

# Vocational education and training in Estonia

## Short description







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# Foreword

2017 marks Estonia's first Presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU). The Baltic State has also declared 2017 the 'year of skills'. A top performer in OECD's assessment of young learners (PISA) and having more than doubled participation in lifelong learning in the past decade, the country is aiming to attract more young people and adults to vocational education and training (VET).

The Estonian decision to focus on skills ties in with one of its Presidency priorities: to take forward the EU skills agenda, including modernising higher education, graduate tracking and the quality framework on apprenticeships. VET takes centre stage on these initiatives.

Raising awareness of the value of skills and craftsmanship for individuals, employers and society is a challenging task in a liberal economy and a country where VET and academic learning do not enjoy the same parity of esteem. Considering that only every fourth learner enrolls in VET after completing basic education, the country has set itself an ambitious target: it aims at increasing this share to 35% by 2020. This will require a radical change in people's mindsets.

To be valued and counteract structural unemployment and mismatch, VET needs to be linked better to the world of work. Promoting apprenticeships and encouraging employers and learners to work together is one of the key objectives set out in Estonia's lifelong learning strategy for 2020. In 2015, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joined forces in the context of the European alliance for apprenticeship. This Baltic alliance has reportedly proved successful. Although the share is still relatively low, the number of apprentices has doubled in the past year and reached 5% of VET learners in the beginning of 2016/17. Using the European Social Fund to support strategic developments, as is the case with apprenticeship in Estonia, is an approach that the European Commission intends to promote extensively.

Excellent OECD PISA results and a boost in adult learning: there is no simple recipe for such a success. A wide range of learning opportunities, flexibility and autonomy seem to be the key at all education levels. Setting the expected learning goals and, with due support, leaving it to teachers and trainers how to achieve these outcomes, is one of the main success factors. This not only requires trust in teachers' and trainers' competences and commitment but also giving them adequate professional development opportunities. While some consider introducing minimum continuing professional development requirements, Estonia has lifted such requirements. Its new approach takes account of individual teacher needs based on their competences and tasks, and the needs of VET providers. Self-

evaluation has replaced the former system of formal teacher attestation, helping create an inspiring and innovative teaching environment.

Rapidly changing skill needs and working environments, through automation and artificial intelligence, as well as an increasing importance of cognitive skills and social intelligence, require a rethink of teaching and learning. In 2015, Member States, EEA <sup>(1)</sup> and candidate countries committed to working on devising systematic approaches to, and opportunities for, VET teacher and trainer development. However, information available to Cedefop suggests that, so far, other areas among the agreed five Riga priorities have received more attention, while ensuring professional development opportunities for VET teachers and trainers remains a challenge. With its participation in a Baltic alliance to take this issue forward, and its conference on future challenges for teaching staff and learners in all types and levels of education and training, the Presidency sets initiatives that may inspire further action.

Understanding the implications of local, regional, national and sectoral skill needs is paramount. These data inform VET, industry and employment policies and people's education and training and career choices. Cedefop supports interested countries in building their capacity to guide decisions and choices and, together with the European Commission, provides an online *Skills panorama* <sup>(2)</sup>. Known for its online (public) services, it is not surprising that Estonia is providing web-based information systems on (future) skill needs by economic sector, education opportunities, qualifications, curricula and providers, e-courses and educational statistics and indicators.

With this short description we aim to offer a taste of Estonia's VET system to a wider European audience, in order to build bridges between VET systems, encourage learner and teacher mobility across Europe and support a better image of VET.

Joachim James Calleja  
Director

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<sup>(1)</sup> European Economic Area.

<sup>(2)</sup> European Commission; Cedefop: *Skills panorama*.  
<http://skillspanorama.cedefop.europa.eu/en>

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# Estonia



Area:	45 339 km <sup>2</sup>
Capital:	Tallinn
System of government:	Parliamentary republic
Population:	1 315 635 (2017)
Per capita gross domestic product (GDP) (nominal):	EUR 15 883 (2016)
Legislative power:	exercised by the Parliament ( <i>Riigikogu</i> )

In this short description VET is referred to as 'vocational education' (in Estonian: *kutseharidus*). Occupations are referred to as 'professions' as per national legislation.

## CHAPTER 1.

# External factors influencing VET



## 1.1. Demographics

Estonia's population is 1 315 635 (2017) <sup>(3)</sup>. Its area of 45 339 km<sup>2</sup> comprises 15 counties, 30 towns, and 183 rural municipalities <sup>(4)</sup>. The population is decreasing due to negative natural growth and migration.

In 2016, the number of deaths exceeded the number of births by about 1 339 but there was a small increase in the number of births compared with the three previous years. A total of 14 822 persons (1.12% of the total population) came to Estonia (mostly Estonians returning from abroad but also other country nationals) and 13 792 (1.04%) left to Finland (58%), the UK (9%) and other destinations (Statistics Estonia, 2017a). Positive net migration still has minor impact on education.

As in many other European Union (EU) countries, the population is ageing. Although the negative natural growth in the 1990s has not yet affected the working age population, its impact will appear in the coming years (Cedefop ReferNet Estonia, 2014). By 2060, there will be one working age person for every retired person. This is 3.5 times less than in 2015 (Figure 1).

Demographic changes have an impact on vocational education and training (VET). Participation has been decreasing since 2010/11 due to the low birth rate in the second half of the 1990s. This has led to rearrangement of the VET institutions network: the number of State-owned VET providers has been reduced from 54 in 2002/03 to 26 in 2016/17. To increase the quality and efficiency of VET, many small providers were merged into regional VET centres offering a wide range of qualifications. Adjustments will continue in line with demographic trends.

The country is multicultural and has a bilingual community. In June 2016, about 69% of the population was Estonian <sup>(5)</sup>. Most VET institutions teach in Estonian, though there are schools where they use Russian or both Estonian and Russian.

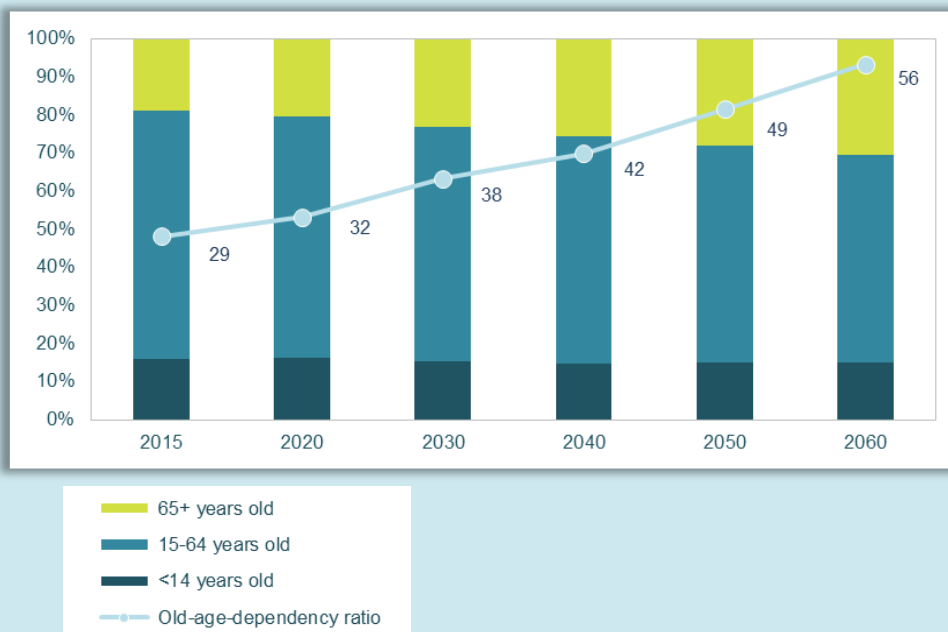
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<sup>(3)</sup> Eurostat: [demo\\_gind](#) [extracted on 24.7.2017].

<sup>(4)</sup> Ministry of Finance: *Kohalikud omavalitsused [local authorities]*: <http://www.fin.ee/kov>

<sup>(5)</sup> Statistics Estonia: *Statistical database*:  
<http://pub.stat.ee/px-web.2001/dialog/statfile1.asp>

Figure 1. Population forecast by age group and old-age-dependency ratio



Source: Eurostat, proj\_13ndbims and tsdde511 [extracted on 24.7.2017].

## 1.2. Economy and labour market indicators

Most companies are micro and small-sized. A limited number of occupations/professions is regulated and the labour market is considered flexible. It requires VET qualifications in the main economic sectors:

- (a) information and communications;
- (b) electronics and components;
- (c) machinery and metalworking;
- (d) transport and logistics;
- (e) timber and furniture <sup>(6)</sup>.

Export comprises mainly electronic equipment, machinery and equipment, mineral products, metals and metal products, timber and wood products, food and transport vehicles, agricultural products and food preparations. The main export

<sup>(6)</sup> Enterprise Estonia: *Trade with Estonia*:  
<https://www.tradewithestonia.com/estonian/doing-business-in-estonia>

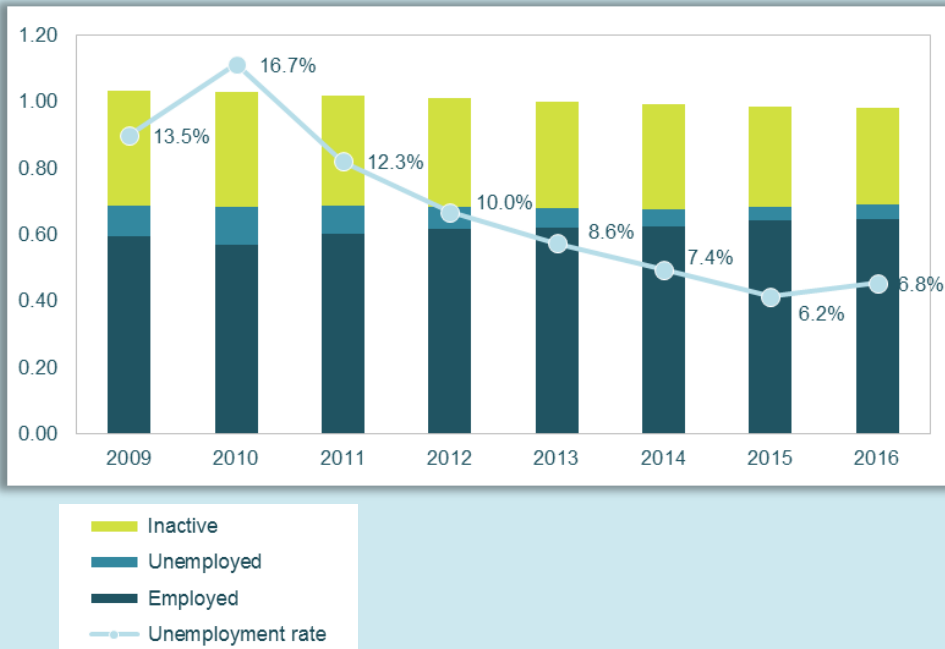
destination countries are Sweden (18%), Finland (16%) and Latvia (9%) (Statistics Estonia, 2017b).

The government is encouraging more working age people to remain economically active. Reform since 2016 has been supporting individuals with reduced working ability in finding suitable employment. Another reform is supporting creation of childcare services, so parents can return to the labour market earlier. This increases labour force participation.

The employment rate has been recovering quickly after the economic crisis (the increase was 3.9 percentage points in 2011 compared with 2010), but its rise was notably slower in 2014 (0.9 percentage points less compared with 2013). In 2016, the employment rate of 15 to 74 year-olds was 65.6%.

Unemployment has decreased since 2010, reaching 6.8% in 2016. This is below the EU average. The unemployment decline has slowed over the past four years as expected after the rapid recovery of the economy in 2010-11 and higher demand for employees due to demographic changes.

