focuses on a) compulsory students in 4th, 6th, 8th and 10th grade (annually), b) students in

secondary school (bi- annually) and c) young people that have finished school and dropped out of school from 18-25 years old (Íslenska Æskulýðsrannsóknin, 2024).

- **The School Pulse** (Skólapúlsinn). A tool that is used by around 200 schools in Iceland for internal evaluation. It collects data on student's attitudes toward schools, academic self-confidence, mental health and social relationships among other things. It provides real-time feedback to schools, enabling them to respond quickly to emerging issues in the schools (Skólapúlsinn, 2024).
- **Icelandic Centre for Social Research & Analysis** (Rannsóknir og greining) oversees numerous studies that examine the well-being of children and youth in Iceland. A recent example is the Lifecourse study, an ERC funded research on the interplay between the biological, environmental and social factors that influence the development of harmful behaviours in adolescents (Rannsóknir og greining, 2024).

3.4 Main challenges and obstacles to be encountered on ELET

In this chapter, the main points are taken from the interviews described in chapter 4.

- **Shortening secondary school**

There was a significant policy change in 2015, when secondary school was shortened from 4 years to 3 years. The aim was to align Iceland's education system with international standards, improving student outcomes and reducing drop-out rates. Furthermore, to enter universities or the workforce earlier. Even though the drop-out has decreased, the action has been very controversial. According to Jónasdóttir et al.

(2023), the reform had unintended consequences, leading to gaps in student preparation, increased subject inequality and challenges for university teachers as students are less prepared.

- **Mental health issues**

Although the Well-being Act emphasizes early mental health intervention, many schools still lack adequate mental health services and trained professionals such as counselors and psychologists. This shortage makes it difficult for schools to provide the comprehensive mental health support students need, particularly for those dealing with anxiety, depression, or other issues linked to school avoidance. Many of the interviewees from schools said that the waiting lists for the assessment of ADHD or autism is 1-3 years.

- **Systemic and Institutional Gaps**

Lack of coordination between school levels is a recurring challenge. The transition from primary to secondary school is a critical period, and when information regarding a student's history, especially regarding attendance and behavior, is not shared across institutions, students with existing problems often slip through the cracks. There is a lack of standardized data collection and a centralized monitoring of school attendance, which makes early detection of school avoidance difficult. Without robust systems in place, schools struggle to intervene effectively before issues escalate.

- **Challenges for foreign students**

Students from immigrant backgrounds are at higher risk of early school leaving due to language barriers and social integration difficulties. They may face additional challenges adjusting to the Icelandic education system and culture, and their academic needs are not always adequately met.

Socioeconomic factors also play a significant role. Immigrant students may prioritize work over education due to financial pressures, leading to higher dropout rates. Furthermore, teachers face challenges and lack support with a diverse classroom where around 10-20% of students are not proficient in Icelandic.

- **Parental involvement**

Parental engagement is inconsistent, with some parents lacking the tools or understanding to support their children's education effectively. In some cases, parents themselves may have negative school experiences, which affects their involvement. On the other hand, some parents may exert excessive pressure on academic performance, which can lead to increased anxiety and disengagement. Cultural barriers can also impact communication between schools and immigrant families, further isolating students who need extra support.

- **Teacher challenges**

Teachers face overcrowded classrooms and a lack of resources to manage the diverse needs of their students. Handling students with neurodivergent conditions, behavioral issues, or language barriers without sufficient support leads to teacher burnout and reduces the effectiveness of interventions for at-risk students.

- **Social inequalities**

Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face more barriers to staying in school. Lack of parental support and unstable home environments can make it difficult for these students to remain engaged in education. The stigmatization of school avoidance further prevents families from seeking help, leading to a delay in support.

- **Student engagement and self concept**

Factors such as family background, peer relationships, and school environment play critical roles in influencing whether students stay engaged or become disinterested in their education, according to Blöndal and Aðalbjarnardóttir (2012).

