



**National summary sheets on
education systems in Europe
and ongoing reforms**

2008 Edition



ESTONIA

JUNE 2008

1. Education population and language of instruction

On 1 January 2008, the number of people aged 29 or under was 499 564 (37.3 % of the population) and the number of children of compulsory school age (7-16 years old) was 135 834. The language of instruction is in most cases Estonian or Russian. On 2007/08 academic years there are 495 Estonian-medium schools, 78 Russian-medium schools and 25 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 28 % of all pupils in 2007/08 academic years and, in higher education the language of instruction was Estonian for 87.9 % of students, Russian for 10.5 %, 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 2007/08 academic years 94.8 % of pupils attended municipal schools, 2.2 % state schools and 3.0 % 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. 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 reimburse their study costs.

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 2007, 67 % of children aged between 1 and 6 attended pre-primary institutions while, for those aged less than 3, the percentage was 33 %.

4. Compulsory education

(i) Phases

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

7-year olds are obliged to attend school. 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.

(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 2007/08, the pupil/teacher ratio was 11.0. The average class size was 19.4. 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 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 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 basic national curriculum 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, 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)	16-18 years of age
<i>Kutsekeskharidus</i> (vocational upper secondary)	16-18/19 years of age
<i>Kutseõpe keskhariduse baasil</i> (vocational post-secondary)	19-21 years of age

(ii) Admissions criteria

Admission to upper secondary general or vocational schools 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 basic national curriculum. 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, offering academic programmes; and, secondly, institutions of professional higher education, offering professional higher education programmes (*rakenduskõrgharidus*). Professional higher education programmes can be offered also by universities and vocational education institutions, which operate on the basis of secondary education.

(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 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 reimburse their study costs.

(iii) Qualifications

A graduate of professional higher education programmes (*rakendus kõrgharidusõpe*) (lasting 3-4.5 years) is issued a diploma (*diplom*) and a diploma supplement (*akadeemiline õiend*) in Estonian and in English. 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.)

7. Special needs

In 2006/07 academic years, special education was provided for 19 % of students at basic school level. Every attempt is made to place children with special educational needs into mainstream schools, reserving special schools for those with more serious problems. 83 % of basic school pupils with special educational needs attended mainstream schools. 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 training is provided by universities and higher education institutions. Primary school teachers usually teach most subjects in grades 1 to 6 and subject teachers teach up to three subjects from grades 7 to 12. Most teachers in vocational education institutions are currently trained in higher education institutions. The diploma and certificate awarded provide evidence of teaching qualifications. Since 2004, graduates from the initial teacher training have to pass the final 'on-the-job' qualifying phase (*kutseasta*) 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.

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, labour market and also for the state 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 16 per cent and this sharp decrease also has affected the number of schools. During the last decade the number of schools has diminished by 100. The fall of pupils' numbers is expected to decrease further 15 000 by 2012, which means, in effect, that in 2012/13 about 35 % less pupils will take up their studies in upper secondary schools in comparison to today. Such a decrease in the number of students will certainly have a direct influence on the school network, teacher training, the need for in-service training and retraining of teachers, the whole higher education system as well as to the whole labour market circumstances.

One of the most serious problems of the last years is the dropping out on basic school level. In 2007/08, drop-out level on 7-9 grades was 1.6 %. 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 2007 was 14.6 % (up from 13.2 % in 2006). 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 are programmed under the European Social Fund funding and will be available since 2008.

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 between 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 in 2009.

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 in Estonia and is a prerequisite for acquiring Estonian citizenship. In the 2007/08 academic year one subject (Estonian literature) was taught in Estonian, afterwards one subject will be added each forthcoming year until 2011. 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, but at 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. There has been a special funding available for Sunday schools for national minorities already for years but mostly in project bases. In 2008, it was the first time for the Ministry of Education and Research to allocate baseline funding for Sunday schools, which is used mostly for the cooperation projects with the historical home country, teacher training and purchase of the study materials.

