PART I
ISCED 2011 0VERVIEW



Chapter 1

ISCED 2011 overview

The *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.

ISCED 2011 is the second major revision of this classification (initially developed in the 1970s and first revised in 1997). It was adopted by the UNESCO General Conference in November 2011.

ISCED 2011 presents a revision of the ISCED 1997 levels of education programmes (ISCED-P) and introduces a related classification of educational attainment levels (ISCED-A) based on recognised educational qualifications. Compared to ISCED 1997 which had seven levels of education, ISCED 2011 now has nine levels of education.

WHAT IS ISCED AND WHAT ARE ITS UNITS OF CLASSIFICATION?

(§1)[1] The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) is the reference classification for organizing education programmes and related qualifications by education levels and fields.

(§2) The basic concepts and definitions of ISCED are therefore intended to be internationally valid and comprehensive of the full range of education systems.

ISCED 2011 is the second major revision of this classification (initially developed in the 1970s and first revised in 1997). The ISCED 2011 classification was adopted by the UNESCO General Conference in November 2011.

For more general information on ISCED, see Section 1 of the ISCED 2011 classification.

(§10) The basic units of classification in ISCED are the national (and sub-national) education programme and the related recognized educational qualification.

(§11) In ISCED, an education programme is defined as a coherent set or sequence of educational activities or communication designed and organized to achieve pre-determined learning objectives or to accomplish a specific set of educational tasks over a sustained period.

(§20) Within the context of ISCED, an educational qualification is the official confirmation, usually in the form of a document certifying the successful completion of an education programme or a stage of a programme.

For more information on ISCED units of classification, see Section 2 of the ISCED 2011 classification.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ISCED CLASSIFICATION?

(§91) The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) is the custodian of ISCED and is thus responsible for the development, maintenance, updating and revision of this reference classification.

(§96) The UIS plans to work closely with countries and partner data collection agencies (including Eurostat and the OECD) to ensure mappings are in accordance with the ISCED classification and updated as needed.

For more information on ISCED 2011 governance, see Section 8 of the ISCED 2011 classification.

WHAT ARE ISCED MAPPINGS?

(§8) ISCED mappings are an essential tool for organizing information on 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.

(§22) In ISCED, education programmes are classified first and qualifications are subsequently classified. The ISCED mapping is the tool to show the links between education programmes and qualifications.

ISCED mappings for each country help to ensure that international comparisons are more transparent and are better understood by users. Therefore, contextual information presented within mappings is fundamental.

Such information includes, inter alia, national names of programmes, theoretical entrance ages and durations of programmes, minimum entry requirements and qualifications received upon successful completion of programmes. This information is presented alongside relevant ISCED dimensions such as the ISCED level, orientation of the programme, completion and access sub-categories, and, at Bachelor's and Master's levels, the position in the national degree structure.

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The classification of national programmes to ISCED levels and complementary dimensions can then be used to determine the three-digit ISCED-P code of a programme and corresponding three-digit ISCED-A code related to the qualification received upon successful completion of the programme.

ISCED mappings may also include some notes with further explanatory details regarding the national programmes.

WHAT IS COVERED AND NOT COVERED BY THE ISCED 2011 CLASSIFICATION?

(§35) ISCED 2011 covers formal and non-formal education programmes offered at any stage of a person's life. Qualifications which are recognized by the relevant national authorities, however they are obtained (e.g. by successful completion of a formal education programme or via a non-formal education programme or informal learning activity), are used for the purpose of measuring educational attainment. ISCED does not cover programmes of informal, incidental or random learning, nor qualifications which are not recognized.

(§42) In ISCED 2011, there is a clear distinction between formal and non-formal education for statistical purposes. Currently, international data collection exercises on education (mappings, surveys, censuses, etc.) are mainly focused on formal education.

While in the scope of ISCED, information on non-formal education programmes is not usually included in international collections of education statistics. However, for the purposes of educational attainment, recognised qualifications obtained from non-formal education programmes are usually taken into account, if these are considered equivalent to the qualifications obtained in formal education.

- *For more information on the scope of education in ISCED, see Section 4 of the ISCED 2011 classification.*
- *For more information and details on issues regarding non-formal education, see Section 4 and Annex V of the ISCED 2011 classification.*

WHAT ARE THE LEVELS OF EDUCATION WITHIN THE ISCED 2011 CLASSIFICATION?