- **Free school choice**

Free school choice has perpetuated social stratification, with high-performing students from affluent backgrounds clustering in prestigious schools while vocational and mixed schools enroll students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

3.5 Policy Implications and Recommendations (Policy Analysis, Best Practices and Interventions, and Future Directions for Research and Action)

In this chapter, the main points are taken from the interviews described in chapter 4.

3.5.1 Policy Analysis

Iceland has implemented several policies aimed at reducing school dropout rates, such as:

- **The Well-being Act**, which emphasizes cross-sector collaboration between schools, social services, and healthcare providers for early intervention in mental health and social support issues.
- **Frigg**, a centralized data system designed to track student performance and engagement throughout their academic journey.
- **New assessment framework (Námsferill)**, a new national policy standardized assessment tool in compulsory schools, aimed at modernizing how student performance is evaluated. The tool includes flexible and diverse assessment, teacher training and support for school communities. The tool is tailored to individual students needs and emphasizes not putting extra pressure on teachers and schools (Mennta- og Menningarmálaráðuneyti, 2020).

3.5.2. Best practices and interventions

- **More research on policy impact** is needed to understand the long-term effects of shortening secondary school on student outcomes. Tracking students who entered secondary school after the reform can provide insights into how this change has affected academic performance, dropout rates, and university readiness. Also, the implementation of the Well-being Act should be researched continuously to monitor the progress.

- **Comprehensive mental health and support services:** Expanding access to mental health services in all schools, not just in urban areas, is critical. Research into cost-effective models of delivering these services, such as through teletherapy or community partnerships, could help ensure equitable access across Iceland. The long waiting list for mental health support through the school and social service system is a problem. Results from the Icelandic Youth Study show that anxiety is increasing substantially in students, especially girls.
- **Innovative Educational Models and a more diverse school environment:** Skólinn í Skýjunum, the online school is a step forward to meet the different needs of students. Many interviewees mentioned that school avoidance is not a necessarily a student problem, but a school problem. Students have very different needs, and the needs of students that do not fall into the common boxes are often not met.
- **Increase options for vocational studies:** In 2024, the Technical School (Tækniskólinn) got the most applications of all secondary schools in Iceland (441 applications), of which 86% were able to attend (Þorláksson, 2024). This shows the need for more vocational options in Iceland.
- **Support for immigrant students:** Language support for immigrant students, through programs like MEMM, is essential for addressing the barriers these students face in intergrating into the icelandic school system. This includes a cultural integration and parental involvement initiatives that foster better communication between schools and immigrant families.
- **Parental involvement:** Parental education programs, like PMTO, that help families with positive reinforcement, setting clear expectations for their children, emphasizing the active role of parents in addressing behavioural issues.
- **Teacher training:** Teacher professional development should focus on equipping teachers with tools to manage diverse classrooms to reduce burnout rates. Also, increasing students to become teachers is necessary as many teachers in schools in Iceland have not completed formal teaching education. Initiatives such as „Komdu að kenna“ was a positive step in that direction, a program launced in 2016 at the School of Education, University of Iceland that was designed to highlight the work of teachers at all educational levels and is now supported by the Ministry of Education and Children (Komdu að kenna, 2024).

3.5.3. Future directions for research and actions

Future directions for research and actions should involve the factors described in 3.5.2; research on **policy actions** are important, **mental health services** and ongoing research on the well-being of Icelandic youth are crucial, a **flexible school environment** that can better meet the needs of the **diverse student body**, increased options for **vocational studies**, increased support for the growing number of **immigrant students** and also more **support for teachers** as well as increasing teachers that have completed formal education and lastly **parental involvement** in their children's lives throughout all school levels.

4. Main findings from interviews

4.1 Background and context

4.1.1. School staff

The interviews with teachers and school staff took place in May and June 2024. In total, 11 people were interviewed, of which four were working at the primary school level and 7 at the secondary school level. At the primary school level, the participants were from 3 schools; two schools in the capital area and one school that is an online school from 8th – 10th class. The 7 participants at the secondary school level were from three schools: two schools in the capital area and one outside the capital area. All schools are public schools.