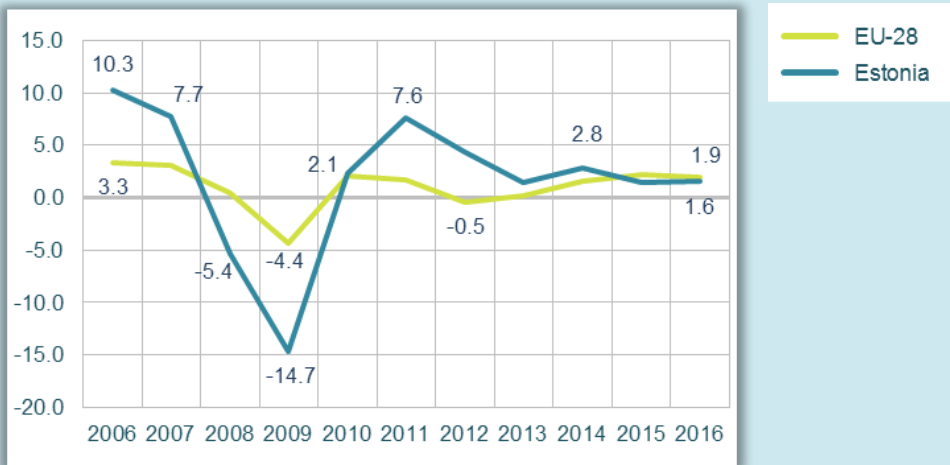
Figure 2. **Employed, unemployed and inactive population (aged 15-74) in 2009-16 (millions)**



Source: Statistics Estonia, 2017 [extracted on 4.5.2017].

Unemployment decline might have been greater, if not for the modest growth in GDP (Figure 3) and economic problems in several export destination countries.

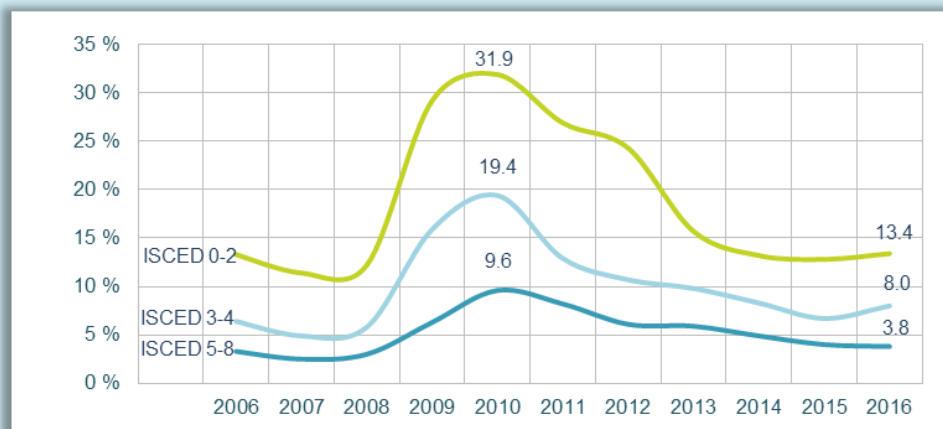
Figure 3. Real GDP growth compared to the previous year



Source: Eurostat, tec00115 [extracted on 20.4.2017].

As demonstrated in Figure 4, unemployment is distributed unevenly between those with low- and high-level qualifications. The gap has increased during the crisis as unskilled workers are more vulnerable to unemployment. In 2016, the unemployment rate of people with medium-level qualifications, including most VET graduates (ISCED levels 3 and 4) is still higher than in the pre-crisis years.

Figure 4. Unemployment rate (aged 15-64) by education attainment level in 2006-16



NB: Data based on ISCED 2011.

ISCED 0-2 = less than primary, primary and lower secondary education

ISCED 3-4 = upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education

ISCED 5-8 = tertiary education

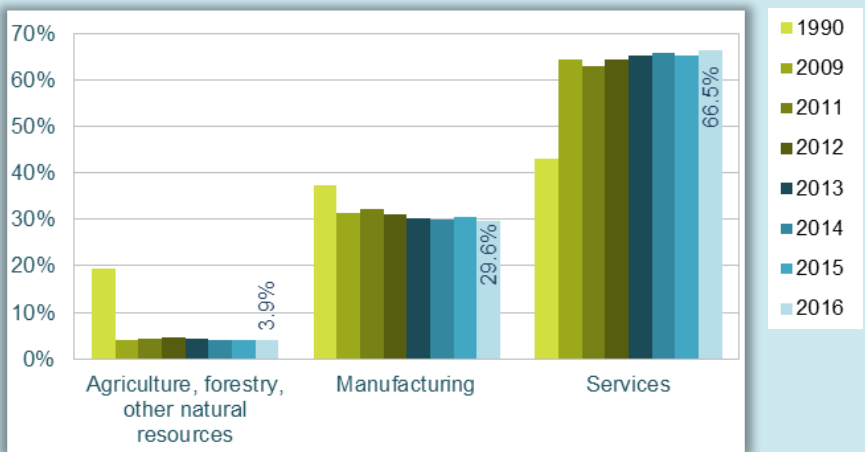
Source: Eurostat, [lfsa\\_ergaed](#) [extracted on 4.5.2017].

The employment rate of recent VET graduates increased from 79.6% in 2014 to 82.1% in 2016 <sup>(7)</sup>. In 2016, 66.5% of employment was in services and 29.6% in industry (Figure 5). The primary economic sector <sup>(8)</sup> share was 3.9%. In the 1990s and 2000s, the services sector expanded significantly, employing more people in accommodation and food services, professional, scientific and technical activities, wholesale and retail trade, and arts, entertainment and recreation. Employment in manufacturing has decreased slightly, mainly in construction and energy production. Since 2009, the balance between sectors has remained relatively stable.

<sup>(7)</sup> 20 to 34 year-olds who graduated one to three years ago from upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary VET (ISCED levels 3 and 4) (Eurostat [edat\\_lfse\\_24](#), extracted on 23.5.2017).

<sup>(8)</sup> The primary sector of the economy makes direct use of natural resources.

Figure 5. **Employment by economic sector in 1990-2016 (aged 15 and above, % of total employment)**

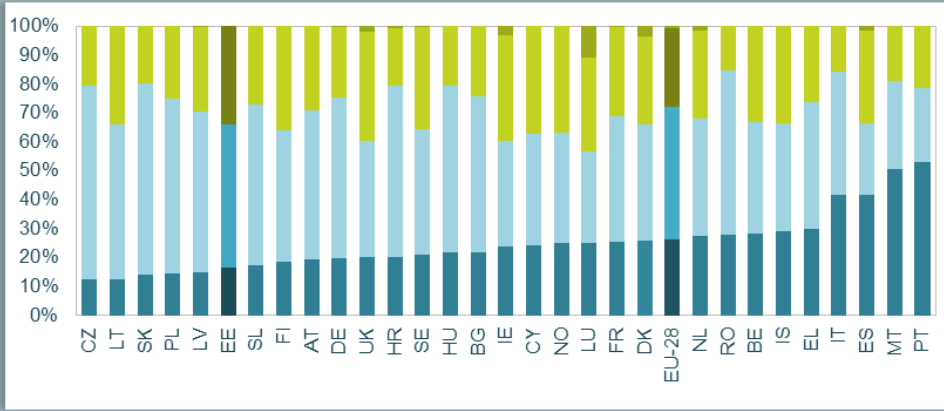


Source: Statistics Estonia, 2017 [extracted on 5.5.2017].

### 1.3. Education attainment

Education traditionally has high value in Estonia. For many years, the share of the population aged up to 64 with higher education (34%) has been higher in Estonia than in most EU Member States. The share of those with low or without a qualification is the sixth lowest in the EU, following the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Slovakia, Poland and Latvia (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Population (aged 15 to 64) by highest education level attained in 2016



NB: Data based on ISCED 2011.

ISCED 0-2 = less than primary, primary and lower secondary education

ISCED 3-4 = upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education

ISCED 5-8 = tertiary education

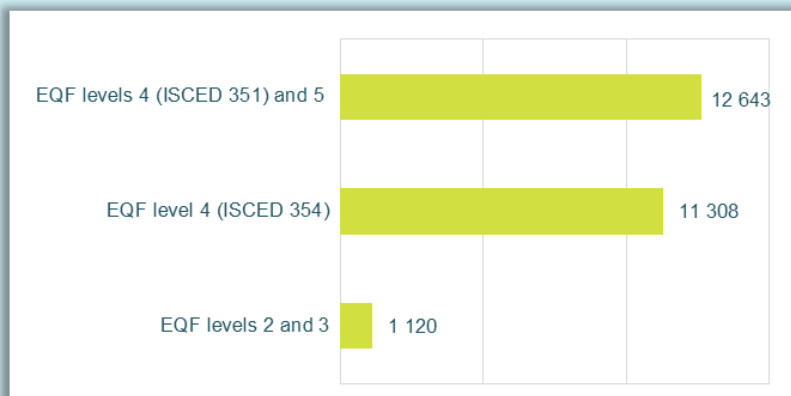
Source: Eurostat, *lfsa\_pgaed* [extracted on 5.5.2017].

■ No data  
■ ISCED 5-8  
■ ISCED 3-4  
■ ISCED 0-2

In 2016/17, there were 25 071 VET learners, almost half of whom were at upper secondary level <sup>(9)</sup> (Figure 7).

<sup>(9)</sup> EQF level 4 (except ISCED 351). While there are two VET programme types at upper secondary level, only one (ISCED 354) is called 'upper secondary VET' in the national context (see Figure 11).

Figure 7. VET learners by EQF level in 2016/17



NB: Data for initial and continuing VET.

Source: Estonian education information system.

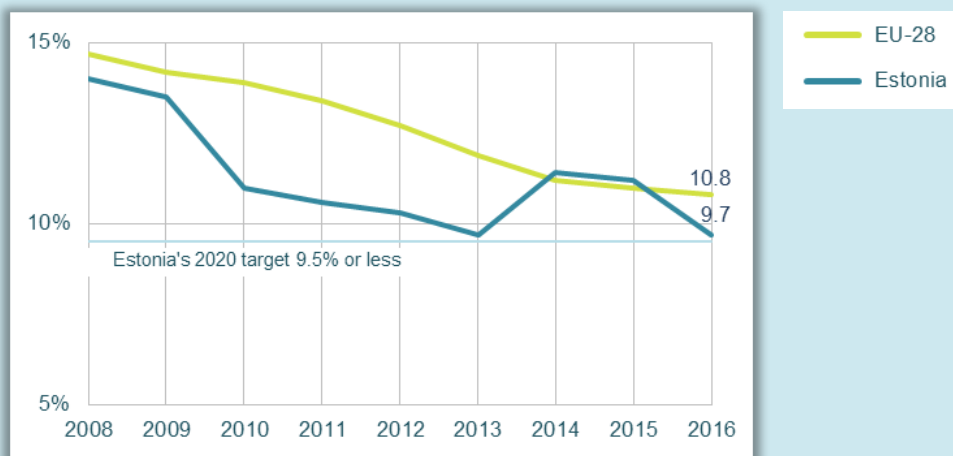
Traditionally, there are more males in VET (53%) <sup>(10)</sup>, except at post-secondary level. Males prefer engineering (the most popular option), manufacturing and construction, science, and services programmes, while females more often enrol in services (the most popular option), social sciences, business and law, and engineering, manufacturing and construction <sup>(11)</sup>.

Despite high attainment rates, the share of early leavers from education and training has decreased from 14.4% in 2007 to 9.7% in 2016 (Figure 8). It is just above 9.5%, the national objective for 2020 (Government Office, 2017).

<sup>(10)</sup> Source: Estonian education information system. <http://www.ehis.ee/>

<sup>(11)</sup> Ministry of Education and Research: *HaridusSilm* [Educational statistics database]: <http://www.haridussilm.ee/>

Figure 8. Early leavers from education and training in 2007-16



NB: Share of the population aged 18 to 24 with at most lower secondary education and not in further education or training.

Source: Eurostat, [tsdsc410](#) [extracted on 20.4.2017].

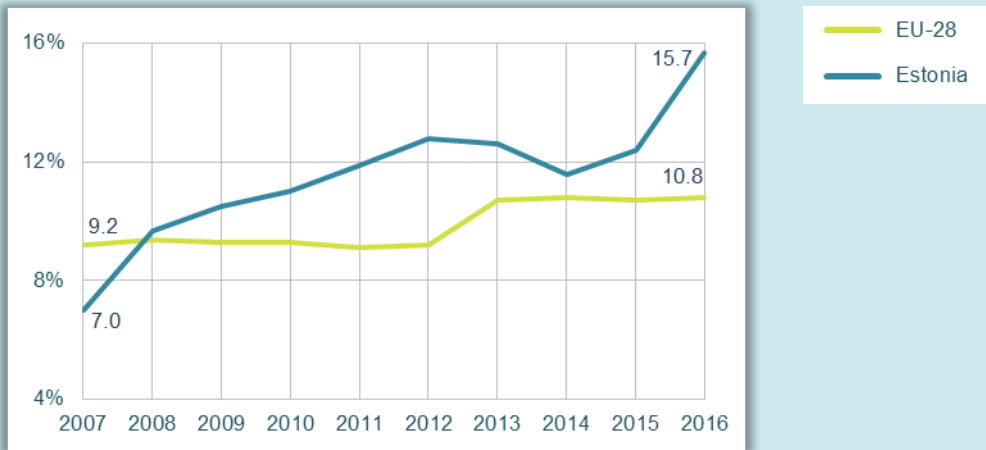
Despite recent positive developments, the dropout rate <sup>(12)</sup> from VET within a school year is high (19.2% in 2015/16). The risk of dropping out is the highest in the first school year and the challenge for VET providers is to keep the most vulnerable learners in VET programmes; those who had low grades in basic education <sup>(13)</sup> and may not have had positive learning experience or not developed study habits are examples. Dropout rates also vary by region, school and curriculum group.