In higher education, major quality oriented process continues based on the Higher Education Strategy approved by the Parliament in 2006. In June 2008, the parliament approved amendments to the Universities Act that change the fundamentals of licensing and recognition of diplomas. The main purpose of the reform is to increase the security of the students and future-to-be students regarding the quality of higher education. During the transfer period all higher education institutions wishing to award higher education diplomas in Estonia are required to go through the special assessment process. Since 1st January 2012, all HEIs operating in Estonia, need to have awarding rights granted by the Government. The permission from the Government will specify the level of cycles and study groups where the institutions are permitted to award state recognised qualifications and diplomas. Based on the law, mandatory institutional accreditation will be introduced for all HEIs. The Law also foresees the establishment of the independent Quality Assurance Agency. Another fundamental change, provided by the amendments, concerns opening opportunities for introducing the joint study programs between Estonian HEIs as well as in cooperation with foreign recognised HEIs.

Links to the labour market

There is a major development regarding the adoption of the eight level qualification structure or EQF in Estonia. 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 in 2011,

as 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.

For years the participation in lifelong learning has been challenging for people with lower qualifications. The Government has approved additional funding instruments for the people seeking the training in vocational education institutions. That broadens further the training opportunities for adults interested in updating their work related skills. In 2007, the number of people that took part on VET provided refreshment courses increased sharply – to 20 200 persons from 14 000 in the previous year. In 2008, again, the number is expected to increase further. The overall participation rate in life-long learning, however, has remained rather low – in 2007 the share of 25-64 years' participating in learning activities was 7 %.

Changes in management structures

New amendments to the Universities Act change the status of the Higher Education Quality Assessment Council into the independent and final decision-making body for the higher education institutions and programs. The previous regulation granted the Council the power of recommendations that were formally approved by the Minister of Education and Research. The change of the status and authority was needed in order the Estonian Higher Education Quality Assurance body to apply for the inclusion in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education.

Another big change that was approved by the Parliament in April concerns the conditions of employment contracts for the heads of schools (general education, VET, kindergarten, and hobby activities). Based on the new legislation all heads will 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.

(b) Planned reforms and initiatives

The Estonian economy goes through the economic slowdown process that has already had the effect on the current, 2008 financial year with the Parliament adopting negative budget. More cuts are expected to be executed for the 2009 financial year ⁽¹⁾ but it is unclear to what extent. Therefore, it is difficult to see which of the action lines described below will be dropped.

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.

Vocational education

Lively discussions are being held about the status of vocational education acquired after secondary education and about the position and trends of professional higher education. The number and contents of vocational standards are of great importance. National curricula are prepared on the basis of vocational standards that are prepared in cooperation with social partners.

The accreditation system for VET-s has been under discussion for last years and the implementation is expected to start in 2008. Estonia has been actively implementing the requirements of Copenhagen

⁽¹⁾ As of 1st July 2008.

process. The adaptation of ECVET and applying accreditation of prior learning and working experiences is planned for upcoming years, the respective discussions are in the early phase of the process.

Higher education

Extensive changes for implementing the ECTS system are planned to undertake. Based on amendments to the legislation, the transfer to ECTS credit points will be completed by the 2009/10 academic year. During four years (2006-2009) higher education institutions have the responsibility to rearrange study programs using the learning outcome approach. The financial support for this purposes is foreseen to continue via the European Social Fund resources.

The Rectors' Conference continue 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 2008. The intended target of the signed parties is to provide solely quality education, a modern work environment and the support services necessary for foreign nationals residing in Estonia. 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 they have taken the task to provide relevant and truthful information for international students regarding the studying conditions in Estonia. The code prescribes the duties of HEIs in respect to international students and teaching staff and researchers. The compliance with the code is subject to the audit by the Estonian Rectors' Conference Special Auditing Commission.

Lifelong learning / Adult education

The Government of the Republic approved the Estonian Strategy for Lifelong Learning for the years 2005-2008 on November 2005. Due to the end of this timeframe the start of compilation of the new strategy document is foreseen at the second half of 2008. Development of a quality system of adult education will also continue. In the course of the development process, it is intended to significantly update the currently existing system of issuing education licenses.

Teachers

The higher education institutions providing preparation of teachers develop a competency model for teachers offering teachers' training, carry out an analysis of developmental needs and create a support system for development of teachers. During 2007/08 the new development plan for the teacher training has been under discussion with the stakeholders, with the main focus to strengthen the support structure for teachers in order for them to be better prepared for the teaching profession. The teachers offering teachers' training shall be provided with an opportunity to practice at school in parallel with fulfilling their obligations as a teacher in a higher education institution. 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.

Unrevised English

For more detailed information on education systems in Europe, you may consult the EURYDICE data base, EURYBASE (<http://www.eurydice.org>)