Secondary level: 7 people from 3 schools. **Compulsory level:** 4 people from 3 schools

All schools have a diverse student body, with total number of students ranging from 200-600 students in each school, 20-27 students per class, except for the online-school. The student bodies represent the general demography of the Icelandic population, with around 5-18% immigrants and with diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

4.1.2 Policy makers

We interviewed 9 people from 4 institutions and the interviews took place in August and September 2024.

The ministry of Education and children: 2 people, both working with compulsory school affairs at the ministry.

Education and Training Service Center: 2 people.

Keðjan (the Chain): 3 people. The Chain is a support service in Reykjavík aimed at providing assistance to children, youth and their families. The service was established in 2020 and consolidates various support mechanisms that were previously spread across multiple service centers in Reykjavík. Their main goal is to improve the well-being of children and families and work closely with service centers, child protection services and educational institutions to offer integrated care.

Association of Icelandic municipalities (Samband íslenskra sveitarfélaga, SÍS): 2 people. SÍS serves as a cooperative forum for local authorities, advocating for their interests at the national and international level. SÍS works closely with the government to develop and implement education policies that support local needs.

4.2 Key points from interviews with teachers and school staff

4.2.1 Main Risk Factors for School Leaving:

- **Mental health issues:** Anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem are significant contributors to school avoidance and dropout. Students with mental health problems find it more challenging to attend school regularly.
- **Socioeconomic status:** Students from low-income backgrounds or with a lack of parental support are more likely to disengage from school.
- **Cultural and language barriers:** Immigrant students, especially those who struggle with Icelandic, are at a higher risk of school leaving due to difficulties in social integration.
- **Parental disengagement:** Either neglect or excessive pressure from parents can contribute to student disengagement. In particular, children of parents with negative school experiences may lack motivation.

4.2.2 Evaluation Tools for Detecting School Avoidance/Dropout:

- **Attendance tracking systems:** Most schools use point-based systems to monitor attendance, where accumulating points for not attending school triggers various levels of intervention. Typically compulsory schools monitor attendance more closely than secondary school. In secondary school students can be expelled for bad attendance, but not in compulsory schools. In Reykjavík, schools use guidelines for school attendance and are structured to ensure early intervention that is broken down in 5 steps that call for different actions (from contacting parents to reporting to Child Protection Services).
- **Teacher reports and weekly meetings:** In some secondary schools students meet weekly with teachers to discuss their progress (in a class), for the purpose of giving them a chance to discuss problems that come up. This system is good for early intervention if students starts to have problems with their studies, or socially.
- **Education and career counsellors:** In most schools, education and career counsellors are available for student counselling. Sometimes the teachers will notify the counsellors if a student starts having problems with attendance, and sometimes the students will themselves seek assistance, especially in secondary schools. In some schools there are also nurses and psychologists that can help students with social and psychological problems.
- **Early intervention screenings:** Some schools screen all incoming students, particularly for social and academic factors that may indicate a risk for disengagement. Some teachers described a collaboration between school levels if students have had problems in the past, education counsellors at the

primary level will notify the councillors at the secondary level so they can immediately intervene and provide assistance to those students.

4.2.3 Challenges Related to School Transition Between Levels:

- **Pressure:** The transition from **primary to secondary school** is a particularly vulnerable period. Many students struggle with the increased academic pressure and lack of flexibility in secondary schools compared to the more supportive primary environment. Some students experience pressure from their parents in relation to school choice and end up choosing against their will to please their parents. It is extremely important for students to be allowed to choose paths for themselves, as dissatisfaction in school greatly contributes to dropout rates from secondary schools.
- Some secondary schools are **highly competitive** and have to turn away a lot of applicants. In the most popular academic school, good grades are needed to get it. This puts a lot of pressure on students that are finishing 10th grade (last grade of compulsory schools) and contributes to dissatisfaction if they cannot get into the school of their choice.
- **Poor coordination between school levels:** Information about students, particularly those with attendance issues in primary school, is not always passed on to secondary schools, leading to students slipping through the cracks. Even though some interviewees said that there is communication between school levels regarding students with problems, it does not apply to all schools. Some interviewees discussed the difficulties involved getting information from previous schools about the students.

