

Estonian VET Reforms for flexible learning pathways



Estonia

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Since 2013, the Estonian Vocational Educational Institutions Act has enabled flexible learning pathways through VET programmes. These programmes are linked to the Estonian Qualifications Framework, which have a learning outcome-based approach.

Short summary paragraph

The implementation of the 2007-2013 Estonian VET reforms is part of the 2020 Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy. This strategy aims to initiate a shift towards a more learner-centred approach and to improve the quality of lifelong learning opportunities. A new long-term strategy, 'Estonia 2035', is currently under development. This strategy will continue with similar strategic goals.

Estonian labour market representatives are actively involved in the development of VET programmes in terms of the definition of occupational standards and the awarding of qualifications.

VET curricula are modularised and composed by units of learning outcomes, with modules independently assessed and validated. The VET Act (2013) introduced a new credit system based on credit points, the Estonian Credit Points (EKAP), which are in line with ECVET principles. EKAP is a framework for describing learning outcomes as well as recognizing, transferring and accumulating learning results. The learning results may be achieved through formal, non-formal or informal learning. VET institutions have the right to individualise learning duration, so that a student can achieve the learning outcomes in the curriculum within a period shorter or longer than the average study period – depending on prior learning and experiences.

EKAP is largely inspired and aligned to ECVET credit points. It is used for the estimation of students' workload in terms of learning hours to achieve specific modules. EKAP is used for the recognition of prior learning (formal, non-formal and informal learning).

Scope of project/initiative

National

When was the project/initiative implemented?

Since 2013

What were the source(s) of funding?

National funding

Why was/is the project implemented?

In 2018, 40% of VET students in Estonia were adults (aged over 25 years old). Furthermore, the percentage share of adults (aged 25-64 years old) with no professional or vocational education stood at 27%. Thus, there is a need to upskill and reskill adults and consequently, adapt VET opportunities to adults' needs.

In addition, VET needs to respond swiftly to the changes of the labour market and the demand for a highly skilled workforce. The reforms intend to address this issue with a VET offer that matches labour market needs, and which can forecast future skills needs.

The VET reforms of 2007-2013 aimed to align the Estonian VET system to the European initiatives and tools (particularly ECVET, EQAVET and the EQF).

Which groups were targeted by the practice?

The reforms targeted different groups: young people (aged 16-24 years old); adult learners; people with special needs; and other adults including unemployed, low qualified and those that are in work who would like to upskill or re-skill.

What were the practice's main objectives?

The Development Plan for the Estonian Vocational Education and Training System 2009-2013 set out four main goals:

1. The VET system is flexible and available and corresponds to the needs of learners.
2. Education is of high quality and competitive.
3. The VET system is coherent with society, economy and labour market.
4. Organisation of the VET system is purposeful, effective and sustainable.

The VET Act 2013 provided the basis for the management of VET institutions and introduced a credit system, built on ECVET principles.

The aim of Estonian VET reforms is to challenge the shortage of a highly skilled workforce and to offer VET opportunities that are in line with the changing needs of the labour market. This is translated into an active involvement of labour market actors in the definition of occupational qualification standards and in the awarding of the qualifications.

The reforms intend to tackle the increasing need for tailored and flexible study pathways that can adapt to the needs of different target groups. A competence-based approach is at the foundation of the reforms. This is built on the concept of learning outcomes and aligned with ECVET principles.

What activities were carried out?

The Vocational Educational Institutions Act was approved in 2013 by the Estonian Parliament. The act aims to change the regulation of the vocational education system with:

- ▶ the definition of new categories of vocational training directly linked to the [Estonian Qualifications Framework](#);
- ▶ using outcome-based principles in the evaluation, establishing qualification criteria for types of vocational training, curriculums and for personnel working in the teaching and pedagogical profession;
- ▶ establishing the right to provide instruction;
- ▶ the definition and implementation of a new credit system to measure study volume.

The EKAP is an estimation of students' workload required to achieve the modules of learning outcomes: 26 hours of training and individual learning is equivalent to one EKAP, one year of study is the equivalent to 60 EKAPs. Since the introduction of the VET Act, the size of all modules is defined by an exact number of credit points. Therefore, the role of the EKAP is to define the volume of study, intended as school or work-based training or individual learning, required to acquire a whole qualification or single modules within a qualification.

