



VET in Estonia

Vocational education and training (VET) in Estonia is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education and Research and is crucial to ensuring a flexible and skilled workforce. Professional standards in the eight-level Estonian qualifications framework are outcomes-based and are the basis for VET curricula. Social partners are involved in VET policy development and implementation. They participate in national professional councils and are involved in drafting VET-related legislation, including curricula. At provider level, their representatives belong to VET institution advisory bodies.

Recognition of prior learning and work experience has improved accessibility to VET for learners from diverse education and professional backgrounds.

VET providers offer both initial and continuing programmes. Initial VET is offered at levels 2, 3, 4 and 5 of the Estonian qualifications framework (and European qualifications framework, EQF). Learners can choose between full-time studies and those where the emphasis is on self-study (referred to as 'non-stationary' studies in the national context). Full-time studies are available as school-based tracks, and as apprenticeship. Financial assistance is available for VET learners to guarantee equal access to education.

There are no minimum admission requirements at levels 2 and 3 but learners must be at least 17 years old to enrol. Entry to level 4 studies usually requires completed basic education but there are exceptions ⁽¹⁾ for those over 22 without basic education.

VET programmes at ISCED level 354 are referred to nationally as upper secondary vocational education.

The ratio of learners in general and vocational upper secondary programmes is three to one. The qualification achieved in vocational secondary education gives access to higher education. This may require learners to pass State examinations that are compulsory for general upper secondary education graduates: an optional additional year of general education is available for upper secondary VET graduates (ISCED 354) to help prepare. Around 8-9% of upper secondary VET graduates continue in tertiary education. Upper secondary education gives access to EQF level 5 initial VET programmes (ISCED 454). These post-secondary programmes prepare learners for technical and associate professional occupations and further studies.

Continuing VET is offered at EQF levels 4 and 5. To enrol in these formal programmes, learners need a VET qualification or relevant competences, in addition to completed upper secondary education.

Tertiary VET does not feature in Estonian legislation, though tertiary education may also comprise professional qualifications. These are accessible to all graduates of upper secondary education and post-secondary VET.

Non-formal continuing VET is part of adult learning. Its forms, duration and content vary. To support up- and reskilling of vulnerable groups (e.g. with obsolete, low-level or no qualifi-

cation), VET providers and professional higher education institutions offer free courses for working adults.

Distinctive features of VET

Although the number of VET learners has been decreasing, the share of adult learners (age 25 and over) in initial and continuing VET has more than doubled since 2010/11, reaching 41.7% of the total VET population in 2019. This pattern reflects demographic trends but also changing labour market needs. Since 2010, the proportion of higher educated adults entering VET has also been increasing. In both initial and continuing education, learners have the right to take study leave.

The share of practical training in VET programmes is 35% or more, depending on the type of programme. In the school-based track, it is usually divided equally between school workshops and workplace learning, featuring work and study assignments with specific objectives.

Participation in apprenticeships has been increasing since 2016/17 and now accounts for 8% of VET learners. This is a result of the education ministry's efforts to develop a functioning and sustainable work-based learning system with stronger employer involvement, including more ESF investments.

General secondary education has remained the more popular option among basic education graduates despite the government's efforts to increase the attractiveness of VET. Preferences in education paths vary greatly by region and gender. Many basic and upper secondary education graduates make a choice in favour of VET within several years of graduation; within three years after basic school completion, 37% of young people reach vocational training.

The most common VET study fields are engineering, manufacturing and construction, with 50% of upper secondary vocational graduates earning a qualification.

VET programmes are mainly offered in Estonian but, to a lesser extent, also in Russian and English.

