

**International Standard Classification of Educational  
Programmes, 1997  
ISCED 1997**

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## 1. Content and main features of ISCED 1997

The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) is the reference international classification system for education which belongs to the United Nations International Family of Economic and Social Classifications, created by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). The UIS is responsible for the development, maintenance and revision of the classification, as well as for the preparation of guidelines for data collection and analysis according to ISCED. The classification was formalized by a decision of the Member States at the UNESCO General Conference. Its first version of the educational programmes was adopted in 1976 and revised in 1997.

ISCED is applied in statistics world-wide with the purpose of assembling, compiling and analysing crossnationally comparable data. ISCED is the reference classification for organizing educational programmes and related qualifications by education levels and fields ISCED is designed to serve as a framework to classify educational activities as defined in programmes and the resulting qualifications into internationally agreed categories.

ISCED classifies educational programmes by their content using two main crossclassification variables: levels of education and fields of education.

Information compiled according to ISCED can be used for assembling statistics on many different aspects of education. The application of ISCED facilitates the transformation of detailed national education statistics on participants, providers and sponsors of education, compiled on the basis of national concepts and definitions, into aggregate categories that can be compared and interpreted internationally.

Data collections of education statistics assembled according to ISCED can be based on different data sources such as administrative registers, individual and household surveys, and macro-economic aggregated statistics. ISCED 2011 rests on three components: (i) internationally agreed concepts and definitions; (ii) the classification systems; and (iii) ISCED mappings of educational programmes and related qualifications in countries worldwide.

ISCED mappings are an essential tool for organizing information about national education systems, their programmes and related qualifications in order to ensure the comparability of ISCED level information and to support their interpretation for international statistical purposes.

In ISCED, an **educational programme** is defined as a coherent set or sequence of educational activities or communication designed and organized to achieve predetermined learning objectives or accomplish a specific set of educational tasks over a sustained period.

## 2. Cross-classification variables of ISCED 1997

The main classification variable for ISCED 1997 program classifications is the level of education.

Within ISCED levels, programmes can be further subdivided according to additional dimensions, such as program output or type, program orientation or position, and for ISCED level 5, the cumulative length of the program. There is no additional dimension for ISCED level 0.

### Levels of education

ISCED defines levels of education according to ordered series categories. In general, the level is related to the complexity of the content of the program.

The ISCED classification groups the levels of education according to the gradation of the learning experience and the knowledge, skills and competences that each program is intended to impart. The concept of ISCED level reflects the degree of content complexity and specialization of educational programmes from basic to complex. The level of education is thus a concept based on the assumption that educational programmes can be classified into sequentially dependent categories: the more complex the educational program, the higher the level of education.

### Destination and type of programme

The classification determines the destination of the program at ISCED levels 2-4. level and the type of program at ISCED level 5.

The destination of programme at ISCED 2–4. level:

- **A:** This includes programmes that designed to provide direct access to higher-level type A programmes
- **B:** This includes programmes that designed to provide direct access to higher-level type B programmes
- **C:** They are primarily designed for direct access to the labor market at the end of a given level (also called "terminal" programmes).

The type of programme at ISCED 5. level:

- **ISCED 5A:** Theoretically based, research preparatory programmes.
- **ISCED 5B:** Practically oriented/occupationally specific programmes.

### Programme orientation and position

A classification differentiates programme orientation at ISCED levels 2-4., and program position at ISCED level 5.

In the case of orientation, three categories are defined: general education, pre-vocational or pre-technical education and vocational education.

**General education** which is mainly designed to lead participants to a deeper understanding of a subject or group of subjects, especially, but not necessarily, with a view to preparing participants for further (additional) education at the same or a higher level. Successful completion of these programmes may or may not provide the participants with a labour-market relevant qualification at this level.

**Pre-vocational or pre-technical education** which is mainly designed to introduce participants to the world of work and to prepare them for entry into vocational or technical education programmes. Successful completion of such programmes does not yet lead to a labour-market relevant vocational or technical qualification. For a programme to be considered as pre-

vocational or pre-technical education, at least 25 per cent of its content has to be vocational or technical. This minimum is necessary to ensure that the vocational subject or the technical subject is not only one among many others.

**Vocational or technical education** which is mainly designed to lead participants to acquire the practical skills, know-how and understanding necessary for employment in a particular occupation or trade or class of occupations or trades. Successful completion of such programmes lead to a labour-market relevant vocational qualification recognized by the competent authorities in the country in which it is obtained (e.g. Ministry of Education, employers' associations, etc.).

For ISCED level 5, the position indicates the position in the national degree or qualification structure. The variables used are intermediate, first, second and further.

### **Cumulative theoretical duration**

The categories to be considered would be:

#### ISCED 5A:

- Medium: 3–5 years
- Long: 5–6 years
- Very long: more than 6 years

#### ISCED 5B:

- Short: 2–3 years
- Medium: 3–5 years
- Long: 5–6 years
- Very long: more than 6 years

### 3. Coding schemes of ISCED 1997

The ISCED 1997 classification refers to the coding system of the levels of educational programmes.

