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Key features of the Education System

The organisation and principles of the education system are established in the Republic of Estonia Education Act and specified in lower level acts structured by type of educational institution.

In Estonia, the structure of the education system provides opportunities for everyone to move from one level of education to the next. Levels of education comprise **preschool education** (ISCED level 0), **basic education** (ISCED levels 1 and 2), **upper secondary education** (ISCED level 3) and **higher education** (ISCED levels 6, 7 and 8). The obligation to attend school applies to children who have attained 7 years of age by 1 October of the current year. Children up to 7 years may attend preschool childcare institutions. The obligation to attend schools lasts until basic education is acquired or until a student attains 17 years of age.

Estonian education system is decentralised. The division of responsibility between the state, local government and school is clearly defined.

At state level, the Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020 guides the long-term developments. The national standards (the national curriculum for preschool child care institutions, the national curriculum for basic schools, the national curriculum for upper secondary schools, the national curricula for vocational studies, the standard of higher education and the standard of vocational education) guarantee the quality provision of education; laws and regulations establish the principles of education funding, state supervision and quality assessment.

Local governments maintain preschool child care institutions, basic schools, the majority of upper secondary schools, and some of the VET schools. Vocational schools are mostly state owned and universities are institutions in public law. Half of institutions of professional higher education are state owned and the other half are institutions in private law.

Studies are conducted in preschool childcare institutions, general education schools and vocational schools – in case of the vocational upper secondary education curricula -- under uniform national curricula, on the basis of which schools compile their own curricula. In case of other types of vocational training, school curricula are prepared on the basis of the Vocational Education Standard and the relevant professional standard.

The language of instruction is mainly Estonian but also other languages may be used as stipulated in the legislation.

Financing of educational institutions depends on the ownership of the institution pursuant to the principles stipulated in the respective legal acts.

The general education school's expenses are covered by its owner: the expenses of state schools are covered from the budget of the Ministry of Education and Research, those of municipal schools from

the local municipality's budget and private schools' expenses are covered by a legal person in private law. In order to guarantee the constitutional right to free general education to all students, support from the state budget on equal grounds is allocated to both municipal and private schools to cover the expenses related to teachers' and heads' salaries and in-service training, textbooks and study aids as well as the school lunch expenses of the students. In addition, the central government allocates finances to cover the expenses related to the boarding school facilities created at the school.

Vocational education is state financed generally through state commissioned education on the basis of the number of fulfilled study places during a standard period of study established in the curriculum. 99% of students of the educational institutions offering vocational education study in state financed study places; the ratio of students in payable study places is thus negligible. Private vocational educational institutions are financed through the state budget only in exceptional cases if in some field the demand for specialists is greater than the supply.

The higher education institutions are mainly financed from the state budget through operational support allocations covering study costs, administrative costs, investments and assigned operating costs. Since 2017, operational funding is divided in two: 1) baseline funding (at least 80%) based on the last 3 years average operational support to the institution and 2) performance funding (up to 20%).

The teaching staff and management of all educational institutions work based on employment contracts, except for the rector of the professional higher education institution related to national defence. Pursuant to the Employment Contracts Act, the working time of educational staff shall be established by the Government of the Republic by a regulation. The standard workload for educational staff is 35-hour working week. The annual holiday of educational staff is up to 56 calendar days, unless the employee and the employer have agreed on a longer annual holiday.

The initial training of all Estonian teachers is carried out at the higher education level and generally in universities. Since the higher education reform in 2002, preschool teachers and vocational teachers are trained at the level of Bachelor's study; class teachers and subject teachers both of general education schools and vocational schools are trained at the Master's level. Vocational teachers usually teach both theoretical subjects in school and practical subjects in school workshops or simulated learning environments. Many of teachers of vocational subjects working part-time do not have any pedagogical qualification.

The data on the Estonian educational system is gathered into the web-based national register [EHIS](#) [1] (the Estonian Education Information System). EHIS contains information on educational institutions, students, teaching staff, curricula, rights to conduct study and documents certifying acquisition of education. In addition, the visual educational statistics database [Haridussilm](#) [2] allows comparing schools based on a series of indicators.