4.2.4 Teaching Practices to Keep Students Engaged:

- Schools employ an „**individualized learning approach**“, adapting lessons to cater to diverse student needs, particularly for students with learning difficulties or those with low motivation. Each school has a teacher for children with special needs, in line with the Compulsory School Act of 2008 in Iceland that establishes the legal foundation for the country's inclusive education system. This law mandates that all students, regardless of their abilities or special needs, are entitled to receive equitable education in schools (Ólafsdóttir et al., 2014).
- In one of the compulsory schools, teachers used a **project-based learning** approach where multiple subjects were integrated into projects to make learning more engaging and relevant to real-world applications. This approach, the Owl (Ugla) has been used for the 8th – 10th classes where Icelandic, social

sciences, information technology and natural sciences are taught together with 3-4 teachers.

- In most of the participating schools, **formative assessment** is applied. Formative assessment is the continuous assessment and regular feedback help students track their progress and stay motivated, as opposed to relying solely on final exams. The approach emphasizes active student participation in the learning process and encourages students to reflect on their learning and engage more deeply with the material.
- Most schools in general in Iceland have shifted away from the classical model of relying on a single, final exam at the end of the semester. Instead, **smaller assessments** and assignments are incorporated throughout the semester with the final exam (if any) contributing only a small portion to the overall grade. is a small percentage of the final grade.

4.2.5 Communication with Parents:

- Communication with parents, especially in secondary school, often decreases compared to compulsory school. Schools that maintain **regular parent-teacher meetings** and actively involve parents in discussions about attendance and performance tend to have better outcomes in preventing school dropout. The interviewees from secondary school emphasized the importance of parent communication, especially for students that start showing signs of avoiding school.
- **Home visits:** some interviewees said that sometimes teachers, or others at their school have gone used a more direct communication by going the the home of the student to encourage the student to come to school, when the student has not been showing up and it has been impossible to reach the student or the parents.

4.2.6 The Most Vulnerable Students for School Avoidance/Dropout:

- **Students with mental health issues** such as anxiety and depression are particularly vulnerable. One teacher in a compulsory school said that anxiety in girls is more common than before and believed that mobile phones play a big role. She explained that in her school, girls in the 8th – 10th classes rely heavily on social media on their phones for communication and that it can complicate social interaction between them, some feel left out for example when they see on social media that friends have gone together to get icecream without including everybody. The complications related to social communication through their phones contributes to higher levels of anxiety in girls in her opinion.

- **Immigrant students** who face language barriers and cultural differences. Most school staff we interviewed said that the schools provide adequate support for immigrant students and that learning Icelandic is crucial for both their education and their inclusion. In some cases, the interviewees expressed that immigrant students should get more support with Icelandic before entering classes, otherwise there is too much pressure for the student and the teacher. A worry for one interviewee was that immigrant students are way less likely to enter university than Icelandic students: *„it’s not just the language, but also the culture, it’s a terrible fact that students with a foreign background hardly ever go to universities [...] they are excellent students, but often drop out, because of the language barriers“*. Another interviewee added: *„There is a lack of options for these students, we can not always just make them take baking and food-production classes.“*
- **Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds**, often dealing with external pressures like part-time work. In Iceland, young people start working very early and it is very common for students in secondary schools to have a part time job, even before secondary school. One of the reasons students drop out of secondary school are job opportunities. One interviewee told a story about a student in secondary school that lived with his father. Students had to complete an assignment where they should interview a family member. The student did not hand in the assignment even though the teachers reminded him regularly. When the teacher inquired further about why the student did not hand in the assignment, the student explained that he was working most days after school and got home so late that his father had gone to bed. In the morning the father was off to work very early, so they hardly ever met. He did not have other family members he could go to. Students, like this one, do not get support from their parents at home, not necessarily because of lack of interest, but because of lack of time due to work overload.

