



National system overview on education systems in Europe

2011 Edition



ESTONIA

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1. Education population and language of instruction

On 1 January 2011, the number of people aged 29 or under was 473 341 (35.3 % of the population) and the number of children of compulsory school age (7-16 years old) was 125 725.

The language of instruction is in most cases Estonian, the official national language or Russian. On the 2010/11 academic years there were 463 Estonian-medium schools, 62 other, mostly Russian-medium schools and 36 schools with Estonian and/or other language medium classes (Estonian- and Russian-medium; Estonian- and English-medium, Estonian- and Finnish-medium schools and two English-medium schools). In vocational education, there were Russian-medium groups for 25.05 % of all pupils in the 2009/10 academic year. In higher education the language of instruction was Estonian for 90.2 % of students, Russian for 7.9 %, and English for 1.85 %.

2. Administrative control and extent of public-sector funded education

Most pupils attend public-sector schools which are funded by the State: in 2010/11 academic years 94 % of pupils attended municipal schools, 2 % state schools and 4 % private schools. Private schools are owned by private physical or legal entities. Costs for teacher salaries and textbooks are covered from the state budget; students who attend private schools must pay fees. All out-of-school activities and project work beyond compulsory curricula in state, municipal and private schools are expected to be funded by local government or parents.

National standards for education at different levels are set by the Government of the Republic (*Vabariigi Valitsus*). The Ministry of Education and Research is responsible for the development and implementation of educational policy and supervises basic and secondary schools at national level. The county governments (*maavalitsus*) provide regional-level supervision of pre-school childcare institutions and schools, and some guidance and counselling while the local governments (*vallavalitsus, linnavalitsus*) maintain pre-primary childcare institutions, basic and secondary schools. Authority responsible for school inspection is the external evaluation department (*välishindamise osakond*) at the Ministry of Education and Research. Inspectors in the educational departments of county governments may be involved in the inspection of schools. Higher education standard is approved by the Government of the Republic.

3. Pre-primary education

In Estonia, pre-primary education is not compulsory. It includes all public- and private-sector institutions (*koolieelne lasteasutus*) that cater and provide pre-primary education for children aged 1 or over until they move on to primary school. Parents contribute towards the costs. Less secured families are supported financially by local authorities in covering the costs. In 2010, 67 % of children aged between 4 and 6 attended pre-primary institutions while, for those aged less than 3, the percentage was 59 %.

4. Compulsory education

(i) Phases

<i>Põhiharidus</i> (primary and general lower secondary education – single structure)	7-15/16 (17) years of age
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Education is compulsory until completion of basic education which lasts nine years or up to the age of 17.

7-year olds are obliged to attend basic school – *põhikool* – which provides primary and lower secondary education in one single stage. Most students are 15/16 years old when they acquire compulsory education. Students who have not acquired basic education are still obliged to study up to the age of 17.

(ii) Admissions criteria

Children who attain 7 years of age by 1 October of the current year are subject to the obligation to attend school. Local governments have to guarantee each child a school place. Schools must provide places for all children in their service area. Parents can enrol their children in the school of their choice if there is a place available. Compulsory education is free in municipal and State schools.

(iii) Length of school day/week/year

A study period must include no less than 175 days of study i.e. 35 weeks. The school year starts on 1 September. The length of the school week differs from grade to grade: 20 lessons lasting 45 minutes for first-year pupils and 34 lessons for pupils in the final year of *põhikool* are spread over five days a week.

(iv) Class size/student grouping

In 2010/11, the pupil/teacher ratio was 10.1. The average class size was 18.3. The regulations define the maximum number of pupils in each class of basic school as 24. The owner of a school may, proposed by the head teacher and agreed upon by the school board, also establish a smaller or higher upper limit of the class size (the maximum is 26). In general, classes are mixed and are made up of pupils of the same age. From first to sixth year, most subjects are taught by one single teacher, depending on needs of school and teacher preparation, from seventh to twelfth year, each subject is taught by a specialist teacher.