Stages of the Education System

Preschool education (ISCED level 0) is generally acquired in childcare institutions (*koolieelne lasteasutus*). Local governments are obliged to provide all children aged from 1.5 to 7 years permanently residing in their catchment area with the opportunity to attend a preschool child care institution if the parents so wish. In addition, there is also a system of childcare services (*lapsehoiuteenus*) catering mainly for the youngest children. These services can be either centre- or home-based.

Basic education (ISCED levels 1 and 2) is the minimum compulsory general education, which is

acquired in the basic school (*põhikool*) and which gives the right to continue studies at upper secondary education level. Basic school includes grades 1–9. Successful completion of the curriculum and passing final examinations is the condition for acquiring basic education.

Secondary education (ISCED level 3) is based on basic education and is divided into general secondary education, which is acquired in upper-secondary schools (*gümnaasium*), and vocational upper-secondary education, which is acquired in vocational schools (*kutseõppeasutus*). The length of general upper-secondary education is 3 years (grades 10–12). To graduate from upper-secondary school, students must pass state examinations, a school examination and a student investigation paper or practical work.

The volume of vocational education curricula is calculated in VET credit points (EKAP). One credit point corresponds to 26 hours of work used by a student for studying. The yearly study volume is 60 credit points. The study volume of vocational secondary education (ISCED 3) is 180 credit points. Successful completion of the curriculum, taking necessary tests and passing all required assessments, practical training and the final examination is the condition for graduating from a vocational school. Acquisition of upper secondary education gives the right to continue studies at higher education level.

Vocational education may be acquired also after graduation from upper secondary school. The study volume of VET after secondary education (post-secondary non-tertiary education, ISCED 4) is 120–150 credit points. Also, people with unfinished basic education can enter VET studies, the study volume is 15–120 credit points (ISCED 2).

Higher education (ISCED levels 6, 7 and 8) may be acquired as professional higher education (in an institution of professional higher education (*rakenduskõrgkool*) or an educational institution belonging to the structure of university (*ülikool*)) or academic higher education (*ülikool*). The general structure of academic study has three levels or cycles. The first level is Bachelor's study and the second level is Master's study. The third and the highest level is Doctoral study. All persons with upper secondary education or foreign qualifications equal thereto have an equal right to compete to be admitted to the above mentioned educational institutions.

The volume of higher education curricula is calculated in credit points of European Credit Point Transfer System (ECTS). One credit point corresponds to 26 hours of work used by a student for studying. The yearly study volume is 60 credit points. The standard volume of Bachelor's study as well as of professional higher education study is 180–240 ECTS. The standard period of Master's study is 60–120 ECTS. The standard period of Bachelor's and Master's study combined must be at least 300 ECTS in total. The standard period of Doctoral study is 180–240 ECTS.

In the course of studies, educational institutions may take account of a person's previous study results and professional experiences (APEL). Through APEL, a curriculum can be completed in full, except for the final examination or final paper.

Adult education is divided into formal education and continuing education. Formal education acquired within the adult education system allows adults to acquire general lower and upper secondary education at adult upper secondary schools. Schools implement individual curricula when needed. In addition to formal education, VET and higher education institutions provide continuing education and retraining courses.

For further information, please consult the introduction articles of [Organisation and Governance](#) [3] and of each educational level: [Early Childhood Education and Care](#) [4], [Single Structure Education \(Integrated Primary and Lower Secondary Education\)](#) [5], [Upper Secondary and Post-Secondary Non Tertiary Education](#) [6], [Higher Education](#) [7] and [Adult Education and Training](#) [8].