(§45) The main cross-classification variables of ISCED are levels and fields of education.

This operational manual focuses on the classification of programmes and related qualifications by ISCED 2011 levels.

ISCED 2011 has nine levels of education, from level 0 to level 8:

- ISCED 0: Early childhood education
- ISCED 1: Primary education
- ISCED 2: Lower secondary education
- ISCED 3: Upper secondary education
- ISCED 4: Post-secondary non-tertiary education
- ISCED 5: Short-cycle tertiary education
- ISCED 6: Bachelor's or equivalent level
- ISCED 7: Master's or equivalent level
- ISCED 8: Doctoral or equivalent level

(§47) The ISCED level reflects the degree of complexity and specialisation of the content of an education programme, from foundational to complex.

(§48) The more advanced the programme, the higher the level of education.

- *For more information on ISCED levels, see Sections 5 and 9 of the ISCED 2011 classification.*

HOW ARE PROGRAMMES AND RELATED QUALIFICATIONS ALLOCATED TO THE ISCED 2011 LEVELS?

(§50) The classification of education programmes by levels aims to reflect their content. Due to the absence of direct measures to classify educational content, ISCED employs proxy criteria that help to classify a given education programme to the appropriate ISCED level.

(§51) These proxy criteria are comprised of main and subsidiary criteria.

For example, proxy measures that can be used in the classification of programmes to levels are the duration and cumulative duration of programmes within and across ISCED levels. ISCED 2011 provides some guidelines of typical duration and ranges of cumulative duration as criteria for classifying education programmes by level. These criteria are summarised in Tables 1.1 and 1.2.

▪ Table 1.1 ▪

Duration by ISCED level

ISCED level	Typical duration [most common duration]
0	No duration criteria. However, a programme should account for at least the equivalent of 2 hours per day and 100 days a year of educational activities in order to be included.
1	4 to 7 years [most common: 6 years]
2	2 to 5 years [most common: 3 years]
3	2 to 5 years [most common: 3 years]
4	6 months to 2 or 3 years
5	2 to 3 years
6	3 to 4 years when directly following ISCED level 3; or 1 to 2 years when following another ISCED level 6 programme
7	1 to 4 years when following ISCED level 6; or 5 to 7 years when directly following ISCED level 3
8	Minimum 3 years

▪ Table 1.2 ▪

Typical cumulative duration in primary and secondary education

ISCED level	Range [most common cumulative duration]
1	4 to 7 years [most common: 6 years]
1 + 2	8 to 11 years [most common: 9 years]
1 + 2 + 3	11 to 13 years [most common: 12 years]

Other proxy criteria exist within ISCED 2011, such as requirements to enter the programme, type of teacher qualifications, organisation of instruction and design of the programme (for example, to prepare for entry to the labour market or to other education programmes).

The providers of education programmes should not be used as a main criterion for classifying programmes by ISCED level. The primary criterion is the complexity and specialisation of a programme's educational content and how the content is reflected in the classification criteria (§52).

◗ *For more information on ISCED 2011 duration and cumulative duration criteria, see Section 5 and Table 21 in the ISCED 2011 classification.*

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(§49) Classifying education programmes into a progression of levels aims to reflect the full range of educational pathways available in education systems. Most education systems provide several possible pathways from ISCED level 0/1 to 8.

- *To see possible educational pathways by ISCED 2011 categories, see Figure 2 in Annex I of the ISCED 2011 classification and Annex B in this operational manual.*

HOW ARE PROGRAMMES THAT SPAN ISCED LEVELS, ARE SEQUENTIAL OR ARE COMPRISED OF MODULES CLASSIFIED WITHIN ISCED 2011?

(§26) When classifying national education programmes by ISCED levels, transition points between national programmes and exit points into the labour market may not always coincide with transition points between ISCED levels. Three such cases can be identified: i) programmes that span two or more ISCED levels; ii) two or more sequential programmes that together constitute one ISCED level; and iii) programmes which are provided in modules or courses without clearly defined sequencing.

For programmes that span two or more ISCED levels, the years, grades or stages that meet the criteria for each ISCED level should be assigned accordingly to the different levels. Transition points already existing in the programmes may be used to help identify the boundary between ISCED levels.

