

National summary sheets on education system in Europe and ongoing reforms

2009 Edition

ESTONIA

SEPTEMBER 2009

1. Education population and language of instruction

On 1 January 2008, the number of people aged 29 or under was 496 468 (37 % of the population) and the number of children of compulsory school age (7-16 years old) was 130 862.

The language of instruction is in most cases Estonian (official national language) or Russian. On 2008/09 academic years there are 482 Estonian-medium schools, 67 Russian-medium schools and 33 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 26.2 % of all pupils in 2008/09 academic years. In higher education the language of instruction was Estonian for 87.9 % of students, Russian for 10.4 %, and English for 1.6 %.

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

Most pupils attend public-sector schools which are funded by the State: in 2008/09 academic years 93.9 % of pupils attended municipal schools, 2.1 % state schools and 3.9 % 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*, *linnaavalitsus*) 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 2008/09, 61.8 % of children aged between 0 and 6 attended pre-primary institutions while, for those aged less than 3, the percentage was 32.5 %.

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 (nine years), or up to the age of 17.

7-year olds are obliged to attend school – at *põhikool* (providing primary and lower secondary education in one single stage). Most students are 15/16 years old when they acquire compulsory education (9 years). Students who have not acquired basic education are 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 (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 2008/09, the pupil/teacher ratio was 10.5. The average class size was 18.9. The regulations define the maximum number of pupils in each class of basic school as 24 (and of upper secondary school as 36). The manager of a school may establish a smaller class and on the consent of the school board, also bigger upper limit of the size of a class. 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 for Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools laying down *inter alia* the list of compulsory subjects (the same for all pupils). 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). They are graded at the end of a complete school session or part of it (term, or half-term), 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 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 for Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools. 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 mother tongue, is compulsory, while the two others are 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 (*rakenduskorgkool*), 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 two-cycle system in 2002/03 academic year. The number of students enrolled in the two cycle degree system in Estonia in 2008/09 is 65 934. That is 93.4 % 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 2008/09 8.5 % of those pupils who attended basic schools studied according to individual study program in one or several subjects. 2.7 % of all basic school pupils attended schools for students with special educational needs in 2008/09 academic year. 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 (caregiver) is also needed. Counselling committees (including a SEN 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 have to pass the final 'on-the-job' qualifying phase (*kutseaasta*) lasting one school year. During this time the prospective teachers receive support from their tutors and universities (university colleges). At the end of the period they are awarded a qualification of a teacher. 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.

9. Current reforms and priorities

(a) Main debates, recent changes

The impact of a drastic decrease in the number of children for the education system and labour market is discussed by the educational community and general public. Within the last three years, the number of students in general education schools has decreased by 10 per cent and this sharp decrease also has affected the number of schools. During 1999-2007 the number of schools has diminished by 155. The fall of pupils' numbers is expected to decrease further 7800 by 2013, which means, in effect, that in 2012/13 about 35 % less pupils will take up their studies in upper secondary schools in comparison to 1999. Such a decrease in the number of learners certainly has a direct influence on the school network, teacher training, the need for in-service training and retraining of teachers, the activities of higher education institutions as well as to future's labour market circumstances. The Ministry of Education and Research has prepared the legislative changes, based on the thorough analytical work, in order to facilitate changes in the school network.

Basic and secondary education

One of the most serious problems of the last years is the number of pupils dropping out on basic school level. In 2007/08, drop-out level on 7-9 grades was 1.5 %. The share of the population aged 18-24 with basic school (lower-secondary) education or even without basic school qualification and not in education or training has increased somewhat in the last year – the corresponding number in 2008 was 14.3 % (up from 13.2 % in 2006, the same 14.3% in 2007). Measures, which would guarantee the fulfilling of compulsory school attendance and decrease the number of learners dropping out of school, are in the focus of political attention. Since these issues are often related to the socio-economic circumstances of the family the major initiatives so far have been provision of free school meals and transportation subsidies for all pupils and special accommodation in rural areas and smaller towns. In addition, concrete support mechanisms (e.g. support services) are programmed under the European Social Fund funding and are available since 2008/09.

Debates continue for the basic school and upper secondary school curriculum development although consensus exists regarding the main principles of curriculum development: decreasing the scope of syllabi and creating links within syllabi, a greater emphasis on general skills and implementation of knowledge, increasing the choice possibilities for schools to better take into account students' needs and interests. The new curriculum is expected to be approved by the Government at the end of 2009. The application of new curricula is expected to start since 2010/11 academic year.

As a new development, based on the legislative amendments, there is a legal bases for provision of International Baccalaureate Diploma Programs in Estonia since July 2009.