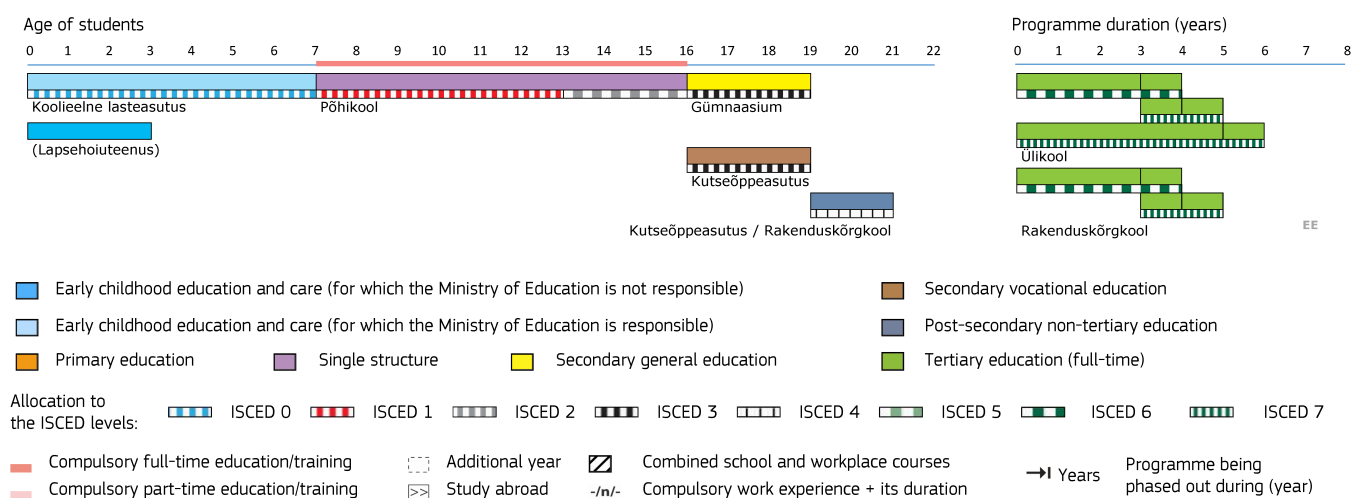
For a brief description of other main topics regarding the national education system, please read the introduction article of [Funding education](#) [9], [Teachers and education staff](#) [10], [Management and other educational staff](#) [11], [Educational support and guidance](#) [12], [Quality assurance](#) [13], [Mobility and internationalisation](#) [14].

For information on recently adopted or planned reforms and policy measures, please consult the topic [Ongoing Reforms and Policy Developments](#) [15].

Eurydice database provides comprehensive and comparable information on the Estonian education system. Further information may also be found on the websites of the [Ministry of Education and Research](#) [16], [Statistics Estonia](#) [17] and [Foundation Innove](#) [18].

Structure of the National Education System

Estonia – 2020/21



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Common European Reference Tools Provided by the Eurydice Network

- [National Student Fee and Support Systems](#) [19]
- [Organisation of the Academic Year in Higher Education](#) [20]
- [Organisation of School Time in Europe](#) [21] (Primary and general secondary education)
- [Recommended Annual Instruction Time in Full-Time Compulsory Education in Europe](#) [22] (Presented by grades/stages for full time compulsory education as well as by subject and country.)
- [Teachers and School Heads Salaries and Allowances in Europe](#) [23] (Salaries and allowances of teachers and school heads at pre-primary, primary, lower secondary and upper secondary education levels.)

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[5] [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Estonia:Single_Structure_Education_\(Integrated_Primary_and_Lower_Secondary_Education\)](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Estonia:Single_Structure_Education_(Integrated_Primary_and_Lower_Secondary_Education))

[6] https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Estonia:Upper_Secondary_and_Post-Secondary_Non-Tertiary_Education

[7] https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Estonia:Higher_Education

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[15] https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Estonia:Ongoing_Reforms_and_Policy_Developments

[16] <http://www.hm.ee/>

[17] <http://www.stat.ee/en>

[18] <http://www.innove.ee/en>

[19]

https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/national-student-fee-and-support-systems-european-higher-education-%E2%80%93-201718_en

[20]

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[21]

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[22]

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[23]

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