4.2.7 Main Challenges Teachers and School Staff Face:

- **Large class sizes and diverse student needs:** Some of the school staff and teachers felt overwhelmed by the variety of academic, social, and emotional needs in their classrooms.
- **Lack of time and resources:** Teachers often do not have enough time or support to address the needs of students struggling with attendance or performance. Most interviewees said that school authorities do whatever they can to provide support for teachers, but sometimes it is not enough.

- **Consequences of the COVID pandemic:** Some interviewees discussed the challenges that they faced during the COVID-period. During that period, secondary schools were closed for some time and schools switched to online-classes. After COVID, teachers noticed a difference in students, they were socially more awkward and one said that at the beginning of the semester they preferred communicating with each other rather than speaking with each other, even standing next to each other. Some believed that students are less resilient from the COVID time and that they are still adjusting to traditional school attendance.
- **Lack of respect for schools:** Interviewees from compulsory schools experienced lack of respect for schools from parents in regard to attendance. In Iceland it is too common that parents take their children out of school to go on vacations for example. Interviewees wanted a more strict attendance plan as this trend disrupts learning processes and devalues education: *„all the social interaction happens in the schools, even though they take their education material with them on holidays, when they come back they have lost the connection to what the class is doing and the class has been making plans without them.“* Many emphasized that parents should start already in kindergarten to adjust children to attend school every day at the same time and restrictions should be made for taking children out of school in the middle of the semester.

4.2.8 Support Systems in Schools:

- **Multidisciplinary teams:** Schools with strong support systems often have teams of counselors, psychologists, and healthcare professionals who work together to provide holistic support for students. The education councillors interviewed said that support in schools has improved and that school authorities are realising the necessity of the various support needed from special teachers, education councillors, psychologists and in one secondary school there was a new position for a social worker that is helping students with personal challenges and assisting students with solutions that require the synchronization of different systems.
- **Extra tutoring and study spaces:** Many schools provide designated study areas (Icelandic: **námsver**) or tutoring programs for students who need additional academic support. These spaces are designed to provide students with a supportive environment where they can receive additional academic assistance. Some interviewees described a space that is a cozy environment, and sometimes they would try to get students that were not attending school, to come to the study space just to relax, hang out, even sleep in a sofa, just to get that student to enter the school building.

4.2.9 What School Authorities Can Do to Reduce Risks:

- **Increase communication and coordination between school levels**, ensuring that issues flagged in primary school are followed up in secondary school.
- **Strengthen parental involvement** by maintaining consistent communication and offering resources to parents to help support their children's education.
- **Provide early mental health interventions** and increase access to mental health services within schools and outside the school system. The long waiting lists for the diagnosis of ADHD and autism for example are too long and the support system each municipality has is not providing enough assistance. Many parents chose to seek private counselling for their children, but that is an option only for families with a stronger socio-economic background as private assistance is expensive.

4.3 Key points from interviews with policy makers

4.3.1 Should school dropout/avoidance be explored/tackled?

- Different opinions were expressed regarding this question. Most interviewees scaled both factors high, saying that more research is needed on school dropout and school avoidance as the society is constantly changing and research needs to be done that aligns with that. One interviewee did not think more research was needed, and that research often does not have enough practical value, a bridge between the research and the actual application of results is needed, *“more action and less emphasis on more research.”* Some raised the question whether school dropout is actually a problem in Iceland, as there are many other options for young people than completing formal learning. Informal learning options are plenty and re-entering school later in life is always an option.
- Most agreed that tackling the problem is very important, especially the experts from the compulsory school level. Education in formal schools is compulsory and each child is important and authorities should always take school avoidance seriously and take action.