The EKAP is also used for the process of recognising learning, transfer and accumulation of units of learning outcomes as part of a qualification. Validated prior learning can be quantified with an exact number of EKAPs. The EKAP is linked to the groups of learning outcomes. This enables schools to shorten or extend the studies according to the students' needs and pace. For example, the duration of modules can be extended for those students with special needs, who need more time to achieve specific learning outcomes. Alternatively, it can be shortened when prior learning is recognised.

Curricula is composed of units of learning outcomes that are independently assessed and measurable. According to the legislation, learning outcomes are 'the knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired as the result of learning which have been described in the threshold level necessary for the completion of a curriculum, module, topic or subject'.¹ VET curricula are divided into national curricula and school curricula. The national curriculum provides the foundation for the development of the vocational curriculum at secondary education level. VET schools are responsible for the development of the school curricula, modules, implementation plan, and for using outcome-based assessment methods. Modules are both compulsory and elective, according to students' needs.

¹ <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/505022014002/consolide>

² https://cumulus.cedefop.europa.eu/files/vetelib/2019/Vocational_Education_Training_Europe_Estonia_2018_Cedefop_RefertNet.pdf

³ <https://www.kutsekoda.ee/en/>

What specific ECVET principles were/are used?

A key element of the Estonian VET reform is the active involvement of labour market representatives such as: employers, associations, public authorities and trade unions. The definition and update of professional standards,² is a collaborative process, coordinated by the Estonian Qualification Authority.³ Labour market actors, VET providers, academics and experts provide input into professional councils to define the professional qualification standards. These standards describe the activities and provide the competence requirements for each qualification. They outline knowledge, attitudes and skills required to perform a task and define the methods for assessing learners' competences. Professional standards are used for the design of VET curricula and other training programmes, they define competences and skills which are then translated into 'operational' learning outcomes. In addition, an assessment (called a 'professional examination') undertaken by the labour market representative takes place either during the studies or at the end of a study path'. Where exams are required, they usually take place in schools. The exam assessors are from relevant sectors with specific insights of the subject. Awarding bodies are selected via public competitions organised by the Estonian Qualification Authority.

VET schools are responsible for the recognition and validation of prior learning. It is regulated on school level. Schools are responsible for the identification of the assessment method. The recognition of informal and non-formal learning is a competence-based assessment which takes place in the VET schools. This includes the provision of information and guidance as well as assessment and certification. Every Estonian VET school needs to provide the possibility of having prior learning recognised, in line with the VET Standard regulation. The Estonian VET system combines school-based with work-based learning, with school in-company practical training opportunities as well as apprenticeships.

▶ **Principle 1: Qualifications should be composed of clearly defined groups of learning outcomes.**

The Estonian VET system is based on a VET curriculum with a learning outcomes approach. It is composed of units (modules) which can be measured and assessed.

▶ **Principle 2: Groups of learning outcomes within a qualification should be capable of independent assessment.**

The assessment of learning outcomes is competence-based. It is the responsibility of each VET school to define the assessment method for each unit of learning outcomes (modules).

▶ **Principle 3: The assessment of each group of learning outcomes should be properly documented.**

VET schools are responsible for documenting the progress of each student. Schools inform students of their progress, learning outcomes achieved and units which are still missing. Students have access to this information both digitally – via a personal account available on the schools' website – and print.

▶ **Principle 4: Provision of learning opportunities should be arranged to facilitate individuals to achieve groups of learning outcomes.**

VET curricula are composed of modules and units of learning outcomes. VET schools are responsible for the implementation of VET curriculums and specific modules. Modules are either compulsory or optional, according to the needs and interests of each student.

▶ **Principle 5: Individuals should have the opportunity to have their learning outcomes validated, irrespective of how and where they have acquired them.**

Learners are evaluated based on their competences, independently from where these have been acquired. Prior learning, which is acquired via work experience or other types of informal learning, can be assessed and recognised.