Where two or more sequential programmes constitute one ISCED level, special care should be taken in reporting statistics. For example, while enrolment would be combined for all programmes in the level, data on entrants would only include those entering the first programme in the level. Furthermore, data on graduates would be only those completing the final programme in the sequence within the level (except where successful completers of programmes leading to partial level completion are also collected). (§32)

Programmes composed of modules also need to be carefully assessed in order to ensure that they meet all the criteria for an education programme within ISCED 2011 and also be given special consideration in the reporting of data.

- *For more information on programmes spanning ISCED levels, sequential programmes and modular programmes, see Section 3 in the ISCED 2011 classification.*

BY WHAT COMPLEMENTARY DIMENSIONS CAN PROGRAMMES AND QUALIFICATIONS BE FURTHER CLASSIFIED WITHIN ISCED 2011 LEVELS?

(§45) Within ISCED levels, programmes and qualifications are further classified by complementary dimensions. These include:

- Programme orientation;
- Completion of the ISCED level;
- Access to higher ISCED levels; and
- Position in the national degree and qualification structure.

For ISCED levels 2 to 5, there are two possible programme orientations: general and vocational. ISCED 2011 also allows for the possibility of coding academic and professional orientation categories at the tertiary levels (5 to 8). However, in the absence of internationally-agreed definitions on these orientation categories for tertiary education, the category "unspecified" may be used in international statistics for ISCED levels 6 to 8.

ISCED 2011 introduces a new complementary dimension: completion of an ISCED level and access to higher levels of education. Altogether there are four possible sub-categories of programmes (although not all four apply to all levels):

- No level completion – and thus without direct access to a higher ISCED level (which in the case of ISCED level 3 is to levels 5, 6 or 7);

- Partial level completion without direct access to a higher ISCED level;
- Level completion without direct access to a higher ISCED level;
- Level completion with direct access to a higher ISCED level (which in the case of ISCED level 3 is to first tertiary programmes at levels 5, 6 or 7).

Programmes at ISCED levels 6 and 7 can be further categorised by the position in the national degree and qualification structure (see the respective chapters for more information on these sub-categories).

Not all complementary dimensions apply to all levels. In addition, ISCED level 0 is further sub-divided according to the type of programme and age group into early childhood educational development and pre-primary education.

➧ *For more information on ISCED 2011 complementary dimensions, see Section 5 of the ISCED 2011 classification.*

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 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 in the following languages:

Arabic (www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Documents/isced-fields-of-education-training-2013AR.pdf)

Chinese (www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Documents/isced-fields-of-education-training-2013CH.pdf)

English (www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Documents/isced-fields-of-education-training-2013.pdf)

French (www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Documents/isced-fields-of-education-training-2013FR.pdf)

Russian (www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Documents/isced-fields-of-education-training-2013RU.pdf)

Spanish (www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Documents/isced-fields-of-education-training-2013ES.pdf)

WHAT ARE THE CODING SCHEMES WITHIN ISCED 2011?

(§89) The ISCED classification consists of parallel coding schemes for education programmes (ISCED Programmes or ISCED-P) and levels of educational attainment (ISCED-Attainment or ISCED-A). Three-digit coding systems are used to codify both education programmes and educational attainment.

It should be underlined that, while there is very often a correspondence between the ISCED-P code of a programme and the ISCED-A code resulting from its successful completion, ISCED-A codes cannot always be translated automatically from ISCED-P codes. For example, certain education programmes may lead to more than one qualification, each of which may result in different educational attainment levels. The programme itself will be classified in ISCED-P according to the highest completion and access category to which it leads, but each resulting qualification will be classified in ISCED-A according to the actual educational attainment level with which it is associated.

Codes ending in "1" in ISCED-P (for programmes which are insufficient for level completion) do not exist in ISCED-A since educational attainment from such programmes is coded at the ISCED level below the programme of study.

➧ *For more information on ISCED 2011 coding, see Tables 1-3 and Annexes II and III in the ISCED 2011 classification. Also see Annexes A and C in this operational manual.*

COMPARISON OF ISCED 2011 WITH ISCED 1997

Major changes between ISCED 2011 and ISCED 1997

ISCED 2011 presents a revision of the ISCED 1997 levels of education programmes (ISCED-P) and introduces a related classification of educational attainment levels (ISCED-A) based on recognised educational qualifications.

ISCED 2011 includes improved definitions of formal and non-formal education, educational activities and programmes. An expanded glossary is also included to assist users in understanding specific terms related to ISCED.