(v) Curriculum control and content

Each school sets its own curriculum based on the National Curriculum laying down *inter alia* the list of compulsory subjects which are the same for all pupils (¹). Teachers are free to use the teaching methods and textbooks of their choice.

(vi) Assessment, progression and qualifications

Pupils are assessed by their teachers throughout the school year: written and oral student performance, practical work, etc. They are graded at the end of a quarter of an academic year or a course and at the end of each school year.

As a rule, they are entitled to progress to the next year if they have been assessed in all compulsory subjects and never rated 'unsatisfactory'. In fact, subject to teacher approval, the law also enables them to move on to the following year if they have had one or two such 'unsatisfactory' grades. Pupils in difficulty can be made to repeat the year.

To complete basic school (*põhikool*), students have to pass three final centrally-set internal examinations following which they receive a school-leaving certificate (*põhikooli lõputunnistus*).

5. Post-compulsory education/upper secondary and post-secondary level

(i) Types of education

<i>Üldkeskharidus</i> (general upper secondary education)	16-18/19 years of age
<i>Kutsekeskharidus</i> (vocational upper secondary education)	16-18/19 years of age
<i>Kutseõpe keskhariduse baasil</i> (vocational post-secondary education)	19-21 years of age

(ii) Admissions criteria

Admission to upper secondary general (*gümnaasium*) or vocational schools (*kutseõppeasutus*) is based on the compulsory education certificate. Pupils can apply for admission to the kind of school they prefer. In some sectors, satisfactory completion of general upper secondary education is the prerequisite for entry to vocational and post-secondary education.

(iii) Curriculum control and content

General upper secondary schools set their own curriculum in accordance with the National Curriculum (1). Compulsory subjects account for 70 % of curricular content. The structure of the vocational upper secondary curriculum (number and spread of general and vocational subjects) varies in accordance with the field of training and must be approved by the Ministry of Education. Out of a minimum 120 weeks of study in the vocational upper secondary curriculum, 40 weeks have to be for general subjects, of which 32 weeks are compulsory and common to all pupils. Teachers are free to use the teaching methods and textbooks of their choice.

(iv) Assessment, progression and qualifications

Arrangements for the assessment of pupils are identical to those in compulsory education. To complete their upper secondary general schooling, students have to pass five school-leaving examinations (*gümnaasiumi lõpueksamid*). Three of them have to be external national examinations (*riigieksam*) one of which, the Estonian, is compulsory, while the two others are

⁽¹⁾ In January 2011 new curricula for basic schools and upper secondary schools were adopted by the government, the implementation of which will start on 1 September 2011.

chosen by students from a list of subjects. Two optional exams can be internal. Students who pass the examinations receive the school-leaving certificate (*gümnaasiumi lõputunnistus*) and national examination certificate (*riigieksamitunnistus*).

To finish courses at their vocational education institution, students have to complete the corresponding curriculum. They receive the vocational upper secondary certificate (*lõputunnistus kutsekeskhariduse omandamise kohta*) or vocational post-secondary certificate (*lõputunnistus keskhariduse baasil kutseõppe läbimise kohta*).

6. Higher education

(i) Structure

There are two types of higher education establishment: first, universities (*ülikool*), offering academic programs; and, secondly, institutions of professional higher education (*rakenduskõrgkool*), offering professional higher education programs (*rakenduskõrgharidus*). Professional higher education programs can be offered also by universities and in few vocational education institutions (*kutseõppeasutus*).

(ii) Access

The pre-condition for admission to higher education institutions is secondary education obtained in Estonia (*gümnaasiumi lõputunnistus; lõputunnistus kutsekeskhariduse omandamise kohta*) or qualifications equal thereto obtained abroad. The conditions and procedure for studies are established by higher education institutions.

The acquisition of higher education is financed from the state budget to the extent of the state commissioned student places. Students who do not study in a student place formed on the basis of state-commissioned education have to pay tuition fees. The number of student places financed from the state budget, in state, municipal or private institutions, is decided in the process that involves the Ministry of Education and Research and its partners. Each higher education institution is entitled to allocate a number of additional places. Students who obtain such additional places have to pay tuition fees.

