

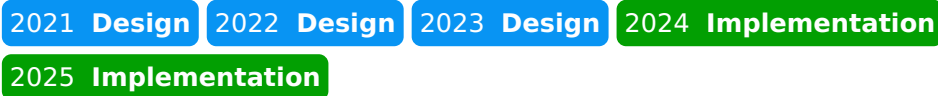
# Seamless transitions between levels and types of education and training, and the labour market

POLICY DEVELOPMENT

REGULATION/LEGISLATION

ESTONIA

## Timeline



ID number 41131

## Background

Estonia's strong tradition of extracurricular (hobby) education for children and high participation rates in adult education call for a holistic approach that enables learners to shape their education, training and career paths as a lifelong process.

According to the Education Strategy 2021-35, lifelong learning and flexible learning pathways are at the core of a learning environment that enables personalisation.

The reinforced Youth guarantee is a commitment by all Member States to ensure that all young people under the age of 30 receive a good quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship or traineeship within a period of four months of becoming unemployed or leaving education.

Recognition of prior learning and validation of work experience (RPL) aims to increase the permeability of the education system and to smooth transitions between levels and types of education, and to the labour market. RPL is used in initial vocational education and training (IVET), continuing vocational education and training (CVET) and higher education, and awarding professional qualifications.

## Objectives

To keep pace with the rapidly changing world of labour, and to ensure equal access to high-quality education irrespective of learners' social and cultural backgrounds, age and gender, it is necessary to increase coherence between, and the flexibility of, different levels and types of education. The dividing lines that prevent permeability between formal, non-formal and informal learning, as well as between general and vocational education, need to be reduced.

To create opportunities for learners to design their learning paths according to their needs and abilities.

To add flexibility, the RPL system needs to be further developed and expanded, to cover knowledge and skills acquired through non-formal and informal learning and work experience. In general education, RPL is not yet widely used.

## Description

In order to ensure flexible learning opportunities, accessibility of high-quality education and training, and supported learning with the aim of reducing drop-out and early leaving rates and exploiting every individual's potential to the fullest, the following measures are foreseen:

- (a) developing and implementing a common standard for secondary education to integrate general and vocational secondary education;
- (b) updating the Standard of vocational education and specifying the differences between IVET and CVET;
- (c) supporting access to (further) education, including within the framework of the Youth guarantee action plan;
- (d) developing opportunities for learner-centred learning and flexible learning pathways at upper secondary education level and vocational training, providing learners with the conditions and opportunities to acquire education in smaller modules (e.g. micro-qualifications, bitesize learning) tailored to learners' needs and abilities;
- (e) contributing to the development of the principles of micro-qualifications and supporting their implementation in VET;
- (f) developing the system of recognition of prior learning and experience (RPL, accessibility, user-friendliness, training of assessors and counsellors), and ensuring access to RPL information and counselling, user-friendly RPL assessment and skills recognition for all learners.

### 2021 Design

Regulation of micro-qualifications was designed to offer learners an opportunity to acquire competences in smaller modules. In the Estonian context, the term 'micro-qualification' has been chosen to denote micro-credentials that can be considered as part of the formal curriculum.

To regulate the emerging field of micro-degrees offered by higher education institutions and expand the micro-qualifications system to vocational education and adult training institutions, the concept of micro-qualifications was drafted, and a regulative process was launched in 2021. Based on international practice, the possibilities for the introduction of micro-qualifications in the Estonian education and qualifications system have been explored.

In 2021, a legislative process was launched to introduce amendments to the Adult Education Act to provide the definition of micro-qualifications, establish the volume of study programmes leading to micro-credentials, principles of provision, and quality assurance mechanism.

The amendments concerned:

- (a) requirements for the study programmes that lead to micro-qualifications;
- (b) links between the micro-qualification programmes and the Estonian qualifications framework;
- (c) volume of studies required to obtain a micro-qualification;
- (d) types of institutions that can provide micro-qualifications for the acquisition of specific work-related knowledge, skills, or competences (higher education institutions, VET institutions, and private in-service training institutions that are recognised through the national quality assessment mechanism);
- (e) types of training that can lead to micro-qualifications (parts of formal education programmes, in-service training, professional examination or independent study/work recognised by the competent authority using VNIL);
- (f) types of certificates (micro-degree, partial qualification, partial profession, certificate or licence awarded by the competent authority);
- (g) special conditions for private in-service training institutions offering micro-qualifications.

## 2022 Design

In 2022, updating the national curricula in upper secondary VET continued, creating prerequisites for designing flexible education paths that meet individual needs of learners, including introduction of micro-qualifications.