Compared to ISCED 1997 which had seven levels of education, ISCED 2011 now has nine levels of education. Tertiary education has been restructured, taking into account changes in higher education such as the Bologna structure, and now comprises four levels of education compared with two levels in ISCED 1997. Programmes previously classified in level 5 of ISCED 1997 will now be allocated to levels 5, 6 or 7 in ISCED 2011. As well, 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 years. 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).

ISCED 2011 comprises two parallel classifications, ISCED-P and ISCED-A, each represented by a separate but similar three-digit coding scheme.

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 1997) do not provide labour market-relevant qualifications and are now mainly classified as general education (§278). ISCED 2011 also proposes codes for 'academic' and 'professional' orientations at the tertiary level. However as there is still a need for international agreement on their definitions, the code 'orientation unspecified' is also available for use at ISCED 2011 levels 6 to 8.

ISCED 1997 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 1997. ISCED 2011 further sub-classifies programmes which 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 1997. (§278)

Moreover, while the position in the national degree structure of tertiary programmes was mentioned in ISCED 1997, 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).

Correspondence tables between ISCED revisions

The correspondence between the levels in ISCED 2011 and ISCED 1997 is shown in Table 1.3.

▪ Table 1.3 ▪

Comparison of levels of education between ISCED 2011 and ISCED 1997

ISCED 2011		ISCED 1997	
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)

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Table 1.4 shows the correspondence between the complementary dimensions of ISCED 2011 and ISCED 1997.

▪ Table 1.4 ▪

Comparison of complementary dimensions between ISCED 2011 and ISCED 1997

ISCED 2011			ISCED 1997		
Orientation (second-digit code)		Levels applied	Orientation		Levels applied
4	General education	2 to 5	G	General education	2 to 4
			P	Pre-vocational or pre-technical education	
5	Vocational education		V	Vocational or technical education	
4	Academic education*	5 to 8		–	
5	Professional education*	5 to 8		–	
6	Unspecified orientation*	6 to 8		–	
Completion and access (third-digit ISCED-P code)		Levels applied	Destination		Levels applied
4	Sufficient for completion of the level with direct access to the higher ISCED level	2 to 8	A	Programmes designed to lead to "A" programmes at the higher ISCED level (on a direct pathway to doctoral studies)	2 to 4
				Theoretically-based programmes at first tertiary level	5
			B	Programmes designed to lead to "B" programmes at the higher ISCED level (on a pathway to the labour market)	2, 3, (4**)
				Programmes designed to lead to the labour market	4**
				Practically-oriented/occupationally-specific programmes at first tertiary level	5
3	Sufficient for completion of the level without direct access to the higher ISCED level	2 to 4	C	Programmes designed to lead to the labour market without direct access to the higher ISCED level	2, 3, (4**)
2	Partial completion of the level without direct access to the higher ISCED level	2, 3			
1	Insufficient for completion of the level without direct access to the higher ISCED level	2 to 8			
Position in the national degree structure (third-digit ISCED-P code)		Levels applied			
5	First degree	6	–	–	–
6	Long first degree	6, 7	-	–	–
7	Second or further degree following a Bachelor's or equivalent programme	6, 7	–	–	–
8	Second or further degree following a Master's or equivalent programme	7	–	–	–

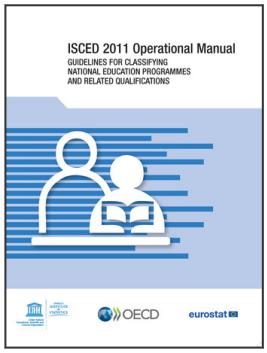
* In the absence of internationally-agreed definitions for academic and professional orientations at the tertiary level, 'general' or 'vocational' will be used at ISCED 2011 levels 2 to 5, and 'orientation unspecified' may be used at ISCED 2011 levels 6 to 8.

** Destination C in ISCED 1997 was introduced at ISCED level 4 for UOE countries (UNESCO-OECD-Eurostat data collection). For other countries, only destinations A and B applied at ISCED 1997 level 4.

For more details on the correspondence between ISCED 2011 and ISCED 1997 levels, see Section 10 and Tables 19, 20 and 21 of the ISCED 2011 classification.

Note

1. Paragraph numbers are references to the main ISCED 2011 classification document. See more details in the Reader's Guide.



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