² https://cumulus.cedefop.europa.eu/files/vetelib/2019/Vocational_Education_Training_Europe_Estonia_2018_Cedefop_RefertNet.pdf

³ <https://www.kutsekoda.ee/en/>

▶ **Principle 6: Individuals should have the opportunity to accumulate their assessed groups of learning outcomes towards a qualification.**

Modules are composed by groups of learning outcomes and assessed using competence-based methods. Once modules are assessed, they can be accumulated towards a qualification. Thanks to the recognition of prior learning, individuals have the opportunity of having modules assessed and recognised independent of their learning context.

▶ **Principle 7: Individuals should have the opportunity to transfer their groups of learning outcomes validated from a context to another context.**

Individuals have the opportunity of having recognised formal, informal and non-formal learning. Recognition of these learning experiences is carried out by VET schools.

Individuals have the opportunity of having recognised formal, informal and non-formal learning. Recognition of these learning experiences is carried out by VET schools, Higher Education institutions, labour market organisations as awarding bodies of sector skills councils.

▶ **Principle 8: Processes for development, assessment, validation and recognition of sets of learning outcomes should be transparent and underpinned by quality assurance.**

The Estonian Qualification Agency oversees the provision of quality assurance during the process that define occupational standards.

The Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA)⁴ is responsible for the accreditation of curriculum groups⁵ to VET providers as well as teaching processes. Curriculum groups are accredited based on an external assessment and proof provided by the schools. VET schools are also required to carry out regular internal evaluations.⁶

In addition, Foundation Innove is responsible for supporting schools in curricula design. Foundation Innove provides guidance to VET schools and teachers on how to design school curricula and checks that they are compliant with VET standards and guidance. Schools have overall responsibility for the quality of their programmes.

The classification of vocational training formal education curricula, fields of study and curriculum groups follows the International Standard Classification of Education: Fields of Education and Training (ISCED-F 2013).

⁴ <http://ekka.archimedes.ee/en/organization/>

⁵ A curriculum group encompasses curricula from related fields (e.g. media technologies is the curriculum group of multimedia, printing, photography)

⁶ https://cumulus.cedefop.europa.eu/files/vetelib/2019/Vocational_Education_Training_Europe_Estonia_2018_Cedefop_ReferNet.pdf and https://www.eqavet.eu/Eqavet2017/media/Documents/2-EE_Template-for-updating-info-on-the-EQAVET-website.pdf

What was/is the added value of ECVET?

ECVET principles have inspired the revamp of the Estonian VET system.

Firstly, ECVET inspired the implementation of a modular approach in a systemic way. VET curricula are based on units of learning outcomes, and assessment criteria is now set. The modular system allows flexible learning pathways for individuals, depending also on their prior learning and experience.

Secondly, learning outcomes enable a competence-based approach where the assessment is focused on learner's knowledge and skills. ECVET has influenced the structure of the Estonian Credit System, based on EKAP credit points. EKAP credit points are a useful instrument to estimate the volume of work necessary for the achievement of learning outcomes.

Thirdly, recognition of formal, non-formal and informal learning is included as a standard process within VET schools. Each VET institution is responsible for the implementation of the recognition process, which is regulated at national level and supported by VET institution level guidelines and conditions.

Lastly, labour market actors are now more actively involved in the definition of occupational qualification standards and in the awarding of the qualifications. This ensures that VET learning opportunities are better aligned with labour market needs.

The introduction of the new principles can be considered a success. However, in practice, VET schools still see challenges in fully implementing the EKAP and the outcomes-based assessment across the board, recognition of previous work experience, informal and non-formal learning is still challenging.

Website

[The Estonian Vocational Institutions Act](#)

[The Estonian Qualification Agency](#)

[Foundation Innove](#)

ECVET Peer Learning Activity 'The use of credit and credit points to facilitate the recognition of prior learning':

- ▶ [Background paper](#)
- ▶ [Summary report](#)
- ▶ [Implementing ECVET principles in Estonia](#)

[ECVET principles in VET curricula design in Estonia](#)



Contact details for further information

Name/Job Title: Rita Kask, Adviser – Vocational Education Department

Organisation: Ministry of Education and Research

Email: rita.kask@hm.ee

Telephone: 00372 56565160