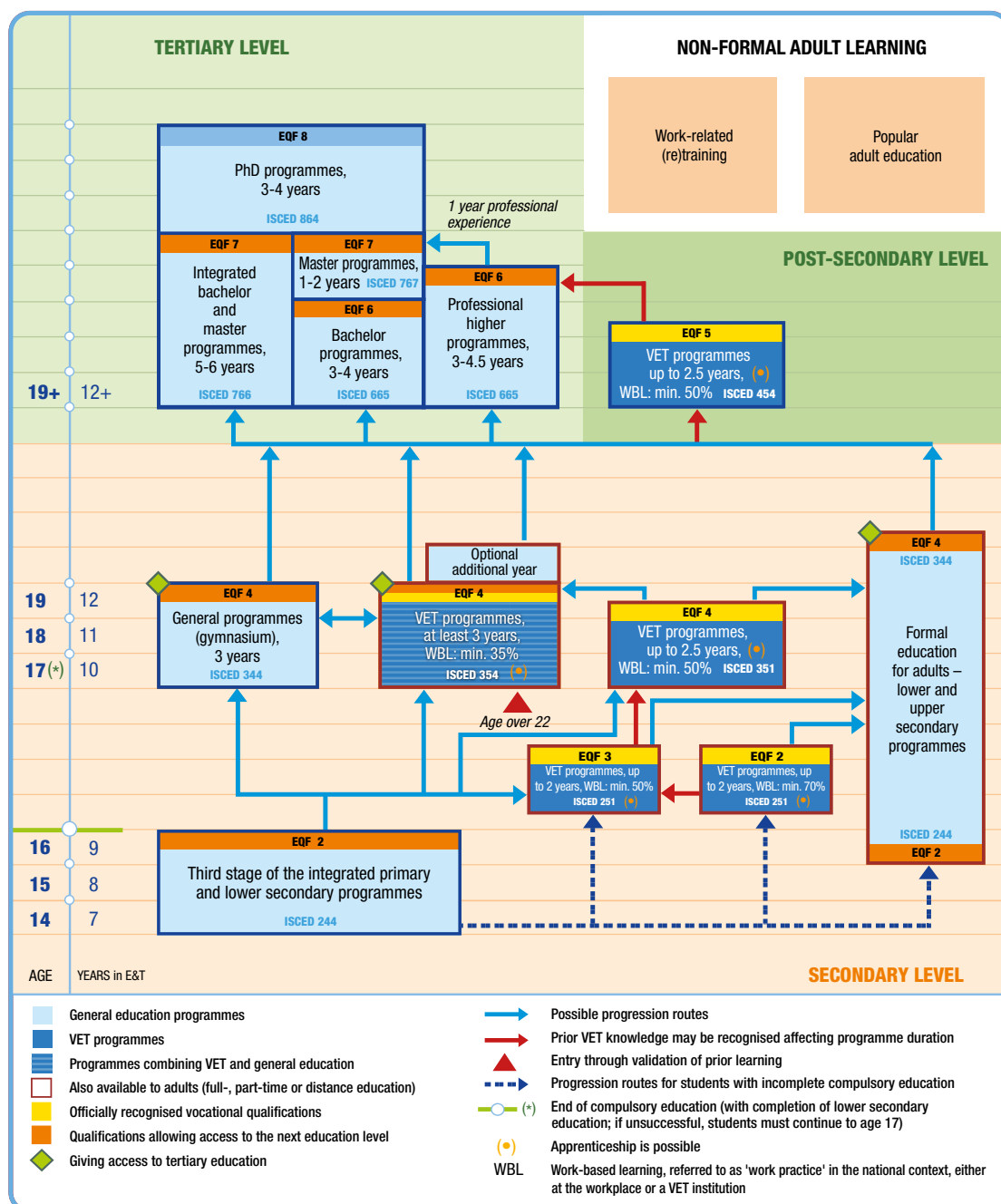
Challenges and policy responses

The Estonian labour market has a high level of skills mismatch. A labour market needs monitoring and forecasting system (OSKA) was launched in 2015 to improve alignment between education and the labour market. Results are available online and are used in curriculum development, career counselling, and planning of State-funded education.

Dropping out from VET is a challenge. Compared with 1.2% of dropouts from general upper secondary education, the rate in the first year of vocational upper secondary education was 23.4% in 2019. There are career counselling services, vocational orientation programme at EQF level 2 and other measures to prevent early leaving.

In 2019, 27% of adults aged 25 to 64 had no professional or vocational qualification; the objective is to reduce this share.

⁽¹⁾ For ISCED 354 programmes.



NB: ISCED-P 2011.

Source: Cedefop and ReferNet Estonia, 2020.

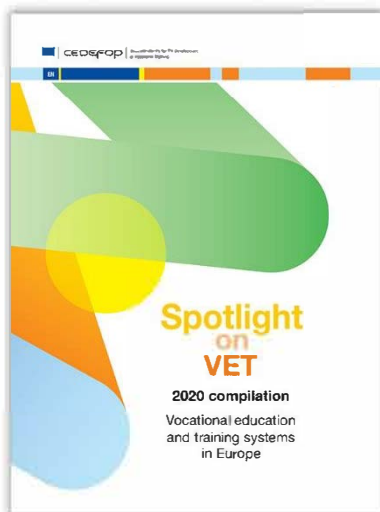
Several measures have been introduced to encourage adults without a qualification to return to formal education.

Participation in lifelong learning increased from 6% in 2005 to 20.2% in 2019. The goal to increase it to 20% by 2020 has been achieved and VET has been playing a great role in this. There is a focus on broadening access to non-formal education, training courses for developing key competences, and career services.

During the Covid-19 crisis, regulatory flexibility of VET has facilitated the transition to distance learning. WBL was reorganised case by case: postponed, suspended or continued.

State-level support was tailored according to VET providers' needs. For example, short webinars, Facebook groups, answers to FAQs on school management, organisation of studies, lists and guidelines for distance-learning environments were offered. The success factors in coping with the crisis were:

- sufficient learner and teacher digital skills, adequate digital infrastructure in VET schools and at homes;
- information and clear messages for reorganising studies;
- good governance, cooperation, partnership and information-sharing between stakeholders.



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