More teaching of Estonian

In 2007/08 Russian medium upper secondary schools (grades 10 to 12) started successfully the transition to partial Estonian language instruction. The transition is primarily designed to enable students studying at Russian medium schools to obtain a good command of Estonian as this is essential for the success in labour market, broadens the opportunities for the good quality higher education and is a pre-requisite for acquiring Estonian citizenship. In the 2009/10 academic year three subjects (Estonian literature, civics, music) are taught in Estonian. Each forthcoming academic year one subject will be added until 2011. Since 2011/12 all Russian medium-schools need to provide at least 60% of compulsory school program in Estonian. At the same time, Estonia will maintain Russian medium basic schools as the Constitution of the Republic states that every person has the right to obtain an Estonian medium education. According to the regulations by the

proposal of a school and upon the agreement of the school owner, the language of instruction in a basic school may be a language other than Estonian. However, a pupil learns language best when the start is made in the early age. This is the reason why according to plans new curricula for nurseries will introduce activities with the supervision in Estonian earlier, already for 3 years olds. Until now, teaching of Estonian for children of families with Russian language background started for age group of 5-7.

Higher Education

In higher education, strategic quality oriented processes continue based on the Higher Education Strategy approved by the Parliament in 2006. Independent Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency started to work since 1 January 2009. It is the legal successor of Higher Education Accreditation Centre, the member of ENQA (the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education), but it carries out a broader mission with aim to encourage the HE quality development and to value and dispread the best practice of quality assurance in Estonian HE sector. One of the main tasks the new agency has to implement is the quality assessment of all higher education institutions in Estonia during 2009-2011 in order the institutions receive the authority to issue state recognised diplomas. The Agency will give an assessment of quality situation of all institutions in three areas – quality, availability of resources and sustainability of and educational process. The Minister of Education and Research, based on the independent assessment of the Agency, takes issue to the Cabinet of Ministers that will decide upon the degree awarding powers to institution in certain broad area of study. The institution may get degree awarding power fully or with limitations (for three years). Decision on degree awarding powers entails recognition of diplomas.

Links to the labour market

Estonia has adopted the eight level qualification structure or **European Qualifications Framework** (EQF) in 2008. The first qualification structure in Estonia was designed in cooperation with the labour market stakeholders and holds five levels. In June 2008, the amendments were passed to Professions Act that will ensure the comparability of Estonian qualifications with the EQF. Amendments also foresee clarifications of roles of different stakeholders in the developments and awarding of professional qualifications. There are quality assurance mechanisms designed in order to guarantee the comparability of levels and procedures in different professional fields. The full enforcement of the amendments is foreseen only in 2011, because there is a need for the transfer period for the development processes that support the major changes (like e.g. upgrading of all professional standards based on the EQF classification, training of people involved in development of professional standards or awarding qualifications). The transfer process is supported via the special European Social Fund project.

As an initiative by the Minister of Education and Research Tõnis Lukas the new program for people in VET and higher education level is under the preparation. The aim of the program is to give the opportunity to finish studies for students who during the economic boom neglected studies and chose to work.

Changes in management structures

In 2008, substantial change was introduced when the Parliament approved amendments concerning the conditions of employment contracts for the heads of schools (general education, VET, kindergarten, and hobby activities). Based on the new legislation all heads have a permanent contract as of August 1, 2008. Under the previous arrangement, owners of the schools (usually, municipalities for general education schools, for example) negotiated the employment contract with heads for the specific time period, usually for 5 years.

Since autumn 2009, the functions of educational institution internal evaluation under the National Examinations and Qualifications Centre will be transferred to the Ministerial level. In the future the Ministry will provide counselling for preschool children's institutions, general educational schools and vocational educational institutions in matters of internal evaluation and analyzes the internal evaluations performed by educational institutions, also providing feedback to managers and owners of the institutions.

Teachers

The higher education institutions providing preparation of teachers develop a competency model for teachers offering teachers' education, carry out an analysis of developmental needs and create a support system for development of teachers. In February 2009 the new development plan for the teacher education was under discussion with the stakeholders, with the main focus to strengthen the support structure for teachers and make them better prepared for the teaching profession. For the professors of teacher education and educational science in universities practical experience opportunities are provided in schools to keep their skills up to date. The Ministry intends to continue supporting of study opportunities of working teachers in order to them improve the qualification level. The aim is to reach the target of 95 % of teachers (already working at schools) reach the prescribed qualification requirements by 2009.

(b) Planned reforms and initiatives

The global financial crisis has had a strong and negative impact to the national economy. In the beginning of 2009 the Coalition Government started serious budgetary discussions with the aim of extensive cuts in back public spending, Education field is considered to be the priority area, however, also here the cuts have been selectively introduced.

Pre-primary education

Not all children at the age of six have the opportunity to attend a pre-primary institution prior to school. In 2006, about 93 % of children at the age of six did participate in the activities of pre-primary institutions or preparation groups of schools. Since 2008, pre-primary education is financed partially from the state budget. This will enable children from economically less secure families to participate in pre-primary education, create preconditions for early detection of a child's special needs and for supporting development, and ensure equal opportunities to all children for a smooth transfer to school.