Adopting a regulation on micro-qualifications in the Adult education act was pending.

## 2023 Design

Adopting amendments on micro-qualifications in the Adult education act remained pending, due to the continued discussions on quality assurance mechanisms. Amendments include the definition of micro-qualifications, the volume of learning leading to micro-credentials, principles of provision, and quality assurance.

Alongside extending compulsory education, the 2023 VET reform was launched. The reform aims at better integration of VET with other education levels, bridging formal and non-formal education, as well as connecting general, vocational, and applied higher education. Stakeholder engagement seminars for updating upper secondary VET curricula started.

## 2024 Implementation

To offer vocational secondary education as a viable alternative to general (gymnasium) education and facilitate transitions to higher education, in 2024 development of new upper secondary VET curricula started, comprising an enhanced set of general competences. The unified structure of the 3.5-4 years upper secondary VET curricula was agreed, new general education modules for these curricula were developed, and the development of curriculum specific speciality modules was launched.

The development of 17 innovative vocational upper secondary curricula started, based on proposals by VET schools. The new curricula focus on smart technology, digitalisation, sustainability, and collaboration with industry experts to meet future workforce needs.

In addition to changes in VET, the extension of compulsory education triggered establishment of a joint admission system to upper secondary education, detailing the roles of the state, local authorities, schools and parents in securing further education options to all pupils, building connections between upper secondary courses and vocational/higher education credits, enhancing career education and counselling, and development of preparatory studies for youth lacking the skills or readiness for further studies.

To prepare for the joint admission system, regulation on the (un)enrolment procedure in/from vocational education institutions was revised.

## 2025 Implementation

In 2025, in VET the focus was on the reform of upper secondary vocational education. The reform was implemented in parallel with the extension of compulsory education. From the 2025/26 school year, all students completing basic education must continue their studies until they turn 18 or obtain an upper secondary general or vocational qualification. The upper secondary VET reform provides basic education graduates with additional pathways for further study.

Based on labour market forecasts, four-year applied programmes were piloted in construction, food technology, ICT, and sustainable business management study fields. In 2025, students were admitted to 13 new applied upper secondary programmes in 12 VET schools. The development of a joint admission system in both general and vocational upper secondary education and the transformation of vocational orientation studies into preparatory studies also continued.

The amendments to the Adult Education Act were adopted to strengthen the quality and transparency of continuing training. The new provisions establish a framework for offering micro-qualifications in VET and higher education, and set competence requirements for adult educators. Since the adoption of the new regulation, 282 micro-credential programmes were registered in the Estonian Education Information System. Most providers were higher education institutions (92%), while 8% programmes were offered by VET institutions. The average volume of a micro-qualification programme was 15 ECTS, and the most popular fields were management and administration, teacher training, and software and applications development.

Supported by the ESF, Just Transition Fund, and RRF, higher education and VET institutions started to offer free micro-qualification programmes.

## Bodies responsible

- Ministry of Education and Research
- Estonian Qualifications Authority

## Target group

### Learners

Adult learners  
Older workers and employees (55 - 64 years old)  
Low-skilled/qualified persons

### Entities providing VET

VET providers (all kinds)

### Other stakeholders

Social partners (employer organisations and trade unions)

## Thematic categories

### Modernising VET offer and delivery

Modernising VET standards, curricula, programmes and training courses

### Transparency and portability of VET skills and qualifications

Developing and applying qualifications smaller/shorter than full

## European priorities in VET

### VET Recommendation

Flexibility and progression opportunities at the core of VET

VET as an attractive choice based on modern and digitalised provision of training and skills

## Subsystem

IVET CVET

## Further reading

[Standard of vocational education](#)

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[Youth guarantee](#)

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[The procedure for admitting a student to a vocational educational institution and expelling a student from a vocational educational institution \(in Estonian\)](#)

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[Adult Education Act](#)

## Related policy developments

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**2025 Implementation**

### Education Strategy 2021-35

The education strategy applies an integrated approach to the development of the education system to make better use of Estonia's high-quality education for the benefit of people, society and the economy.

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#### Type of development

Strategy/Action  
plan

#### Subsystem

IVET CVET

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**2022 Completed**

### Validation of non-formal and informal learning (until 2022)

The development of RPL is a part of the Adult education programme. Since 2015, the Ministry of Education and Research has been widening access to education through:

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#### Type of development

Practical  
measure/Initiative

#### Subsystem

IVET CVET

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**2022 Completed**

### National VET standard (until 2022)

The standard:

**Type of development**

Regulation/Legislation

**Subsystem**

IVET CVET

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“ ... ” **Cite as**

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<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/timeline-vet-policies-europe/search/41131>