4.3.2 Primary causes/main risk factors of school dropout/school avoidance

Key points that came up in all interviews:

- Mental health issues such as anxiety and depression
- Children on the spectrum
- Children that do not have enough support at home from parents/guardians
- Children/young people that are inactive, do not attend extra-curricular activities
- Being bullied at school

- Parents/guardians setting bad examples by taking children out of school for vacations

4.3.3 Challenges schools face in implementing prevention actions

- Schools do not have enough power to tackle the problem of ELET in diverse ways
- It is harder to deal with ELET in smaller, rural areas, fewer services offered and therefore the problem is not tackled.
- Lack of professionals, authorities need to aim for reducing the ratio of teachers that have not obtained a formal education license.
- Lack of time for teachers to implement actions
- Systems need to be more synchronized
- Mental health problems is the new pandemic in our youth

4.3.4 Actions that can be taken to prevent ELET

- Increase awareness about school avoidance and dropout at the universities that are educating teachers
- Teachers could monitor their students better to see if they are struggling
- Increase well-being in schools, it needs to be socially accepted that the school is a good place to be and respected.
- Early intervention: it is more economical to tackle the problem early than to lose students from schools.
- Discussion with students themselves, hear what they have to say about ELET and the reasons behind it.
- Start prevention as early as kindergarten and monitor attendance from the first school level
- We need to build more resilience in the youth
- We need to meet different demands of children with or without special needs, more research is needed there
- We need a solid action plan from all the research that has been done already
- Synchronizing systems (as is being done with the Well-being Act), the establishment of the Education and Children in 2022 was a positive step towards the integration of education policy with children's welfare
- More education on
- The society as a whole needs to embrace our children and youth and participation from all aspects of society is needed: from parents, extended family, teachers, school authorities, social services, municipalities and ministries. We are all responsible for the well-being of children and youth.

4.3.5 Role of technology and data analytics

- Continuously collect data on the well-being of youth (as the Icelandic Youth Study and School-pulse are doing)
- Centralized system to collect data on attendance. Today, several different systems are used in schools, but the new Frigg database is a step in the right direction

References

Barna- og Fjölskyldustofa. (2024, 24th of September).

<https://www.bofs.is/almenningur/urraedi/pmta--foreldrafaernithjalfun/>

Fjölsmiðjan. (2024, 24th of September). <https://fjolsmidjan.is/>

Frigg Nemendagrunnur (2024, 24th of September). <https://frigg.midstodmenntunar.is/>

Gunnarsdóttir, E.D., Arason, G.U., Einarsdóttir, Ó.R. (2023). *Íslenska Æskulýðsrannsóknin. Utanskólakönnun*. Menntavísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands.

https://menntavisindastofnun.hi.is/sites/menntavisindastofnun.hi.is/files/2024-01/utan_skola_sk%C3%BDrsla_iae2024.pdf

Hagstofa Íslands. (2023, June 8th).

<https://hagstofa.is/utgafur/frettasafn/menntun/starfsfolk-i-grunnskolum-2022/>

Hagstofa Íslands. (2024, March 21st).

<https://www.hagstofa.is/utgafur/frettasafn/mannfjoldi/mannfjoldinn-1-januar-2024/>

Hagstofan (e.d.) *Brautskráningarhlutfall og árgangsbrotthvarf af framhaldsskólastigi 1995-2022*.

https://px.hagstofa.is/pxis/pxweb/is/Samfelag/Samfelag_skolamal_3_framhaldsskolastig_1_fsProf/SKO03223.px

Hagstofan (e.d.) *Brautskráningarhlutfall og árgangsbrotthvarf eftir bakgrunni 1995-2022*.

https://px.hagstofa.is/pxis/pxweb/is/Samfelag/Samfelag_skolamal_3_framhaldsskolastig_1_fsProf/SKO03224.px