General education

As already described earlier, one of the very clear impacts that negative demographic trend has had is the diminishing of the number of schools. Until now, that has mostly affected the number of pre-primary and basic schools. But as smaller cohorts are getting to the age of going to upper secondary schools the issue is becoming very relevant also there. In 2009, the debate has started to restructure upper-secondary schools from basic schools. Reasons for the restructuring are following: good quality education in secondary level requires minimum number of pupils to give students choice and sufficient workload for teachers and this cannot be done in schools where there is too few pupils.

Another important aspect is that secondary level education should be centrally coordinated in both streams – in Vocational Education and Training (VET) and well as in more academically oriented stream. Two separated streams that have functioned rather independently have resulted in large inefficiencies that are most visible in pupils varying results in state examinations. Generally, pupils in smaller schools tend to have weaker examination results and, thus, also weaker chances to continue their educational path in higher education level free of charge, thus, creating inequalities

for further educational path and career. The legislative amendments to the relevant laws are approved by the Coalition Government and will be debated in the Parliament during 2009.

Vocational education

The new development plan for VET for the period of 2009-2013 has been under preparation in cooperation with the main stakeholders in the first half of 2009. The main focus of the plan is further improvement of the quality and flexibility of initial VET programs. The main focus will be in the traditional areas like teacher training, curricula development and accreditation of prior learning and cooperation with employers. But there are also new initiatives like participation in the events like Worldskills and Euroskills. The idea is to build up a supportive infrastructure in the broadest sense that Estonian VET institutions can get a feedback on the quality of provision and continue their efforts to improve the reputation of career for skilled workers in industrial and service sectors.

VET institutions will continue provision for targeted groups like people with lower qualifications levels or people without any vocational or professional training. In this regards the provision of European Social Fund funded refreshment courses has proven to be very well received by many adults. The interest to participate in those courses that are provided free of charge is high – in 2007 the number of people in ESF funded courses in VET institutions was 20 300. This is an increase almost 30% from the participation level one year before – in 2006 the number of people attending similar courses was 14 000. Since 2008 the participation rates have steadily increased – in 2nd quarter of 2009, the rate was 10.9% for 25-63 population.

Another important target group oriented topic is offering of Estonian language learning opportunities for learners from Russian-speaking backgrounds. Currently, about one third of learners in VET system are pursuing their studies in Russian and often they do not have sufficient knowledge of state language. However, the knowledge of Estonian is proven to be an important competence also for skilled workers and insufficient language skills may leave graduates in a vulnerable position in job market. Due to that new activities like development of motivation packages for teachers and support for language teaching methodology will be introduced for VET schools in North-East Estonia and Tallinn.

The accreditation system for VET-s has been under discussion for last years and the implementation is expected to continue in 2009. Estonia has been actively implementing the requirements of Copenhagen process. The adaptation of European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) and applying accreditation of prior learning and working experiences is planned for upcoming years, the respective discussions are in the phase of development.

Higher education

Estonia follows actively developments within the European Higher Education Area. All institutions had to redesign their programs based on learning outcomes by 2009/10 academic year and transfer into the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). During four years (2006-2009) higher education institutions have had the responsibility to rearrange study programs using the learning outcome approach. The financial support for this process has been provided via the European Social Fund resources.

The Rectors' Conference continues the work for the development of the quality culture in public universities. As a new initiative, the code of good conduct in the internationalization of Estonia's higher education institutions was signed by rectors in December 2007 and the implementation will follow in 2009. The code foresees good practice forms for any internationalization-related actions of participating higher education institutions, including actions funded by the commercial activities and services provided outside Estonia. Among the institutions that have signed the code are all

universities (irrespective to their ownership status) and state professional higher education institutions.

The new initiatives in higher education are targeted for the strengthening the cooperation between HEI-s themselves and with business sector. For this purposes special funding sources are provided that use opportunities created by the European Social Fund to support curricula development, workplace practical training and doctoral schools. Major programs are directed towards the support of internationalization in universities: for mobility schemes of master and doctoral students, recruitment of foreign professors, and marketing activities.

Since the beginning of 2009/10 transfer to the type of performance contract has taken place for higher education institutions. In comparison to the previous arrangement the new performance contracts have broader focus. Also reporting activities are extended to the substructures of HEI-s. The change follows the guidelines that were approved in the higher education strategy document in 2006.

Lifelong learning / Adult education

The new development plan for adult education 2009-2013 is prepared in cooperation with representatives from other ministries, trade unions and employers' organisations. Under the new development plan it is intended to find new solutions for demand driven funding schemes. Development of a quality system of adult education will also continue as well as the awareness raising activities for general public in TV, radio, print media with the purpose of making life-long learning more popular.

Unrevised English

For more detailed information on education systems in Europe, you may consult the EURYDICE data base, EURYBASE (http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/eurybase_en)