**1. table ISCED 1997 – coding of educational programmes by levels**

Level	Destination/ type <sup>1)</sup>	Orientation/ position <sup>2)</sup>	Cumulative duration <sup>3)</sup>	Name of the level
0	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	Pre-primary education
1	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	Primary education or first stage of basic education
2	A	General / pe-vocational / vocational	n.a.	Lower secondary or second stage of basic education
	B		n.a.	
	C		n.a.	
3	A	General / pe-vocational / vocational	n.a.	(Upper) secondary education
	B		n.a.	
	C		n.a.	
4	A	General / pe-vocational / vocational	n.a.	Post-secondary non-tertiary education
	B		n.a.	
	C		n.a.	
5	B	n.a.	<2 év	First stage of tertiary education
5	B	n.a.	<3 év	
5	A	Intermediate	<3 év	
5	A	First	3-4 év	
5	A	First	>4 év	
5	A	First	≥5 év	
5	A	Second / further	≥4 év	
5	A	Second / further	≥4-5 év	
5	A	Second / further	≥6 év	
6	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	Second stage of tertiary education
6	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	

<sup>1)</sup> In the case of ISCED level 5.

<sup>2)</sup> At ISCED levels 2-4 orientation, at ISCED level 5 position.

<sup>3)</sup> In the case of ISCED level 5.

## **4. The definitions of ISCED 1997-level**

### **ISCED 0 level: Pre-primary education**

Definition: initial stage of organized instruction are designed primarily to introduce very young children to a school-type environment.

### **ISCED 1 level: Primary education or first stage of basic education**

Definition: The purpose of primary education is to give students a sound basic education in reading, writing and mathematics.

### **ISCED 2 level: Lower secondary or second stage of basic education**

Definition: The purpose of lower secondary education is to complete the provision of basic education which began at ISCED level 1. The programmes at this level are usually on a more subject-oriented pattern using more specialized teachers and more often several teachers conducting classes in their field of specialization.

ISCED 2A: Lower secondary or second stage of basic education

Definition: programmes designed for direct access to level 3 in a sequence which would ultimately lead to tertiary education, i.e. entrance to ISCED 3A or 3B.

ISCED 2B: Lower secondary or second stage of basic education

Definition: programmes designed for direct access to level 3C.

ISCED 2C: Lower secondary or second stage of basic education

Definition: programmes primarily designed for direct access to the labour market at the end of this level (sometimes referred to as 'terminal' programmes).

### **ISCED 3 level: Upper secondary education**

Definition: this level of education corresponds to the final stage of secondary education in most OECD countries. More specialization may be observed at this level than at ISCED level 2 and often teacher need to be more qualified or specialized than for ISCED level 2. There are substantial differences in the typical duration of ISCED level 3 programmes both across and between countries, typically ranging from 2 to 5 years of schooling.

ISCED 3A: Upper secondary education

Definition: programmes at level 3 designed to provide direct access to ISCED 5A.

ISCED 3B: Upper secondary education

Definition: az ISCED 3. programmes at level 3 designed to provide direct access to ISCED 5B.

ISCED 3C: Upper secondary education

Definition: programmes at level 3 not designed to lead directly to ISCED 5A or 5B. Therefore, these programmes lead directly to labour market, ISCED 4 programmes or other ISCED 3 programmes.

#### **ISCED 4 level: Post-secondary non-tertiary education**

Definition: captures programmes that straddle the boundary between upper-secondary and post-secondary education from an international point of view, even though they might clearly be considered as upper-secondary or post-secondary programmes in a national context. They are often not significantly more advanced than programmes at ISCED 3 but they serve to broaden the knowledge of participants who have already completed a programme at level 3. The students are typically older than those in ISCED 3 programmes.

ISCED 4A: Post-secondary non-tertiary education

Definition: programmes at level 4, designed to provide direct access to ISCED 5A.

ISCED 4B: Post-secondary non-tertiary education

Definition: programmes at level 4, designed to provide direct access to ISCED 5B.

ISCED 4C: Post-secondary non-tertiary educations

Definition: programmes at level 4 not designed to lead directly to ISCED 5A or 5B. These programmes primarily designed to prepare students for direct entry into the labour market, although they also provide access to other ISCED 4 programmes.

#### **ISCED 5 level: First stage of tertiary education**

Definition: This level consists of tertiary programmes having an educational content more advanced than those offered at levels 3 and 4.

ISCED 5A: Tertiary education, first stage

Definition: ISCED level 5A programmes are tertiary programmes that are largely theoretically based and are intended to provide sufficient qualifications for gaining entry into advanced research programmes and profession with high skills requirements.

ISCED 5B: Tertiary education, first stage

Definition: The content of ISCED level 5B programmes is practically oriented/occupationally specific than in programmes at ISCED level 5A.

#### **ISCED 6 level: Second stage of tertiary education**

Definition: This level is reserved for tertiary programmes which lead to the award of an advanced research qualification. The programmes are therefore devoted to advanced study and original research and are not based on course-work only.