Lifelong learning offers training opportunities for adults, including early leavers from education (Figure 9).

<sup>(12)</sup> Measured on 10 November each year; excludes those who: attended classes less than 31 days, were readmitted within 31 days, applied but never attended or who changed programme in the same curriculum group and in the same institution.

<sup>(13)</sup> See Chapter 2 for the information on education levels.

Figure 9. Participation in lifelong learning in 2005-16

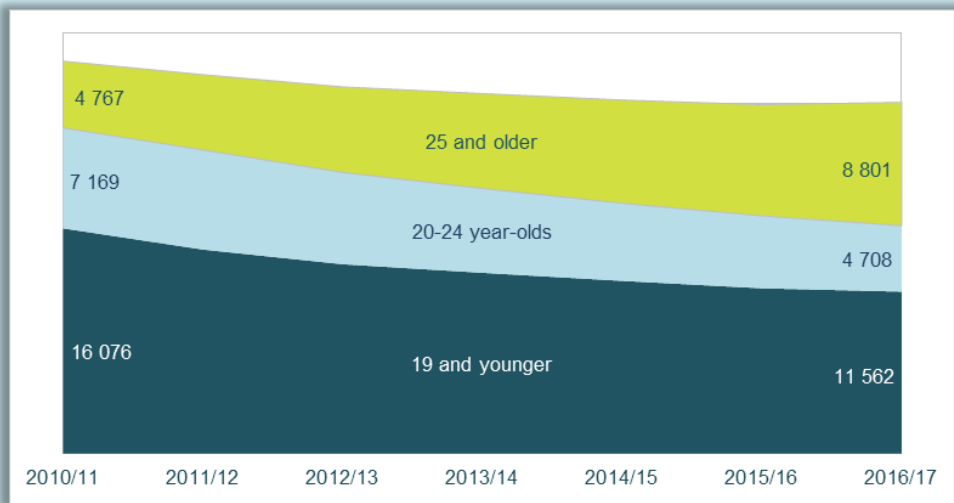


NB: Share of adult population aged 25 to 64 participating in education and training.

Source: Eurostat, [trng\\_lfse\\_01](#) [extracted on 1.6.2017].

Participation in lifelong learning in Estonia has been increasing in the past decade. In 2016, it reached 15.7%, almost five percentage points above the EU-28 average. The government has set the 2020 goal of 20% and VET has been playing an increasing role in achieving this goal (Figure 10).

Figure 10. VET learners by age



Source: Estonian education information system.

The share of adults (aged 25 and above) in initial and continuing VET has been increasing. It has more than doubled since 2010/11 and reached 35.1% of the total VET population in 2016/17 (Section 2.2.6). This reflects demographic trends but also the changing needs of the labour market.

#### 1.4. Employment policies influencing VET

The number of regulated professions in Estonia is relatively low <sup>(14)</sup>. The labour market is flexible and employers do not often require formal qualifications.

Economic and welfare growth, social cohesion, and increasing national security are priorities of the current government. Along with addressing demographic challenges and emigration, employability measures include: flexible parental leave to support employment of those with children; updating employment legislation to serve new work forms; and support for youth employment by creating additional incentives for employers and by decreasing limitations imposed on youth employment, for example, employment of minors.

Some measures have already been approved by the parliament (*Riigikogu*), such as legislation amendments that support attracting highly qualified foreigners to Estonia by simplifying procedures for obtaining a residence permit. This helps to attract foreign investment and workforce and also has an impact on VET.

Activation policy measures target the unemployed and inactive. They include job-search assistance, career guidance and counselling, upskilling and retraining, and traineeships. A contribution-based unemployment insurance scheme is part of the system supporting the unemployed.

The 2016 the 'work ability reform' offers an extensive package of needs-based services, including protected employment, peer support, working with a support person, work rehabilitation, and provision of assistive work equipment. There are also services and subsidies for employers of people with reduced working ability. All services are administered by the public employment service <sup>(15)</sup>.

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<sup>(14)</sup> Compared with Central European countries, European Commission: Growth, European single market: *Database of regulated professions*: [https://ec.europa.eu/growth/single-market/services/free-movement-professionals/regulated-professions-database\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/growth/single-market/services/free-movement-professionals/regulated-professions-database_en)

<sup>(15)</sup> [Unemployment Insurance Fund](#).

## CHAPTER 2.

# Provision of VET



## 2.1. VET in the Estonian education and training system

The Education Act (Parliament, 1992) establishes the organisation and principles of the Estonian education system. The system is decentralised and, due to its relatively small size, also flexible. Responsibilities are clearly divided between the State, local governments and schools. National curricula are based on learning outcomes. Teachers can choose teaching methods and materials.

Education is under the remit of the education ministry (*Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium*). The *Estonian lifelong learning strategy 2020* (MoER et al., 2014) guides the most important developments in all education sectors, including vocational education and training (VET).

The education and training system comprises:

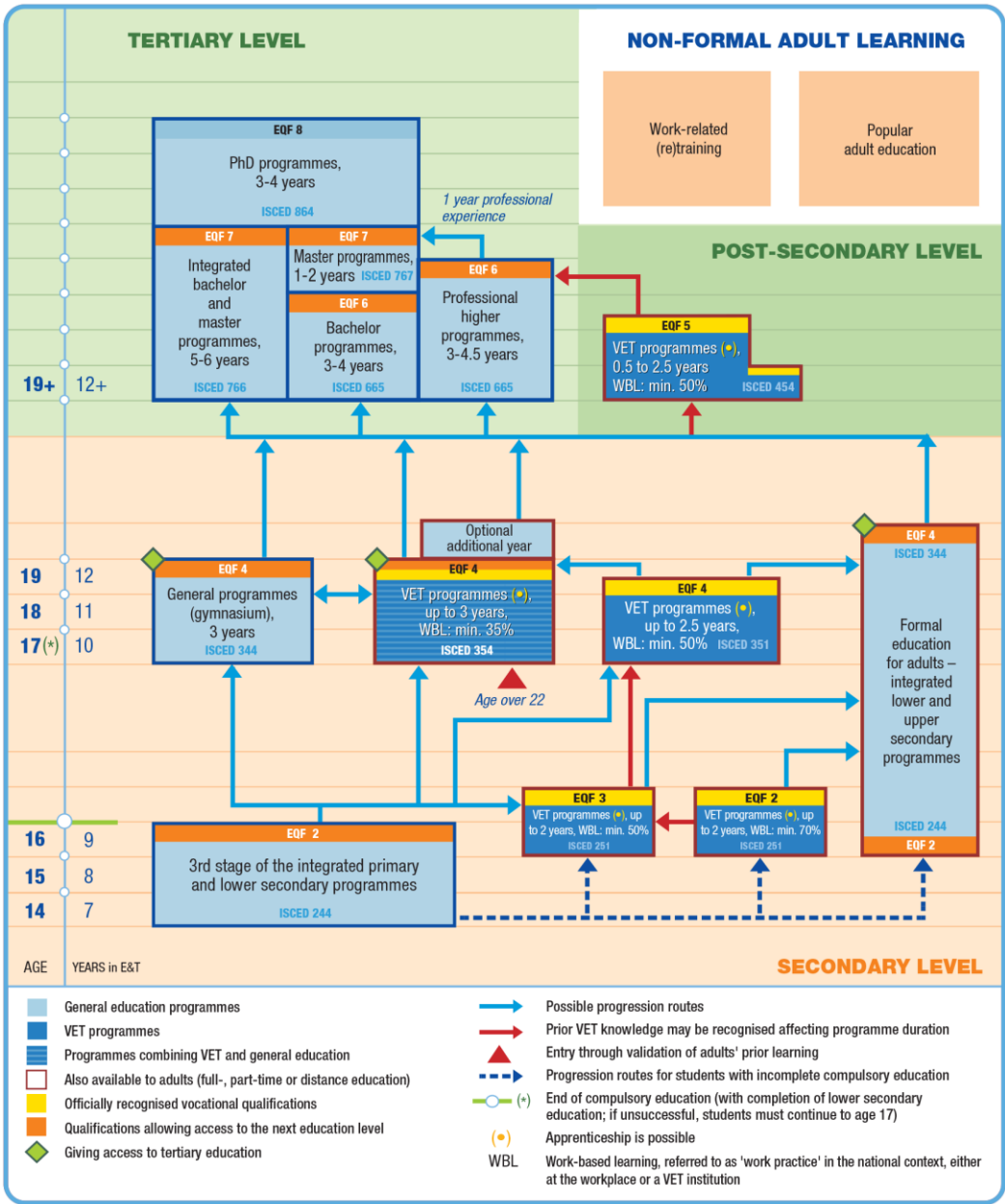
- (a) preschool education (ISCED level 0);
- (b) integrated primary and lower secondary education (ISCED levels 1 and 2) (hereafter basic education);
- (c) upper secondary education (ISCED level 3);
- (d) post-secondary non-tertiary education (ISCED level 4);
- (e) higher education (ISCED levels 6, 7 and 8).

Pre-school education is not compulsory and is generally provided at childcare institutions (*koolieelne lasteasutus*) for one-and-a-half to seven-year-old learners. Compulsory education starts at age seven and includes nine years of basic education or until a learner reaches age 17. While primary and lower secondary education are usually offered together in basic schools, primary education (grades 1 to 6) can also be offered in separate schools, usually in rural areas to ensure better accessibility for learners.

General upper secondary education is provided by so-called *gümnaasium*. This three-year programme gives graduates access to higher education, provided through academic and professional programmes. Professional higher education programmes are formally not considered VET. Professional higher education institutions may also provide post-secondary VET programmes along with higher education.

Most VET is provided at upper secondary and post-secondary levels. VET programmes are also available for learners without completed basic education. However, participation at lower levels is marginal.

Figure 11. VET in the Estonian education and training system in 2017



NB: ISCED-P 2011.

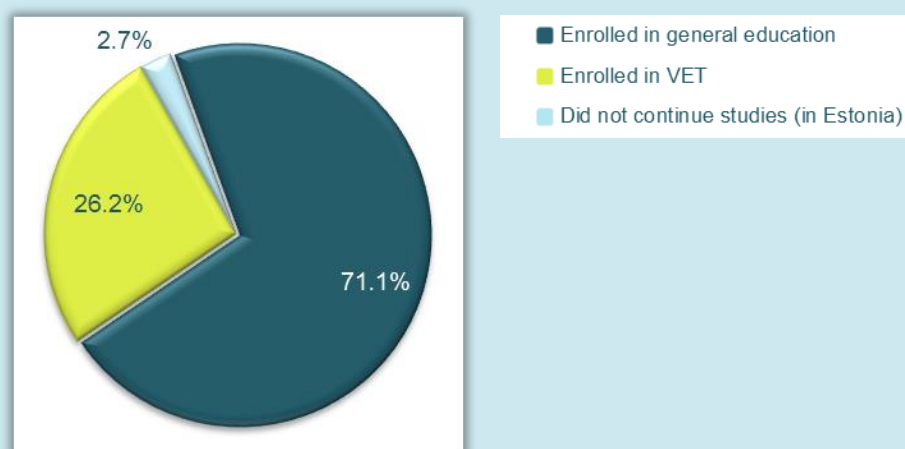
Source: Cedefop and ReferNet Estonia.

There are no age restrictions for enrolment in post-secondary and higher education as long as the learner has a qualification giving access to a selected programme. There is a trend for more adult learners to participate in initial and continuing VET (Section 2.2.6).

Almost 80% of VET schools are owned by the State. There are also private and municipal VET schools.

In 2016, 71.1% of basic education graduates pursued general upper secondary education and 26.2% continued in VET the following school year: the goal for 2020 is 35% (MoER, 2014).

Figure 12. Basic education graduate choices in 2016



NB: In the same calendar year as graduation.

Source: Estonian education information system.

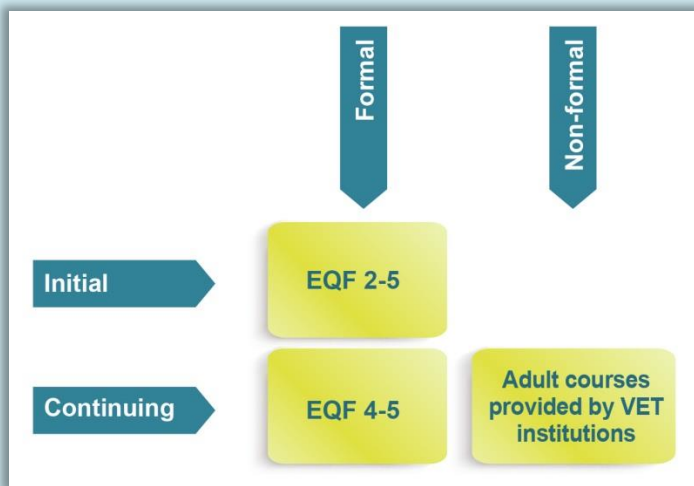
This distribution has not changed significantly since 2010. Approximately 10% of upper secondary school graduates continue in VET. There are gender and regional (including linguistic) differences in the education choices of basic school graduates. While only 10% of females in cities, having studied in Estonian, choose VET, the share increases to 60% for males in the north-eastern part of the country whose language of instruction is Russian. Of the learners who have not achieved B1 level in Estonian by the end of basic school, two thirds have continued in VET the past six years.

Education system data are collected in the [Estonian education information system](#). This has information on education providers, learners, teaching staff, curricula and diplomas. The visual educational statistics database [HaridusSilm](#) allows comparing schools according to selected indicators.

## 2.2. Government-regulated VET provision

The Vocational Educational Institutions Act (Parliament, 2013) distinguishes between initial and continuing VET.

Figure 13. Initial and continuing VET



Source: Cedefop and ReferNet Estonia.

While both types provide the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to enter the labour market, initial VET also gives learners access to the next qualification level. Non-formal continuing VET is part of adult learning regulated by the Adult Education Act (Parliament, 2015) (Section 2.4).

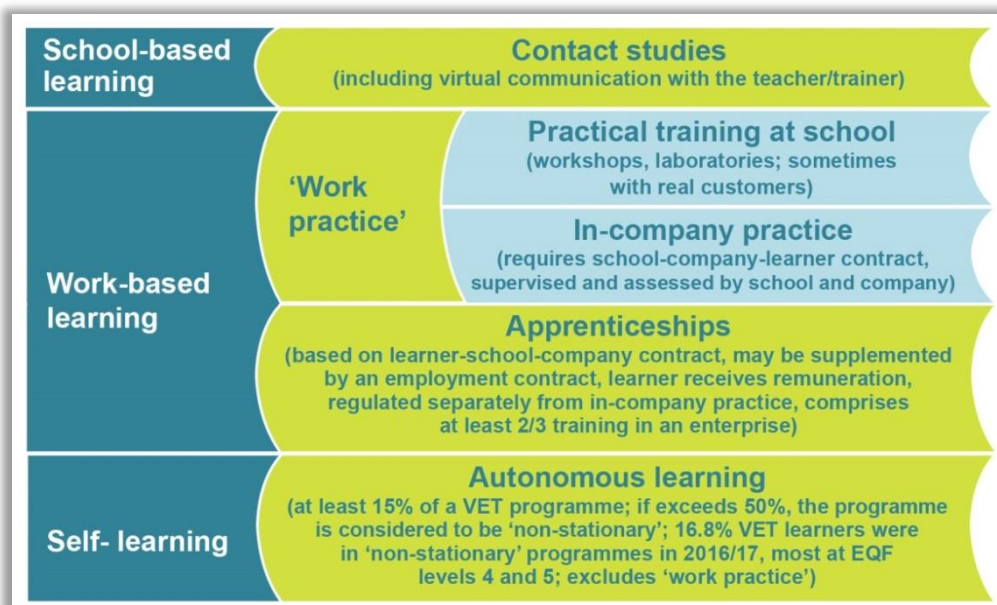
Formal VET leads to four qualification levels (2 to 5) that are the same as in the European qualifications framework (EQF). The VET standard specifies the volume (number of credits), learning outcomes, conditions for termination and continuation of studies for each VET type (Government, 2013).

There are several VET learning options:

- (a) school-based learning (contact studies, including virtual communication with the teacher/trainer);
- (b) work practice (practical training at school and in-company practice);
- (c) self-learning (excludes work practice; at least 15% of a programme should be acquired through autonomous learning; if it exceeds 50%, the programme is considered to be 'non-stationary'; 16.8% of VET learners were in 'non-stationary' programmes in 2016/17, mostly at EQF levels 4 and 5).

Apprenticeships were introduced to VET as a stand-alone study form in 2006 (Figure 14).

Figure 14. Learning options in VET



Source: Cedefop and ReferNet Estonia.

VET learners may receive two qualifications simultaneously: a formal education qualification awarded after completion of a programme; and a professional qualification that is a professional certificate verifying learning outcomes for a specific occupation or profession (Cedefop, 2017). We will refer to them as VET qualification and professional qualification. To complete a VET programme, learners need to pass a final examination that can be also replaced by a professional qualification examination, if available. Both examinations are similar. They are learning outcomes based and usually include a practical part.

In addition to VET examinations, State examinations (mother tongue, mathematics and foreign language) are available for upper secondary VET graduates as an option. They are organised centrally by the Foundation Innove <sup>(16)</sup>.

<sup>(16)</sup> Innove: *Final examinations*: <https://www.innove.ee/en/general-education/final-examinations>

### 2.2.1. Initial VET programmes leading to EQF level 2 (ISCED 251)

These programmes lead to EQF level 2 (*teise taseme kutseõpe*, ISCED 251) qualification and prepare for elementary occupations, such as cleaner assistant, assistant gardener, electronics assembly operator, logger <sup>(17)</sup>. There are no minimum entry requirements but learners must be at least 17 years old to enrol.

The volume of studies is 15 to 120 credits <sup>(18)</sup> depending on the programme: the cleaner assistant programme is 15 credits while assistant gardener is 120. The share of work practice (practical training at school, in-company practice) is at least 70%. Many curricula at this level, for example for cleaner assistants, are also suitable for learners with special educational needs, such as moderate and severe disability. Special arrangements are available for them in VET schools and social welfare institutions.

Those who complete VET can enter the labour market or continue their studies at EQF level 3 or in general education schools for adults leading to general basic education. Those who had been simultaneously enrolled in general education and meet basic education requirements are issued with a basic education certificate by general education schools in addition to a VET qualification. Less than one percent (103) of VET learners were enrolled in these programmes in 2016/17.

### 2.2.2. Initial VET programmes leading to EQF level 3 (ISCED 251)

These programmes lead to EQF level 3 qualifications (*kolmanda taseme kutseõpe*, ISCED 251) and prepare for occupations such as woodworking bench operator and electronic equipment assembler. Completed basic education is not required to enrol in these programmes. The volume of studies is 15 to 120 credits and the share of work practice (practical training at school, in-company practice) is at least 50%; usually half of it takes place at a VET institution and the other half at an enterprise. Graduates can enter the labour market. Similar to programmes leading to EQF level 2, those who acquired basic (general) education (before or in parallel to a VET programme) can continue their studies at upper secondary level; those without completed basic education can continue their studies in general education schools for adults. In 2016/17, 3.7% (927) of VET learners were enrolled in these programmes.

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<sup>(17)</sup> As described in ILO: international standard classification of occupations: ISCO 08, <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/stat/isco/>

<sup>(18)</sup> The Vocational Educational Institutions Act (Parliament, 2013) defines credits for VET curricula describing the time required to achieve learning outcomes. One credit is 26 hours of learner 'study load'. The number of credits per programme and school year is 60.

### 2.2.3. Initial and continuing VET programmes leading to EQF level 4

Two programme types are available at this level:

- (a) initial and continuing VET comprising exclusively vocational curricula (ISCED 351) without access to the next education level unless upper secondary general education is acquired;
- (b) initial VET comprising both general education and VET modules (ISCED 354); it is the only programme type that is called 'upper secondary VET' in the national context.

#### 2.2.3.1. Initial and continuing VET programmes (ISCED 351)

Initial VET programmes (*neljanda taseme kutseõpe*, ISCED 351) lead to qualifications at EQF level 4. Graduates can work in more complex occupations, such as welder, junior software developer, IT systems specialist, farm-worker, but the programme does not provide general education. Completed basic education is a prerequisite to enrol in these programmes. The volume of studies is 15 to 150 credits (depending on the programme) and 180 credits for music and performance programmes. The share of work practice (practical training at school, in-company practice) is at least 50%, half of which takes place at school and half at enterprises. Graduates can enter the labour market or continue in upper secondary general education or a VET programme at ISCED level 354.

Those entering continuing VET programmes must have EQF level 4 qualification or competences in addition to basic education to enrol. Graduates can work in occupations such as electrical network installer, men's (gentlemen's) tailor. In 2016/17, 26.6% (6 574) of VET learners were enrolled in these programmes.

#### 2.2.3.2. Initial 'upper secondary VET' programmes (ISCED 354)

These are three-year initial VET programmes leading to EQF level 4 (*kutsekeskharidusõpe*, ISCED 354) qualification, such as heat pump installers and catering specialists. They also give graduates access to higher education, provided the entry requirements are met. Higher education institutions may require passing State examinations (mathematics, foreign language and mother tongue) in addition to VET qualifications. They are organised centrally by Foundation Innove<sup>(19)</sup>.

At the end of the programme, all graduates have to pass final examinations; it is also possible to sit professional qualification examinations.

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<sup>(19)</sup> Innove: *Final examinations*: <https://www.innove.ee/en/general-education/final-examinations>

As shown in Figure 11, an optional additional year of general education (bridging programme) is available for graduates to help prepare for the State examinations. However, this option has not been widely used.

Students aged 22 and above may enter the programmes without completed basic education, given that they demonstrate competences corresponding to the level of basic education. Schools assess the required competences through validation of prior learning.

The volume of studies is 180 credits, including at least 60 credits of general education: 30 credits are the same for all programmes and 30 are tailored to the programme. The share of work practice (practical training at school and in-company practice) is at least 35%. In 2016/17, 45.1% of all VET learners were enrolled in these programmes; 7.3% continued to higher education the year following graduation.

#### **2.2.4. Initial and continuing VET programmes leading to EQF level 5 (ISCED 454)**

These programmes (*viienda taseme kutseõpe*, ISCED 454) lead to qualifications at EQF level 5. The share of work practice is at least 50%, half of which takes place at a VET institution and the rest at an enterprise.

Initial programmes award qualifications such as accountant, business administration specialist, sales organiser, and small business entrepreneur. The volume of the studies is 120 to 150 credits and 60 to 150 credits for military and public defence programmes. Completed upper secondary education is a prerequisite to enrol in these programmes.

To enrol in continuing programmes at this level, apart from a completed upper secondary education, learners are also required to have an EQF level 4 or 5 VET qualification or relevant competences. The volume of such programmes is 15 to 60 credits. They offer qualifications in occupations such as tax specialist, vehicle technician, information management specialist and farmer.

Graduates of both initial and continuing VET can enter the labour market or follow further pathways in bachelor or professional higher education studies; graduates of initial VET may also progress in continuing VET. In 2016/17, 23.8% of all VET learners were enrolled in EQF level 5 programmes (2.3% in continuing programmes).

#### **2.2.5. Apprenticeships**

Apprenticeships (*töökohapõhine õpe*) were introduced in 2006 (Parliament, 2013, Article 28). They can be offered at all VET levels and in all its forms (initial and continuing), and lead to qualifications at EQF levels 2 to 5. Apprenticeships follow the same curricula as school-based programmes. VET institutions cooperate with

employers to design implementation plans for apprentices based on the existing curricula.

General characteristics of apprenticeship programmes are:

- (a) training in the enterprise comprises at least two thirds of the curriculum;
- (b) the remaining one third of the programme (school part) may also comprise training at school; in some cases, schools have better equipment than companies;
- (c) the apprenticeship contract between the school, learner and employee stipulates the rights and obligations of parties as well as the details of the learning process; the contract is usually initiated by schools but can also be proposed by companies and learners; it should be in accordance with the labour code but learners retain student status even if the employment contract is signed in addition to the apprenticeship contract; apprentices have the same social guarantees as learners in school-based VET;
- (d) the total study duration is from three months to three years <sup>(20)</sup>, equal to school-based VET programmes;
- (e) employers recompense students for tasks performed to the amount agreed in the contract; it cannot be less than the national minimum wage of EUR 470 per month or EUR 2.78 per hour (2017);
- (f) apprentices have to pass the same final examinations as in school-based VET;
- (g) each apprentice is supported by two supervisors: one at school and one at the workplace.

The apprenticeship grant covers training of supervisors and other costs <sup>(21)</sup>. Within an apprentice contract, schools may transfer up to 50% of the grant to the training company to pay a salary to supervisors at the workplace.

In 2015/16, there were 678 apprentices, including 30 whose studies were partly financed by the European Social Fund (ESF). In 2016/17, further ESF investment has allowed increasing the number to 1 381 (5% of VET learners), including 996 of the partly ESF-financed apprentices <sup>(22)</sup> (Figure 15). In 2015-23, the government's intention is to attract a total of 8 000 apprentices.

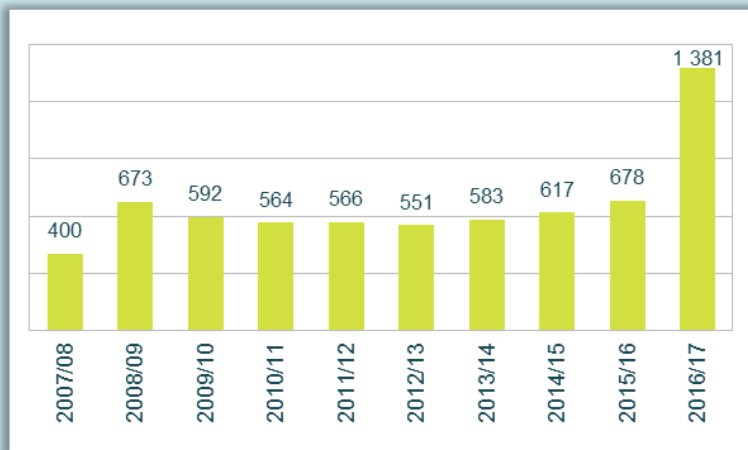
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<sup>(20)</sup> Currently, apprenticeships are not provided in upper secondary VET (ISCED 354).

<sup>(21)</sup> Salaries, training materials and maintenance (such as heating and electricity).

<sup>(22)</sup> More partly EU-financed apprentices started training in January 2017 but they are not included in this figure.

Figure 15. Apprentices in 2007/08-2016/17



NB: Data as of 10 November.

Source: Estonian education information system.

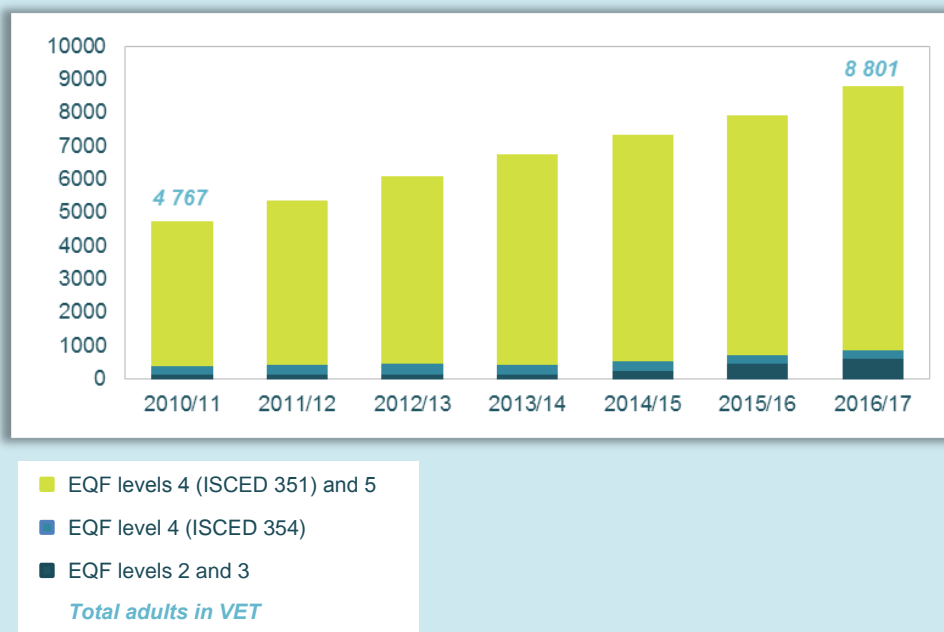
The most popular apprenticeship study fields (curriculum groups) are wholesale and retail sales, social work and counselling, motor vehicles, ships and aircraft, electricity and energy, and social worker.

#### 2.2.6. Adults in formal VET

There is no maximum age limit for enrolling in VET: adults can enrol at any level and any study form for free (Parliament, 2013). In 2016/17, the median age of newly enrolled VET learners was 21, ranging from 16 to 31.

While legislation does not specify the age of adult learners, policy overviews and analyses often refer to age 25 and above. Their share in VET has increased from 17% in 2010/11 to 35.1% in 2016/17, mainly at EQF level 4 (except ISCED 354) and 5 (Figure 16).

Figure 16. Adult learners (aged 25 and above) in formal VET by level



Source: Estonian education information system.

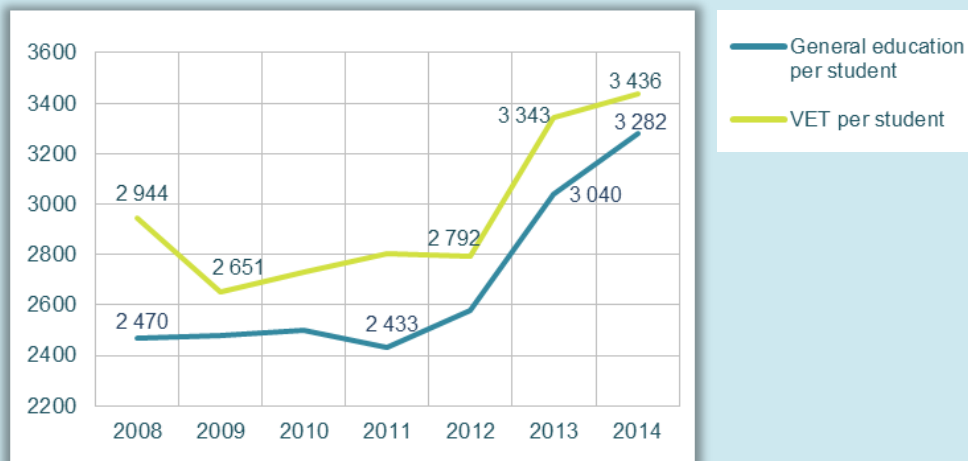
### 2.3. VET funding

Formal VET is mostly State-financed. In 2016/17, 99% of 25 071 initial and continuing VET learners were in State-financed programmes. Private VET schools may also apply for State-commissioned education.

In 2016/17, the base cost of a programme per learner per year (60 credits) was EUR 1 665 multiplied by a coefficient (1.0 to 4.0) depending on curriculum group, study form and learner special needs. The cost covers staff salaries, training materials and maintenance (such as heating and electricity). The government defines the base cost for each calendar year. This financing mechanism applies to all VET levels and forms <sup>(23)</sup>.

<sup>(23)</sup> See Section 2.2 for more details.

Figure 17. Expenditure per student in 2008-14 (EUR)



NB: Most recent data. Investments in infrastructure and equipment are excluded.

Source: UOE; public and private expenditure.

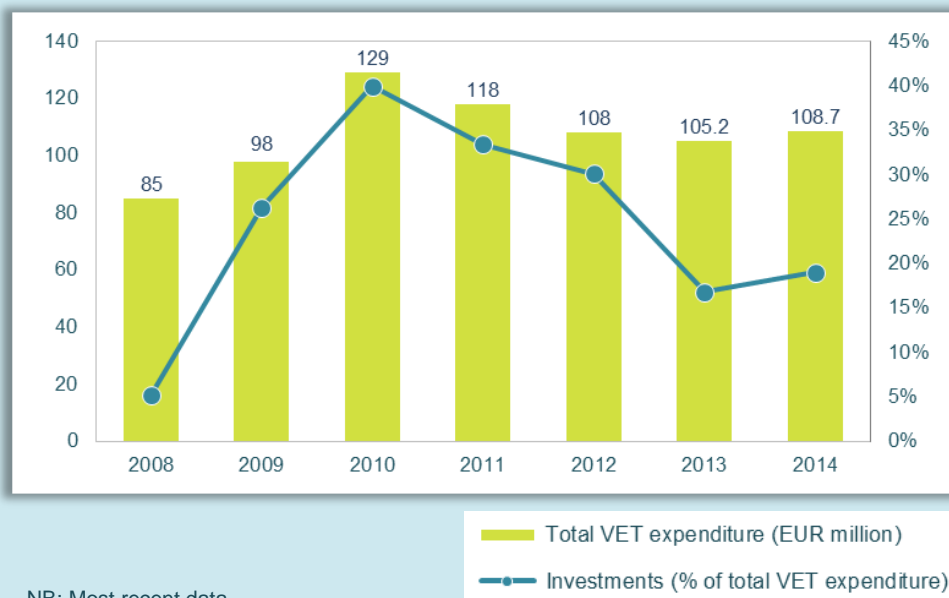
Each year the education minister defines the number of learners to be financed from the State budget for the following three years by curriculum group and VET provider (for example 'media technologies' that comprises curricula from related fields such as 'multimedia', 'printing technology' and 'photography'). The figures are updated annually for the next two years. The school has the right to decide the specific curriculum within the funded curriculum group (defined by the VET standard) and study form. If a VET provider does not have enough learners in the curriculum group, the funding can be used for another curriculum group or for continuing VET in the same curriculum group.

A few privately financed VET programmes are available in State and municipal VET schools. Such programmes are usually in high demand (as with cosmetician) but are not part of the State-financed programmes. Apprenticeships (travel costs and study allowance) are also jointly financed by ESF.

State and municipal vocational schools may provide continuing training for adults for a fee without age restrictions. They can also attract additional financing from other sources, such as international projects.

Total expenditure on VET has decreased from EUR 129 million in 2010 to EUR 108.7 million in 2014 due to reduced investment in infrastructure and equipment as several big VET investment projects have been completed.

Figure 18. VET total expenditure and investments in 2008-14



NB: Most recent data.

Source: UOE; public and private expenditure.

Public VET expenditure as a share of total government expenditure has also decreased, from 1.6% in 2012 to 1.4% in 2014, because total government expenditure increased nominally more than its expenditure on VET. Approximately 66% of total expenditure is on staff salaries.

## 2.4. Other forms of training

This section briefly describes continuing non-formal training courses for adults that are regulated by the Adult Education Act (Parliament, 2015) and can be provided by VET institutions, given they have acquired that right in a public procurement.

Continuing training offers purposeful and organised studies outside formal education and on the basis of a course curriculum. Its forms, duration and content vary. The costs are usually covered by learners or their employers.

Education, social affairs and economics ministries coordinate adult education in Estonia. The education ministry designs and implements the national adult education policy, its principles and objectives. It also supports adult educators, providers and learners. The social affairs ministry is responsible for (re)training the

unemployed and other groups at risk through the public employment service <sup>(24)</sup>. The service offers labour market training to jobseekers and the unemployed free of charge (financed from the State budget) (Parliament, 2005). Training is chosen in cooperation with a consultant and is focused on the knowledge and skills that make it easier to find a job. The training is usually conducted in groups of 6 to 12 members. It lasts from one day to one year and may be offered as distance learning (e-learning). The content takes account of professional standards and employer needs. The economics ministry creates the conditions for regular provision of education and training to employees to meet the needs of the companies.

The Adult Education Act (Parliament, 2015) harmonises the requirements for continuing education providers: all curricula are public; providers must have a website and certificates must comply with defined criteria; continuing education providers should be registered in the public database. The quality of training is supported by the outcome-based curricula and descriptions of qualification, competences and professional experience of the training providers on their websites.

Non-formal training is mainly provided by more than 600 private training centres that form a large part of the adult education sector, but also by VET schools, professional higher education institutions and universities <sup>(25)</sup>.

## 2.5. VET governance

According to legislation <sup>(26)</sup>, the parliament (*Riigikogu*), the government (*Eesti Vabariigi Valitsus*) and the education ministry jointly oversee the VET system at national level. The VET legislation was substantially renewed in the late 1990s and in 2013. Social partners, including trade unions and employer organisations participated in the working group on developing legislation.

The parliament adopts legal acts. The government approves national education policy, with the *Estonian lifelong learning strategy 2020* (MoER et al.,

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<sup>(24)</sup> Unemployment Insurance Fund.

<sup>(25)</sup> MoER: *EHIS. Eesti Hariduse Infosüsteem [Estonian education information system]*. <http://www.ehis.ee/> (data as of June 2016).

<sup>(26)</sup> Vocational Educational Institutions Act (Parliament, 2013); Vocational education standard (Government, 2013), work-based learning regulation (MoER, 2007); Private Schools Act (Parliament, 1998b); Professional Higher Education Institutions Act (Parliament, 1998a); Adult Education Act (Parliament, 2015); Professions Act (Parliament, 2008a); Recognition of Foreign Professional Qualifications Act (Parliament, 2008b); Study Allowances and Study Loans Act (Parliament, 2003a); Youth Work Act (Parliament, 2010b).

2014) guiding the most important developments in education. It also approves higher education and VET standards and framework requirements for teacher training (Section 2.6).

The VET standard (Government, 2013) defines:

- (a) a learning outcomes approach;
- (b) requirements for VET curricula:
  - (i) the volume and structure of programmes, including joint programmes, for example between VET and professional higher education;
  - (ii) entry and completion requirements;
  - (iii) key competences;
- (c) principles for curriculum updates;
- (d) principles for recognition of prior learning and work experience;
- (e) the list of programme groups, study fields and curriculum groups combining several programmes. Examples of the curriculum groups are 'travelling and tourism', 'social work' and 'banking, finance and insurance'.

The education ministry is responsible for delivering the strategy and its nine programmes <sup>(27)</sup>, including the vocational education programme (MoER, 2015a). The education minister also approves national VET curricula.

Since 2012, Foundation Innove <sup>(28)</sup> has been designated by the education ministry to implement national education policy. In VET, the foundation organises the development of national curricula, supports implementation and organises VET teacher training.

Several advisory bodies and social partner organisations participate in policy implementation. County governments prepare and implement local education development plans and coordinate activities of municipal educational institutions, including four municipal VET schools in 2016/17. Social partner participation in VET is regulated by national legislation and partnership agreements.

At national level, the chamber of commerce (*Eesti Kaubandus-Tööstuskoda*), employers' confederation (*Eesti Tööandjate Keskliit*) and confederation of trade unions (*Eesti Ametiühingute Keskliit*) represent social partners. Employers play an

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<sup>(27)</sup> (1) Competent and motivated teachers and school leadership programme; (2) digital focus programme; (3) labour market and education cooperation programme; (4) school network programme; (5) study and career counselling programme; (6) general education programme; (7) vocational education programme; (8) higher education programme; (9) adult education programme.

<sup>(28)</sup> Until the end of 2011 this function was performed by the National Examinations and Qualifications Centre (NEQC) (*Riiklik Eksami- ja Kvalifikatsioonikeskus*). In 2012, NEQC joined Foundation Innove.

active and influential role in the professional councils (*kutsenõukogud*) and drawing up standards for each occupation.

At local level, social partners participate in VET school counsellor boards (*kutseõppeasutuse nõunike kogu*), established under the Vocational Educational Institutions Act (Parliament, 2013). The boards comprise at least seven members in total. Advisory bodies link VET schools and society, advising the school and its management on planning and organising educational and economic activities.

VET schools can be owned by central or local government or be privately owned. They all have a similar management structure in line with the Vocational Educational Institutions Act (Parliament, 2013). The highest collegial decision-making body of the school is the council (*nõukogu*) which organises the activities and plans school development. The head of a school (*direktor*) is also the head of the council, managing the school according to the plan, including financial resources (Cedefop ReferNet Estonia, 2014).

In 2016/17, 26 of 34 VET institutions were State-owned and run by the education ministry. Municipalities ran three VET schools and five were private. A further five professional higher education institutions provided VET programmes at post-secondary level (ISCED 4) along with higher education (ISCED 6).

## 2.6. Teachers and trainers

The lifelong learning strategy up to 2020 supports creating conditions for competent and motivated teachers as one of its five strategic goals. It aims at offering competitive wages and working conditions, leading to a positive image of a teacher in society. Currently, the teaching profession is not an attractive option for young people. The highest share of VET teachers (50.6%) are aged 50 and above <sup>(29)</sup> and their share has been increasing in the past decade. Most VET teachers are females; however, the share of males (38%) is more than double the share in general education.

### 2.6.1. Qualification requirements

In the Vocational Educational Institutions Act (Parliament, 2013), the term 'teacher' is used for both teachers and trainers. The act has also specified that qualification requirements of VET teachers should be based on professional standards. These standards distinguish between general education subject teachers and vocational teachers in VET.

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<sup>(29)</sup> Source: EHIS.

General education subject teachers can work in VET but also in general education schools. They require a master degree (also called 'second cycle higher education diploma') equal to 300 ECTS credits and teach, for instance, mathematics, physics and languages.

Vocational teachers offer knowledge and skills in the field of their professional expertise (the so-called 'specialty subjects'). Qualification requirements are lower compared with teachers of general education subjects, allowing more flexibility for professionals who want to teach. This also improves the link to the labour market. The professional standard <sup>(30)</sup> defines three qualification levels (EQF levels 5, 6 and 7) for vocational teachers (*kutseõpetaja*). Some vocational teachers work part-time and have no pedagogical qualification. However, to reach the highest level, the person should have at least EQF level 6 qualification (180 ECTS) in one of the available tertiary vocational teacher programmes. According to the professional standards, a VET provider cannot employ more than 20% of staff with the lowest level qualification.

Teachers are employed through contracts. The head of a school concludes, amends and terminates employment contracts with teachers in accordance with the labour code. Employment contracts are of indefinite duration; reduced working time (35 hours per week) applies.

### 2.6.2. Continuing professional development

The Vocational Educational Institutions Act (Parliament, 2013) stipulates compulsory and free-of-charge continuing professional development for VET teachers. It is the teachers' obligation to develop their professional skills and be up to date with new developments in the world of education. Continuing professional development also provides teachers with the opportunity to evaluate own competences and to develop lifelong learning skills.

In 2015, the minimum continuing professional development requirements (160 academic hours per five years for general education subject teachers and two months per three years for vocational teachers) were lifted. Instead, a new approach takes account of teachers' individual needs depending on their current competences and tasks and the needs of VET providers. This approach applies to all VET teachers.

VET providers offer tailored training to teachers in accordance with their annual self-evaluation and feedback from the school leader. Self-evaluation replaces the former system of teacher attestation.

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<sup>(30)</sup> Kutsekoda: [http://www.kutsekoda.ee/en/kutsesysteem/tutvustus/kutsestandardid\\_eng](http://www.kutsekoda.ee/en/kutsesysteem/tutvustus/kutsestandardid_eng)

Teacher practice at an enterprise or institution <sup>(31)</sup> may also be counted towards continuing professional development. It is professional work performed in a work environment with a specific purpose and has a direct link with the teachers' area of expertise. Teachers are excused from teaching during practice.

The leading continuing professional development providers are universities, followed by VET providers, private companies and foundation courses.

More information is available in the Cedefop ReferNet thematic perspective on teachers and trainers (Taimsoo, 2016).

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<sup>(31)</sup> E.g. healthcare or social services.

## CHAPTER 3.

# Shaping VET qualifications



### 3.1. Anticipating skill needs

The *Estonian lifelong learning strategy 2020* (MoER et al., 2014) supports creating learning opportunities and career services that are of good quality, flexible and diverse, and take account of labour market needs. It also aims at increasing the number of people with vocational or professional qualifications in all age groups and regions. Anticipation of skill needs in the Estonian labour market is based on forecasts by the economics ministry.

Since 2003, the ministry has produced labour market needs forecasts and updated them annually. Its quantitative data analysis shows demand in the national economy for employees by sector and qualification level. Over the years, the methodology has been updated. Forecasts are based on the data of the 2011 population census and labour force surveys conducted by Statistics Estonia. They cover 39 economic (sub)sectors and five major professional groups:

- (a) managers;
- (b) specialists;
- (c) service staff;
- (d) skilled workers;
- (e) unskilled workers.

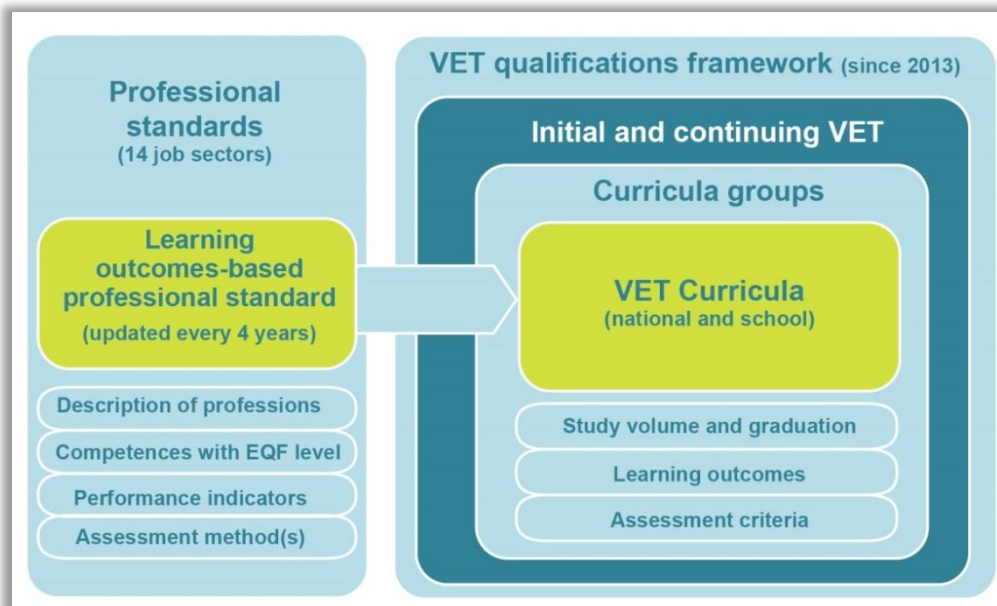
The forecasts reflect changes in employment and the need to replace employees leaving the labour market. The latest forecast considers the period 2016-24 (MoEC, 2016).

In 2015, the education ministry launched a new labour market needs monitoring and forecasting system, known by its Estonian acronym [OSKA](#). Managed by the qualifications authority (*Kutsekoda*), it assesses skill needs by economic sector (such as information and communications technology, accounting) and develops new evidence and intelligence for stakeholders in education and the business world. The system comprises 23 expert panels of employer representatives, education professionals, researchers, public opinion leaders, trade unions and policy-makers. By 2020, each panel representing one sector will publish a report with practical recommendations to decision-makers and stakeholders. The first five OSKA reports on accounting, forestry and timber industry, information and communications technologies (ICT), manufacturing of metal products, machinery and equipment, and social work were published in 2016. Another six sectors will be covered in 2017. Based on the sectoral reports, a 10-year forecasting report on changes in labour market demand, developments and trends is updated and presented to the government annually. The forecasting results are used for career counselling, curriculum development and strategic planning at all education levels, including vocational education and training (VET).

## 3.2. Designing qualifications

Initial and continuing VET qualifications are based on professional (occupational) standards that are part of the professional qualifications system (Figure 19).

Figure 19. VET qualifications and professional standards



Source: Cedefop based on ReferNet Estonia.

### 3.2.1. Professional standards

Professional standards are used for designing VET curricula, curricula for higher education and other training programmes, for assessing learner competences, and awarding a professional qualification. They:

- (a) are based on a job analysis and describe the nature of work; analyses are carried out by working groups designing professional standards;
- (b) describe expected competences as observable and assessable;
- (c) define the method(s) for assessing learner competences and a 'satisfactory' threshold;
- (d) define qualifications (EQF) levels.

All professional standards are available in the State register <sup>(32)</sup>. In February 2017, the State register included 577 professional standards in 95 professional areas.

### 3.2.2. VET qualifications

Uniform requirements for VET curricula and qualifications are stipulated by the VET standard (Government, 2013). The standard describes the requirements for national and school curricula and the curriculum groups in line with ISCED levels, their objectives and expected learning outcomes; it determines the terms and conditions for recognising prior learning, volume of study and graduation requirements by initial and continuing VET curricula; it defines requirements for teachers and trainers. It also assigns the national qualifications framework levels to VET qualification types.

VET schools design curricula for every qualification offered.

Upper secondary VET programme curricula that give access to higher education are based on the national curricula. National curricula are based on professional standards, the VET standard and the national (general education) curriculum for upper secondary schools. Foundation Innove coordinates the process of curriculum design, including cooperation with social partners.

Other VET curricula are based on the VET standard and the respective professional standard(s). Where such standards do not exist, the school must apply for recognition of the curriculum by social partners.

National upper secondary VET curricula that give access to higher education are approved by the education minister.

The VET standard determines how learning outcomes of modules are described:

- (a) profession-specific knowledge are facts, theories acquired through the learning process;
- (b) profession-specific skills are the ability to apply knowledge for performing tasks and solving problems; skills are described in terms of their complexity and diversity;
- (c) autonomy and responsibility describe to what extent the graduate is able to work independently and take responsibility for the results of work;
- (d) learning skills are the ability to manage the learning process using efficient strategies and appropriate learning styles;
- (e) communication skills are the ability to communicate in different situations and on different topics orally and in writing;

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<sup>(32)</sup> Kutsedoda: *State register of occupational qualifications*:  
<http://www.kutsekoda.ee/en/kutseregister>

- (f) self-management competence is the ability to understand and evaluate oneself, give sense to one's own activities and behaviour in society, develop oneself as a person;
- (g) operational competence is the ability to identify problems and solve them, plan one's own activities, set goals and expected results, select adequate tools, act, evaluate results of one's own action, cooperate with others;
- (h) ICT competence is the ability to use ICT tools and digital media skilfully and critically;
- (i) entrepreneurship competence is the ability to take initiative, act creatively, plan one's own career in the modern economic, business and work environment, applying knowledge and skills in different spheres of life (Cedefop ReferNet Estonia, 2014).

### 3.2.3. Managing qualifications

Several bodies are involved in designing, updating and awarding qualifications:

- (a) the education ministry;
- (b) professional councils;
- (c) awarding bodies;
- (d) qualifications committee;
- (e) assessment committee.

Figure 20. **Qualification bodies**



Source: Cedefop based on ReferNet Estonia.

The education ministry is responsible for developing a professional qualifications system. This task is delegated to the qualifications authority (*Kutsekoda*), a private foundation led by a council comprising representatives of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry; Employers' Confederation; Employees' Unions Confederation; Confederation of Trade Unions; and the education, finance, economic and social affairs ministries. The qualifications authority organises and coordinates the activities of professional councils and keeps the register of professional qualifications.

Professional councils represent 14 job sectors. The councils approve and update professional standards and are represented equally by trade unions, employer organisations, professional associations and public authorities. Chairs of professional councils form a board of chairmen for these councils to coordinate cooperation between them.

Professional councils select awarding bodies (public and private) to organise the assessment of competences and issue qualifications. The awarding bodies are selected for five years through a public competition organised by the qualifications authority. VET providers may also be given the right to award qualifications, if the curriculum of the institution complies with the professional standard and is nationally recognised. Qualifications are entered into the register of professional qualifications <sup>(33)</sup>. In 2016, there were many institutions (115) awarding professional qualifications.

The awarding body sets up a committee involving sectoral stakeholders: employers, employees, training providers, and representatives of professional associations. Often it also includes customer representatives and other interested parties. This ensures impartiality in awarding qualifications. The committee approves assessment procedures, including examination materials, decides on awarding qualifications, and resolves complaints. It may set up an assessment committee that evaluates organisation and results of the assessment and reports to the qualifications committee.

The assessment committee verifies to what extent the applicant's competences meet the requirements of the professional qualification standards. The assessment criteria are described in the rules and procedures for awarding the qualification or in the respective assessment standard (Cedefop ReferNet Estonia, 2014).

A person's competences can be assessed and recognised regardless of whether they have been acquired through formal, non-formal or informal learning.

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<sup>(33)</sup> Kutsedoda: *State register of occupational qualifications*:  
<http://www.kutsekoda.ee/en/kutseregister>

### 3.3. Recognition of prior learning

Recognition of prior learning helps assess applicant competences against stated criteria, indicating whether these competences match with education programme enrolment requirements and learning outcomes or with those in occupational standards. The process helps value competences regardless of the time, place and the way they have been acquired, supporting lifelong learning (Figure 9) and mobility, improving access to education for at-risk groups, and supporting more efficient use of resources (Cedefop, 2016).

The VET sector in Estonia has introduced recognition of prior learning following developments in the higher education sector. The recognition process is legally established by the Vocational Educational Institutions Act (Parliament, 2013). General principles for all VET providers are set in the VET standard (Government, 2013).

The lifelong learning strategy up to 2020 and its adult education programme (MoER, 2015c) support development of quality and broader use of validation practices.

Awarding bodies, including VET providers, are responsible for developing detailed recognition procedures. Prior learning may be taken into account by education institutions when admitting learners to their programmes. Learners may also be exempt from a part of a curriculum, if they have achieved and demonstrated relevant learning outcomes. In such a case, the level of learning outcomes demonstrated can be considered as final grade for the subject or module.

VET providers offering recognition of prior learning make public the terms, conditions and procedures that apply, including deadlines and fees. They must also provide counselling to candidates.

Successful recognition results in a certificate or diploma. Experiential learning, hobby activities or any other everyday activity are certified by reference to the work accomplished and presentation of it, a qualification certificate, contract of employment, copy of assignment to the post or any other documentary proof. A description of vocational experience and self-analysis is added to the application. If necessary, VET providers may give applicants practical tasks, conduct interviews or use other assessment methods (Cedefop, 2016).

### 3.4. Quality assurance

VET quality is assured through external and internal processes that make no difference in their approach between school-based learning, work-based learning, self-learning (including 'non-stationary') and apprenticeships<sup>(34)</sup>.

#### 3.4.1. External quality assurance

External quality assurance of a school's curriculum groups<sup>(35)</sup> is confirmed by awarding the 'right to offer VET programmes'.

The right to provide initial and continuing VET in the curriculum group is granted to a school for three years. The education minister decides the granting of this right on the basis of documents submitted by the school, the results of external assessment by an expert committee, and additional evidence, if necessary (Cedefop ReferNet Estonia, 2014).

To extend this right, the curriculum group must be accredited. Accreditation comprises external evaluation of curriculum groups at schools, based on their internal evaluation reports and assessment conducted by an external committee. Performance, sustainability, leadership, cooperation with stakeholders and management of resources, including human resources, are evaluated. Accreditation is organised by the Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA). The evaluation report, including the internal evaluation, is publicly available and the outcomes are used to improve curricula and learning methods, strategic planning and management of VET providers. The education ministry, as the owner of VET schools, evaluates the reports in the light of strategic development planning at provider and system level.

The quality evaluation council, appointed by the education minister, works under the auspices of EKKA and comprises 13 members, representing stakeholders. It approves accreditation decisions and makes proposals on the extension of the right to provide instruction.

Based on the council proposal, the education minister can extend accreditation for three or six years, or refuse to extend it.

VET schools can receive free training and counselling according to the outcomes of the external evaluation under the Teacher and school leadership education programme (MoER, 2015b), one of the nine programmes of the lifelong learning strategy 2020.

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<sup>(34)</sup> Comprising more than 50% self-learning.

<sup>(35)</sup> A curriculum group (e.g. media technologies) comprises curricula from related fields (e.g. multimedia; printing technology; and photography).

### 3.4.2. Internal evaluation

In 2006, internal evaluation of education institutions became mandatory, the objective being to support the development of VET providers. VET providers constantly (formally at least every three years) conduct an internal evaluation of each curriculum group and draft a report. Since 2013, EKKA has consulted them on this process.

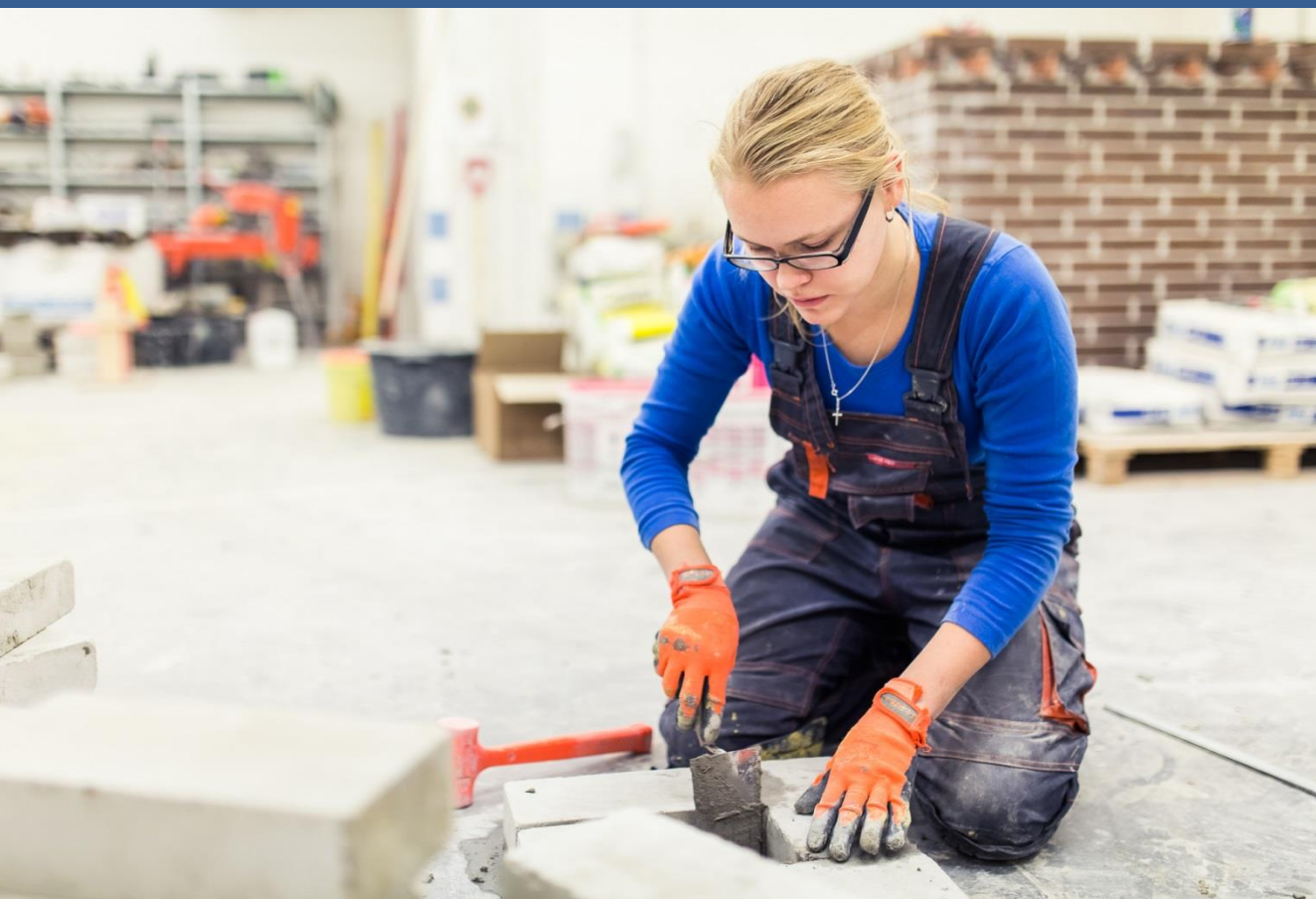
Internal evaluation is linked to provider development plans which are drafted following the performance analysis. The internal evaluation criteria are similar to those for external evaluation: leadership and administration, resource management (including human resources), cooperation with interest groups, and education process. Methods of internal evaluation are chosen by VET providers (MoER and SICI, 2016). They often use activity and performance indicators provided in the education statistics database *HaridusSilm*.

Internal evaluation reports are essential for extending the right to offer VET programmes in the respective curriculum group (Section 3.4.1).

The education information system collects data about the internal evaluation and feedback reports, so the ministry is able to check whether internal evaluations have been conducted and supported by advisory services. The results of internal evaluations are public but education institutions are not obliged to make them available on their websites.

## CHAPTER 4.

# Promoting VET participation



## 4.1. Incentives for VET providers

Promoting participation in vocational education and training (VET) is a political priority in Estonia. The labour market and education cooperation programme <sup>(36)</sup> aims at making VET more attractive for young people by improving its image and raising awareness.

The programme offers VET providers counselling and support from professional public relations companies on how to develop communication strategies. Regular seminars and in-service training are organised for VET school communication and marketing specialists.

National skills competitions, held in 32 professions, are organised in cooperation with enterprises, training providers and professional associations to raise VET awareness. The winners of national competitions participate in international competitions.

Year of skills 2017 – a series of events and campaigns to promote skills – is being organised as a part of the programme. Information about learning opportunities in VET and success stories are also disseminated to young people and adults through social media.

## 4.2. Incentives for learners

### 4.2.1. Allowances, meals and travel subsidy

VET learners can apply for basic and special study allowances:

- (a) the monthly basic allowance is EUR 60 and is available from semester two in formal full-time programmes. Around 40% of VET learners receive the allowance based on performance merit;
- (b) a special allowance can be granted to learners in a difficult economic situation; the board of the education institution approves the procedure to use the provider's special allowance fund.

VET providers create allowance funds (basic and special) which are financed from the State budget. The special allowance fund can be up to 50% of the resources of the basic allowance fund.

Lunchtime meals are also paid by the State. This applies to VET learners up to age 20 who have not completed secondary education <sup>(37)</sup> according to the initial training curricula (Parliament, 2013).

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<sup>(36)</sup> Part of the lifelong learning strategy up to 2020.

<sup>(37)</sup> Excluding 'non-stationary' programmes, i.e. comprising more than 50% self-learning.

VET learners <sup>(38)</sup> are reimbursed public transport tickets between the learning venue and home. Dormitory residents and those who rent apartments close to the learning venue are reimbursed one return ticket to their hometown per week and an additional ticket during national and school holidays.

#### **4.2.2. Study loans**

In 2003, study loans were introduced to improve access to full-time post-secondary VET and on-time graduation. Secondary education graduates who wish to enrol in at least six-month formal VET programmes, can apply. Since 2015/16, part-time students may also apply. In 2015/16, 4.4% of VET learners benefited from the loan <sup>(39)</sup> that can be up to EUR 1 920 per year.

#### **4.2.3. Tax exemption on training costs**

Estonian residents can be exempt from income tax on training costs: those incurred for studying in programmes and courses for a fee at a State or local government education institution, or licensed private/foreign provider (Parliament, 1999).

#### **4.2.4. Study leave for employees**

The Adult Education Act (Parliament, 2015) provides the right for employees to take leave of up to 30 calendar days per year while in formal education or professional training. On application, the employee must present written proof of studies from the provider. During leave, employers pay the national average wage; EUR 470 per month or EUR 2.78 per hour in 2017. Additional study leave (15 days) is granted for preparing for the final exams. An employee also has the right to leave without pay to sit entry examinations. These rights and benefits are applied in the public and private sector, in small, medium-sized and large companies (Cedefop ReferNet Estonia, 2014).

#### **4.2.5. Incentives for the unemployed**

The social affairs ministry (*Sotsiaalministeerium*) is responsible for training the unemployed. Vocational training for the unemployed is funded by the public employment service <sup>(40)</sup>. This allocates resources to employment services to purchase and organise labour market training. It commissions training from education institutions, including VET providers, also private.

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<sup>(38)</sup> Excluding 'non-stationary' programmes, i.e. comprising more than 50% self-learning.

<sup>(39)</sup> Ministry of Education and Research: *HaridusSilm [Educational statistics database]*:  
<http://www.haridussilm.ee/>

<sup>(40)</sup> [Unemployment Insurance Fund](#).

The public employment service also supports work-practice placement for the unemployed through agreements. The participant continues to receive unemployment benefit, and is granted a scholarship and travel compensation, paid by the employment service.

Since 2009, labour market training for the unemployed is also offered on the basis of a voucher system. Vouchers offer a quick and flexible way for the unemployed to use the resources for further training or retrain to find a new job. The service covers up to EUR 2 500 per training during two years.

In May 2017, the public employment service launched a new package of services for unemployment prevention through continuing training and retraining. Individuals are encouraged to move to jobs that create higher added value. Examples are workers who are likely to lose jobs but could retain their employment: those without a qualification or whose skills are outdated and do not correspond to the needs of the labour market; workers with poor knowledge of Estonia; and those aged over 50. The package also supports employees who cannot continue their present employment due to health issues.

This service package also offers a study allowance scheme that supports participation in VET and in higher education. People at risk of unemployment now have access to labour market training through vouchers. In addition to direct support to employees, skills development is supported by compensating 50% to 100% of the training costs to employers. Employers can apply for a training grant to support their workers in adapting to the changes in business processes, in technology or changes in formal qualification requirements. Employers can also use the grant to fill vacancies in high demand roles by equipping potential employees with the necessary skills.

More than 3 700 people are estimated as receiving this support in 2017, and around 15 000 to 19 000 annually in 2018-20.

### 4.3. Incentives for enterprises

#### 4.3.1. Wage subsidy and training remuneration

Employers are reimbursed by the State for supervising work practice for the unemployed (Parliament, 2005), with a daily supervision rate of EUR 22.24 – eight times the minimum hourly wage (EUR 2.78 in 2017) (Parliament, 2009) – for each day attended of the first month of training. Reimbursement decreases to 75% of the daily rate during the second month, and to 50% during the third and fourth month.

#### 4.3.2. Tax exemptions

There is no value added tax for formal training; this includes learning materials, private tuition relating to general education, and other training services unless provided for business purposes (Parliament, 2003b).

Since 2012, enterprises have been exempt from income tax if they finance the formal education of their employees (Parliament, 1999a).

### 4.4. Guidance and counselling

#### 4.4.1. Strategy and provision

The lifelong learning strategy up to 2020 promotes diverse learning opportunities and career services that are of good quality, flexible, and take account of the needs of the labour market. This will also help increase the number of people with VET qualifications in different age groups and regions.

Provision of educational support services was significantly restructured in 2013-14 in line with changes in the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act (Parliament, 2010a).

In 2014, the education ministry developed and endorsed a study and career counselling programme. This is part of the *Estonian lifelong learning strategy 2020* (MoER et al., 2014) and is partly financed by the ESF. The programme regulates the provision of study counselling and career services for young people. Study counselling – special education guidance, speech therapy, social pedagogical and psychological counselling – is provided to pre-school children and to students in primary, general education and/or VET. Career services (information and counselling) are provided to people up to age 26. Special attention is paid to the transition from one education level to another and to early leavers from education and training. Through a county-based network of career and study centres called *Rajaleidja* (pathfinder; 15 in total), the programme envisages an integrated approach to counselling services and improvement in their quality and availability.

The network of *Rajaleidja* centres was established in 2014. Implementation of a quality management system, training of career and study counselling specialists, evaluation and monitoring of service quality, compiling and distribution of methodology and guidance publications have been developed.

Offering systematic, thoroughly considered and coordinated career services can allow young people to make informed choices in lifelong learning and in working life. This can help increase the number of young people continuing their education pathways and reduce the number of early leavers. In the longer term, the employability of young people would increase. By 2020, around 174 000 young people will be provided individual study and/or career guidance.

Career guidance is provided within formal education as part of the curricula. Within general education, career education is offered as a compulsory cross-curricular theme and additionally as elective courses. Career-related issues are also discussed in student evaluations, during aptitude and professional suitability evaluations. The schools organise information sessions and visits to fairs, seminars and lectures. *Rajaleidja* centres visit schools to provide individual and group counselling and career information services. They also support schools in implementing the cross-curricular theme 'lifelong learning and career planning'.

Modernisation of the national VET curricula has been in process during recent years. New curricula include the learning outcome 'the student understands his/her responsibility to make informed decisions in a lifelong career planning processes'. This means that career management has become an integral part of VET. In developing career planning skills in VET there is a focus on self-evaluation, how best to use the learner's professional skills in the labour market, how to keep and raise professional qualifications through continuous self-improvement, how to combine family life and work, and how to value health (Cedefop ReferNet Estonia, 2014).

Since 2009, the career counsellor network in the labour market sector has been coordinated by the public employment service <sup>(41)</sup>. It offers career guidance services to the adult population. Since 2015, in parallel to career guidance services provided by *Rajaleidja* centres, the service provides workshops for young people in schools – students of grades 8 to 12 – to introduce them to the labour market and working life. These workshops are mostly financed from the EU budget. The European job mobility portal (EURES) network counsellors are engaged in 16 career information points that help search for jobs in the EU and the European Free Trade Association countries. There are career information specialists and counsellors working in every public employment service department.

All guidance services for young people provided by *Rajaleidja* centres and the public employment service are free of charge. They are offered in individual and group settings, often accompanied by computer-based activities.

#### **4.4.2. Career services quality assurance**

Career and study counselling services in *Rajaleidja* centres are supported by three quality manuals. Career education in schools is supported by quality guidelines and evaluated internally.

There are professional standards for 'career counsellors', 'career information specialists' and 'career coordinators at schools'. These standards regulate the required level of education and specialisation.

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<sup>(41)</sup> [Unemployment Insurance Fund](#).

Most practitioners have a background in psychology, youth work, teacher training, information sciences or social work. To be eligible to apply for a professional qualification, career counsellors must have between two and five years of work-experience; career information specialists must have between one and three years.

There are no regular accredited basic training programmes offered to the career specialists in public universities. Foundation Innove organises varied short- and long-term in-service training for career practitioners under the study and career counselling programme (MoER, 2014). Specialised study programmes for all three groups of career specialist are provided in cooperation with three main public universities.

Study programmes are based on the professional skills requirements set out in the professional standards. The lifelong guidance agency organises international study visits in cooperation with colleagues from the Euroguidance network to exchange knowledge related to the provision and development of career services. Foundation Innove provides methodological support to career specialists (Cedefop ReferNet Estonia, 2014).

#### 4.5. Key challenges and development opportunities

The lifelong learning strategy up to 2020 defines priorities for new developments and initiatives in education and training. One of its key objectives for VET is to reduce the share of adults (aged 25 to 64) without a VET qualification and to increase the share of VET learners compared with general education. Several actions support achieving these and other objectives:

(a) prevention of early leaving from VET.

Schools are expected to take more responsibility in this area. A challenge is to keep the most vulnerable learners in VET programmes, since they are insufficiently motivated. The State provides schools with relevant data about dropout rates and trends, organises seminars to change experiences, and offers financial support for schools that pilot new programmes focusing on young learners not in employment, education or training. Better career guidance and counselling is to help prospective learners make the right education choices;

(b) efficient use of OSKA findings in VET;

Discussions are under way on how to incorporate monitoring and forecasting findings in VET provision. Education changes are not immediate, while entrepreneurs hope for rapid changes in graduate skills;

- (c) Year of skills 2017.  
this aims at developing a mindset that practical skills are of high value. Skills year focuses on learning opportunities to encourage young people to select education programmes offering practical skills and adults to upgrade their skills and learn new ones;
- (d) new collaborative partnerships between general education and VET providers to promote learner-centred approaches and to offer learners more opportunities to engage in flexible learning pathways;
- (e) a national programme supports development of digital competences, including in VET. Its objective is to promote a holistic approach to developing digital competences and result-oriented use of learning technologies. Measures to raise the popularity of the teaching profession aim to make it a viable choice for young people;
- (f) support measures to promote Estonian as a second language and foreign language learning in VET schools. Language skills would improve career opportunities and labour market mobility of graduates.

# Acronyms and abbreviations

<b>EHIS</b>	<i>Eesti Hariduse Infosüsteem,</i> Estonian education information system
<b>EKKA</b>	<i>Eesti Kõrg- ja Kutsehariduse Kvaliteediagentuur,</i> Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education
<b>ECTS</b>	European credit transfer and accumulation system
<b>EQF</b>	European qualifications framework
<b>ESF</b>	European Social Fund
<b>EE</b>	Estonia
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>ICT</b>	information and communications technologies
<b>ISCED</b>	international standard classification of education
<b>MoEC</b>	Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications
<b>MoER</b>	Ministry of Education and Research
<b>OSKA</b>	<i>oskuste arendamise koordineerimisüsteemi loomine,</i> labour market needs monitoring and forecasting system
<b>PISA</b>	programme for international student assessment
<b>VET</b>	vocational education and training

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## Vocational education and training in **Estonia**

### Short description

This short description contributes to better understanding of vocational education and training (VET) in Estonia by providing an insight into its main features and highlighting VET policy developments and current challenges.

Estonian VET has been changing over the past decade, reflecting both demographic trends and the changing needs of the labour market. The VET school network has been optimised to raise its efficiency, with small providers merged into bigger regional centres offering a wide range of qualifications. Participation in lifelong learning has increased, VET having an important role in this process. The share of adults in VET has more than doubled since 2010/11 and reached about a third of the total VET population. Apprenticeships have also been expanding: while their share is still relatively low, the number of apprentices has doubled in the past year. These and other changes are supported by reforms that aim at making VET a more attractive option for learners.

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