(iii) Qualifications

Estonia made a transfer to the two-cycle system (bachelor and master) in the 2002/03 academic year. The number of students enrolled in the two cycle degree system in Estonia in 2010/11 is 66 185 i.e. 95.8 % of all students below third cycle programs.

At the end of the university studies (the 3-4-year *bakalaureuseõpe*, the 1-2-year *magistriõpe*, the 6-year *integreeritud bakalaureuse- ja magistriõpe* and the 3-4-year *doktoriõpe*), a graduate is issued the diploma (*diplom*) certifying the fulfilling of the curriculum or awarding of the academic degree, and a diploma supplement (*akadeemiline õiend*) in Estonian and in English. A graduate from *bakalaureuseõpe* is issued a diploma supplement in English on request only.

A graduate of professional higher education programs (*rakenduskõrgharidusõpe*) lasting 3-4 years is issued a diploma (*diplom*) and a diploma supplement (*akadeemiline õiend*) in Estonian and in English. Professional higher education programs are provided in two different ways and for different courses duration:

- in *ülikool, rakenduskõrgkool and kutseõppeasutus* (programs vary 3-4 years)
- in *rakenduskõrgkool* – programs of nursing – (3.5+1 years)

The duration of formal studies may be longer 0.5-1 years if a student whose mother tongue is not Estonian takes additional courses in Estonian.

A graduate of professional higher education programs (*rakenduskõrgharidusõpe*) lasting 3-4.5 years is issued a diploma (*diplom*) and a diploma supplement (*akadeemiline õiend*) in Estonian and in English. It is possible to continue studies at Master's level lasting 1-2 years after completing the professionally oriented first-level study program in a professional higher education institution or at university. Institutions are authorised to award *magistriõpe* by government decree. After obtaining the diploma (*diplom*), graduates of 3-4-year professional higher education programs may move directly to university. They need at least one year of professional experience if they want to proceed to *rakenduskõrgkool* master course.

7. Special needs

Every attempt is made to place children with special educational needs into mainstream schools, reserving special schools for those with more serious problems. In 2010/11 academic year 3.3 % of all basic school pupils attended schools for students with special educational needs. At several vocational schools, it is possible for students with special needs to get vocational education and training.

A child is admitted to a group (class, school) for children with special needs on the basis of a decision of the counselling committee: a written application from a parent or caregiver is also needed. Counselling committees, including a Special Education Needs teacher, a speech therapist, a social worker, a medical specialist (if needed) and a representative of the local government make recommendations on the basis of medical, psychological and pedagogical research.

8. Teachers

Initial teacher education is provided by universities and professional higher education institutions (*ülikool, rakenduskõrgkool*). Vocational teachers and teachers of pre-primary schools are trained at the first level of higher education (3 years *bakalaureuseõpe* or *rakenduskõrgharidusõpe*), teachers of basic schools (*põhikool*) and upper secondary schools (*gümnaasium*), in second cycle (2 years *magistriõpe*). Primary school teachers are trained according to the integrated curricula of Bachelor's and Master's study (5 years, *integreeritud õpe*), others are trained in three-year Bachelor's study which is followed by the two-year Master's study. The diploma and certificate awarded provide evidence of teaching qualifications.

Since 2004, graduates from the initial teacher education may pass the induction period (*kutseaasta*) lasting one school year. During this time the prospective teachers receive support from their tutors and universities (university colleges). After working as a teacher for a minimum of three years, the person concerned can apply for a higher-level occupational grade. There are four occupational grades. A special share (around 3 % of the amount earmarked for teacher salaries) of the state budget is allocated for in-service teacher training.

At primary level, generalist school teachers usually teach most subjects in grades 1 to 6 and subject teachers teach up to three subjects from grades 7 to 12. Teachers are employed on a contractual basis in line with the general provisions of employment law.

Unrevised English

Information provided by the Estonian Eurydice Unit.

For more detailed information on education systems in Europe, you may consult EURYPEDIA which provides descriptions of educational systems and policies in the Eurydice network countries: <http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurypedia>