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Policy briefs 2023

ESTONIA



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1. Introduction

This VET policy brief produced by Cedefop presents a snapshot of vocational education and training policy developments in Estonia between 2020 and the beginning of 2023. It presents the context and the challenges the country faces, a selection of the latest VET-related statistics, as well as the national priorities until 2030 identified in Estonia's national implementation plan. This VET policy brief provides information from Cedefop monitoring and analysis on the implementation of the [Council Recommendation on VET](#) and [Osnabrück Declaration](#). It offers stakeholders a regular source of information on VET policy developments that could be used for future policy making.

2. National VET context and challenges

2.1 National VET context

Vocational education and training (VET) in Estonia provides free-of-charge initial and continuing training for upskilling and reskilling the young and adults. Most VET providers (30 of 35) are State-owned and run by the Ministry of Education and Research. They have a high degree of autonomy in performing their tasks, including decisions on teaching methods and resource allocation.

VET is offered at qualification levels 2 to 5 (continuing VET at levels 4 to 5). These levels are linked to the European qualifications framework (EQF). Learning forms include school-based, work-based and self-learning. A part of continuing VET is non-formal, including adult courses. Professional higher education programmes (EQF level 6) are not considered VET (Cedefop; Ministry of Education and Research, 2022).

In 2013, there was a major update of the VET regulatory framework existing since the late 1990s, aiming for better responsiveness to the labour market needs, better quality assurance and an outcome-based approach: the [Vocational education institutions act](#) and the [Standard of vocational education](#) were adopted. These regulate the organisation and provision of VET, and the uniform requirements for its curricula (Estonia, 2022).

The parliament (Riigikogu), the government (Eesti Vabariigi Valitsus), including the education ministry, jointly oversee the VET system at national level. The ministry's partner in implementing the VET strategic objectives is the [Estonian Association for the Promotion of VET](#), representing VET providers, social partners and other VET stakeholders. Several other advisory bodies and social partner organisations participate in policy implementation. Local governments prepare and implement local education development plans and coordinate the activities of municipal education institutions. Social partner participation in VET is regulated by national legislation and partnership agreements (Cedefop; Ministry of Education and Research, 2022).

2.2 Challenges

The main challenges that VET in Estonia is facing include the need to improve smooth transitions between VET and other learning pathways, lack of qualified teachers and trainers, and insufficient responsiveness of VET to the needs of the labour market and society.

Several factors hinder smooth transitions between VET and other learning pathways. VET, in comparison to other learning options, is considered less attractive. The dropout rate among VET learners is notably high, particularly during the first year of study. According to education ministry data, in 2022 20.6% of vocational upper secondary learners interrupted their studies, i.e., did not continue in the same VET institution in the following year; and 10.7% dropped out, i.e., did not continue in any form of formal education. Limited available resources reduce the regional availability of VET. Collaboration between VET and general/higher education is limited, and the recognition of prior learning and work experience, which typically facilitates permeability, has not been firmly embedded in the VET system. The readiness of VET institutions to manage a multilingual and multicultural learning environment and to support learners with a mother tongue other than Estonian is also insufficient (Estonia, 2022; European Commission, 2022).

Despite VET teachers and school leaders having autonomy, with active networks supporting exchange of knowledge and a high-quality digital infrastructure of training providers, there are also several challenges. The supply of qualified teachers and support specialists is insufficient. The teaching community is ageing, and the retainment rate of new teachers is low: one in three quit their job within a year. The skills of VET teachers, trainers and principals in diversifying the learning process and environment need to be improved, as does their readiness to introduce educational innovations; the potential of digital solutions is not fully exploited. (Estonia, 2022).

Making VET more responsive to the needs of society and the evolving labour market also remains a challenge. The potential of work-based learning is not yet fully exploited in Estonia. Participation in apprenticeships reached 9% of VET learners in 2020/21 but fell to 5.3% in 2022/23 due to end of external support (EU funding) and limited contribution from employers. VET support for the development of transversal skills and competences, including digital, career and entrepreneurship, is sometimes insufficient. While career paths offered by VET are often undervalued by society, the process of updating professional qualifications and curricula in response to changes in the labour market and society is not always flexible (Estonia, 2022; Cedefop; Ministry of Education and Research, 2022).

3. National VET policy priorities

The Estonian [national implementation plan](#) that the country prepared in response to the [2020 Council Recommendation on VET](#) and the [Osnabrück Declaration](#), sets three main priorities (strategic goals) until 2035:

- (a) diverse and accessible VET enabling smooth transitions between education types/levels;

- (b) competent and motivated VET teachers, trainers and school management;
- (c) VET responsive to the labour market and society needs (Estonia, 2022).

These priorities are aligned with the Estonian [Education strategy 2021-35](#) (follow up of the Lifelong strategy 2020) [steering the developments in education and training](#), including VET. The strategy is implemented through four-year implementation programmes, which are updated annually. It contributes to the [Estonia 2035](#) national long-term strategy in the area of skills and labour market aiming to develop an education [and training] system that is learner-centred, flexible and forward-looking.

The national implementation plan is also linked to the [Youth sector development plan 2021-35](#), reducing early leaving from education and training, supporting transitions to labour market and validation of learning outcomes, the [Research and development, innovation and entrepreneurship strategy 2021-35](#) that strengthens cooperation between VET and universities, research institutions and enterprises, the [Estonian language strategy 2021-35](#) (including education and training), and regional development plans also form an integral part of the national implementation plan.

4. Main policy developments and progress 2020-23

4.1 Diverse and accessible VET

Estonia has been putting in place measures to make VET diverse and accessible and to enable transitions between VET and other education and training paths.

Developing VET excellence and cooperation measures are at the core of this ambitious priority. They were approved in 2022 and foresee several actions: reviewing the VET provider network in connection with the development of the general education school network; implementation of performance based-funding; empowering centres of excellence in VET; and promoting VET cooperation with employers, higher education and research institutions. Until 2022, two Estonian VET centres participated in Erasmus+ CoVEs projects as partners to support the emergence of centres of excellence in VET. Comprehensive mapping of cooperation opportunities between VET institutions, research institutions, higher education institutions and employers was agreed, to be based on the forthcoming (in 2023) study of the VET institutions network.

In 2021, Estonia developed a national mobility indicator: share of VET graduates who have participated in learning mobility for at least 2 weeks during their studies (%). This indicator monitors the quality of VET and the different learning opportunities through [internalisation and learning mobility](#). Since January 2022, VET schools have started submitting mobility data to the national education information system according to the new methodology; first results are expected in 2023.

In 2021, the [legislative process](#) was launched to introduce micro-qualifications (microcredentials) in the [Adult education act](#). The amendments had not been adopted by the end of 2022. They concern the definition of micro-qualifications, the volume of study

programmes leading to microcredentials, principles of provision, and quality assurance mechanism. Nevertheless, in 2022, updating the national curricula in upper secondary VET continued, enabling the introduction of micro-qualifications.

Estonia is putting forward a comprehensive approach to [supporting learners with special educational needs \(SEN\) and those with migrant background](#). In 2022, the dedicated 30 ECTS programme was made available for SEN learners and learners with a migrant background (refugees from Ukraine made up almost half of all students in vocational orientation programmes). In addition, 21 vocational orientation programmes were introduced in 15 VET providers: 60 credit points programme was offered for learners with intellectual disabilities who have studied according to the simplified basic education curriculum.

In 2022, amendments to the [Vocational education institutions act](#) and the related [legislation were adopted to reinforce and expand instruction in the Estonian language in VET](#). These included updating the qualification requirements of teaching staff and the conditions for admission and graduation to reflect the change from the former Russian-speaking classes to programmes in Estonian for non-native speakers. The transition in VET is scheduled to be completed by the school year 2029/30; VET centres are required to draft their action plans to support learners during the transition. To implement the above provisions, in 2022 the framework – legislation for granting support from EU structural funds – was drafted to develop language training in general education and VET, including content and language integrated learning (CLIL) and Estonian as a second language for VET teachers and trainers.

4.2 Competent and motivated VET teachers and trainers

The country has implemented several measures to attract competent and motivated teachers, trainers and school management to VET.

In 2022, the Ministry of Education and Research designed the framework – legislation for granting support from EU structural funds – for [developing competences of teachers, trainers and heads of schools](#). This included field-related training for vocational teachers, continuous professional development (CPD) on general pedagogy/teaching methods, and development activities for VET provider management.

In 2022, the inter-university Teachers' Academy was established to increase the universities' capacity to (re)train teachers and education leaders, and to provide high-level research in the field of education sciences. The new [IT Academy](#) programme was also prepared (but not yet adopted) to continue developing digital competences for VET teachers and trainers and to ensure [training of school and company instructors](#).

To attract more teachers to VET, in 2020 the government also set a target of increasing the average pay of VET teachers to 120%, compared to average pay in Estonia, by 2026. According to [Education strategy 2021-35](#), in 2022, the average pay for VET teachers was EUR 1 718 (8% rise compared to 2021; 102% of average pay in Estonia).

4.3 VET responsive to the labour market and society needs

Estonia has been implementing measures to make VET more responsive to the labour market needs and also the needs of society in general.

In 2022, the framework – legislation for granting support from EU structural funds – for [developing the professional qualifications system and jobs-and-skills forecasting](#) was adopted. It foresees further developing the [OSKA forecast system](#) methodology, including region-based forecasts, but also expanding it to a more comprehensive system of skills and professional qualifications, OsKuS (ReferNet Estonia; Cedefop, 2023). In 2022, the framework was also created for developing green skills by developing and providing new [modules and courses in higher education and VET](#) in fields including transportation, energy, agriculture, forestry, food processing, construction, chemical industry, and waste management.

In 2022, with the support of Erasmus+ funding, a series of webinars were conducted to raise awareness of green issues and support greener policy-making in VET by addressing the needs of policy-makers, leading employers and VET providers. Regular short vision webinars called [Green talks \(Rohejutud\)](#), mainly on the [topics of green transition in VET](#), were organised to address the wider audience (ReferNet Estonia; Cedefop, 2022).

[Developing work-based learning \(WBL\) and practical training](#) has recently gained momentum, aiming to ensure competences that create more added value and better match with the labour market needs. The VET and higher education development programme PRÕM+ was prepared and piloted by the education ministry. It focuses on promoting WBL for young learners in initial VET as, until recently, most work-based learning participants have been adults.

5. Statistical information in relation to EU targets

Estonia's efforts to make WBL more accessible in VET is already paying off. The share of recent IVET graduates (20 to 34-year-olds) with work-based learning experience as part of their vocational education and training increased from 73.5% in 2021 to 78.9% in 2022, and exceeds the EU average and the 2025 target by almost 20 percentage points (pp).

The employment rate of 20-34-year-old recent IVET graduates was 75.1% in 2022, 4.6 pp lower than the EU average. It is lower than in 2017 (83.8%) but higher than in 2021 (70.6%).

The rate of early leavers from education and training aged 18 to 24 in Estonia increased from 8.5% in 2020 to 10.8% in 2022. The trend in EU is the reverse: from 9.9% in 2020 to 9.6% in 2022.

More indicators and their progress compared to the EU targets are presented in the table below.

Table 1. European vocational education and training policy dashboard: Estonia

Type of indicator ⁽¹⁾	Indicator	Last available year	EE	EU-27	Policy Document	EU target (year)
VET for developing a lifelong learning culture						
Progress	Adults (25 to 64 year-olds) with a learning experience in the last 12 months (%)*	2022	41.8	39.5	Skills Agenda	50% (2025)
					Council Resolution on EEA	47% (2025)
					ESPR Action Plan	60% (2030)
Progress	Low-qualified adults with a learning experience in the last 12 months (%)	2022	18.9	18.4	Skills Agenda	30% (2025)
Progress	Unemployed adults with a learning experience in the last 4 weeks (%)	2022	21.7	13.2	Skills Agenda	20% (2025)
Context	Employment rate for 20 to 64 year-olds (%)	2022	81.9	74.6	ESPR Action Plan	78% (2030)
Context	Early leavers from education and training (%)	2022	10.8	9.6	Council Resolution on EEA	<9% (2030)
Context	NEET rate for 15 to 29 year-olds (%)	2022	10.6	11.7	ESPR Action Plan	9% (2030)
VET for Resilience, transitions, sustainability and excellence						
Progress	Adults (16 to 74 year-olds) with at least basic digital skills (%)	2021	56.4	53.9	Skills Agenda	70% (2025)
					ESPR Action Plan	80% (2030)
Progress	Employment rate for recent IVET graduates (20 to 34 year-olds) (%)	2022	75.1	79.7	Council Rec on VET	82% (2025)
Progress	Recent IVET graduates (20 to 34 year-olds) with a work-based learning experience as part of their vocational education and training (%)	2022	78.9	60.1	Council Rec on VET	60% (2025)
					Council Resolution on EEA	
Context	25 to 34 year-olds with tertiary attainment (%)	2022	43.9	42	Council Resolution on EEA	45% (2025)
Context	Gender employment gap (%)	2022	2.9	10.7	ESPR Action Plan	To be halved (2030)
Context	People at risk of poverty or social exclusion (1000s)	2022	332	95 284	ESPR Action Plan	15 million decrease (2030)
Context	Employed ICT specialists (1000s)	2022	44.5	9 370.2 ^e	2030 Digital Compass	20 million, with convergence between men and women (2030)
VET for the European Education Area						
Progress	Learners in IVET who benefitted from a learning mobility abroad (%) **	2021	7.4	2.1 ^{dV}	Council Rec on VET	8% (2025)
					Skills Agenda	
Context	Average number of foreign languages learned in IVET	2021	0.8	1.2		

Available flags: b – break in time series, d – definition differs, e – estimated, V – Cedefop estimate.

* Eurostat data (Adult Education Survey, special calculation excluding guided on-the-job training)

** Provisional estimates affected by the Covid19 pandemic

Source: Cedefop. [European VET policy dashboard](#)

(1) [Definitions](#) on the type of indicators are available.

6. Conclusion

Estonia's priorities defined in the national implementation plan are being addressed through a recently adopted overarching education and training strategy lasting to 2035, including VET. The strategy has a clear focus and well-defined indicators. The priorities are in line with the EU priorities in VET. At the same time, many measures of the strategy are still in the initial implementation stage, including adopting the national legislation for implementing the EU structural funds' projects. It is to be seen how their implementation will unfold in the coming years.

Measures to make VET more diverse and accessible and to allow smooth transitions between various education paths focus on VET excellence and cooperation, including promotion of VET centres of excellence and cooperation with employers, research, general and higher education. The measures also include support for internationalisation and mobility: developing a national mobility indicator and support for transitions within the education sector, and between VET and labour market, such as introducing microcredentials. There has been support for vulnerable groups, including SEN and those who lack Estonian language skills, e.g. through vocational orientation programmes and transition to Estonian as the only language of instruction in VET. Measures pending at this stage are mainly linked to mitigating the risks associated with limited available resources that reduce the regional availability of VET, and with how to make validation and recognition of competences better rooted in the VET community and society in general.

The priority of attracting competent and motivated teachers is being addressed through a combination of teacher salary increase (increasing the average pay of VET teachers compared to average pay in Estonia to 120% by 2026) and support for competences development, including digital ones. Addressing the issue as a package of measures may improve the situation but the country needs to act fast, given that the shortage and ageing of teachers and trainers are particularly acute in VET.

The alignment of VET with the needs of the labour market and society is being addressed in various ways. These include upgrading the OSKA forecast system to a more comprehensive skills and professional qualifications system, supporting the digital and green transition, including new VET modules and courses, and development of innovative approaches for the development of these skills. Measures to strengthen WBL for young learners have been introduced, including the PROM+ programme to ensure competences that create more added value and better match with the labour market needs.

Further steps in the above measures would allow the country to meet the objectives set in the national implementation plan in line with the Council Recommendation on VET and the Osnabrück Declaration.

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