Hagstofan (e.d.) *Brautskráningarhlutfall og árgangsbrotthvarf eftir menntun foreldra 2012-2022*.

https://px.hagstofa.is/pxis/pxweb/is/Samfelag/Samfelag_skolamal_3_framhaldsskolastig_1_fsProf/SKO03225.px

Íslenska Æskulýðsrannsóknin. (2024, 24th of September). <https://iae.is/>

Jónasdóttir, M., Ragnarsdóttir, G., & Eiríksdóttir, E. (2023). Cascading effect of upper secondary education policy reform: The experiences and perspectives of university teachers. *Education Inquiry*, 1–21. DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2023.2207297>

Komdu að kenna. (2024, 24th of September). <https://komduadkenna.is/um-verkefnid/>

Mennta- og Menningarmálaráðuneyti. (2020). *Framtíðarstefna um samræmt námsmat*. https://www.stjornarradid.is/library/01--Frettatengt---myndir-og-skrar/MRN/191015_framt%C3%AD%C3%B0arstefna%20um%20samr%C3%A6mt%20n%C3%A1msmat_lokagerd.pdf

Ólafsdóttir, S., Jóelsdóttir, S., Sigurvinsdóttir, L.R., Bjarnason, D.S., Sigurðardóttir, A.K., Harðardóttir, K.E. (2014). *Skóli án aðgreiningar. Samantekt á lögum og fræðilegu efni*. Menntavísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands. https://www.stjornarradid.is/media/menntamalaraduneyti-media/media/ritogskyrslur/skyrsl_skoli_adgr_samant_l%C3%B6g_fr_2015.pdf

Ólafsson, Ragnar. (2020). *TALIS 2018: Starfshætti og viðhorf kennara og skólustjóra á unglingastigi grunnskóla. Síðari hluti*. Menntamálastofnun. https://mms.is/sites/mms.is/files/talis_unglingastig_2020.pdf

Rannsóknir og greining. (2024, 24th of September). <https://rannsoknir.is/>

Reykjavík. (2024, 16th of May). <https://reykjavik.is/frettir/baett-og-samraemd-mottaka-og-menntun-barna-af-erlendum-uppruna>

Sigurðardóttir, A. K., Gísladóttir, B., Magnúsdóttir, E. E., Hreinsdóttir, F., Arason, H., Eyjólfsson, H. E., Pálsdóttir, K. Þ., Ólafsdóttir, S., Guðnadóttir, U., Þórgrímsón, G. B. (2023). *PISA 2022: Helstu niðurstöður á Íslandi*. Menntamálastofnun. ISBN 978-9979-0-2931-1. https://mms.is/sites/mms.is/files/pisa_2022_helsta_island.pdf

Sigurgeirsson, Ingvar (2020). „Það er alltaf þessi faglega samræða“. Innleiðing teymiskennslu í tólf grunnskólum. *Netla*, 1-20. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24270/netla.2021.1>

Skólapúlsinn. (2024, 24th of September). https://skolapulsinn.is/um/?page_id=432

Statistic Iceland, 2024 https://px.hagstofa.is:443/pxis/api/v1/is/Samfelag/skolamal/3_framhaldsskolastig/1_fsProf/SKO03223.px

Stefánsson, K and Eyjólfsson, H. E. (2022). *Félagsleg og efnahagsleg staða og brotthvarf úr íslenskum framhaldsskólum*. Velferðarvaktin. [Skýsla - brotthvarf úr framhaldsskólum 24.01.2022.pdf](https://www.visir.is/g/20242588994d/taekni-skolinn-og-kvenna-skolinn-vinsaelastir)

UMFÍ. (2024, 24th of September). <https://www.umfi.is/umfi/>

Þorláksson, Tómas Arnar (2024, June 24th). *Tækniskólinn og Kvennaskólinn vinsælastir*. Vísir. <https://www.visir.is/g/20242588994d/taekni-skolinn-og-kvenna-skolinn-vinsaelastir>