

Executive summary

Introduction

Over the past years, the Estonian vocational education and training (VET) system has undergone extensive reforms and developments. Reforms have aimed to create a clearer and more effective qualifications system to enhance employer engagement, to consolidate the school network and improve school facilities, to increase work-based learning and develop apprenticeship, and to meet the needs of both young people and adults in a framework of lifelong learning. Effective arrangements are in place to prepare teachers of vocational subjects. Basic school outcomes, as measured by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), are outstanding, and participation in upper secondary education is near-universal. These are impressive achievements. But challenges remain in improving the status of the VET system so as it can raise to its potential in the skills system of a rapidly changing economy, and in overcoming equity challenges. This report assesses the strengths of the Estonian VET system, the challenges it faces, and makes proposals for how those challenges could be addressed.

Developing the foundations of the VET system

In Estonia, only around one quarter of young people enter an upper secondary vocational track – a lower proportion than in many comparable OECD countries. Around 150 schools in Estonia provide general education in all 12 grades, offering a default option for young people in their ninth grade to remain in the same school, and therefore in general education, for their upper secondary school. A separation of the upper secondary school system from basic schooling would help to remove this bias, so that all ninth-grade students would face a real choice between VET and general education. Co-operation, and where practical at the local level, mergers between general academic and vocational upper secondary schools should be promoted.

While dropout rates have fallen, they remain too high in vocational upper secondary programmes, with around one-quarter of entrants failing to complete. One useful step, implementing recommendations of the 2016 OECD school resources review of Estonia, would be to link some school funding to completions.

A promising apprenticeship system has been launched in Estonia, but apprentice numbers, although increasing, remain low and limited to adults. Given its potential, renewed attempts to develop youth apprenticeship are needed, by focusing for example on a specific region and/or industry and considering specific employer incentives. In other vocational programmes, work practice in enterprises can be introduced as a formal and mandatory requirement.

There are large differences in participation rates in upper secondary VET for young people coming from different socio-economic backgrounds – for example in eastern Estonia, around 60% of Russian-speaking boys enrol in the VET track, while in the larger cities, only 10% of Estonian-speaking girls do so. While variations are monitored, policy responses are undeveloped. The Estonian authorities should explore with stakeholders

potential responses to large disparities to ensure that all Estonians can realise their career and learning potential.

Pathways and progression

The aspiration to higher education is now nearly universal. For young people, the perception of academic upper secondary education as the natural route to university offers formidable competition to any parallel vocational track. In Estonia as elsewhere, this means that initial vocational education must be a first step to lifelong learning, and not a dead end.

For initial VET graduates in Estonia, many learning pathways are open in principle, but rarely travelled. The optional extra year of education that helps upper secondary VET graduates to qualify for higher education attracted only 21 students in 2016. The vast majority of entrants to higher education and post-secondary programmes of all types have graduated from upper secondary general education, rather than VET.

This is a major challenge, since the prospect of progression is often the key tool to attract good candidates into the VET track. A multi-dimensional strategy is needed to facilitate progression from initial VET, working across the education system, ensuring that career guidance addresses progression beyond VET, establishing a dialogue with higher education institutions to encourage interest in candidates from VET backgrounds, developing frameworks of credit recognition and addressing equity issues.

Within upper secondary VET, a hybrid programme might be usefully developed, leading both to a VET qualification and to the state examination that normally gives access to higher education. Such a programme could draw on successful hybrid models implemented in other countries such as Denmark, and would be able to attract into VET high performing students who might otherwise not consider the option.

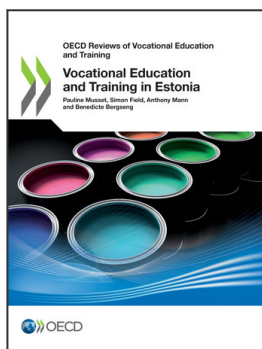
In addition, Estonia should develop its already strong professional examination system to encourage upper secondary VET graduates to upskill, possibly with additional financial support. Some consideration should also be given to using a central fund, as in the model of higher VET developed in Sweden, to address sectoral and regional skills shortages and reskilling needs.

Strengthening career guidance

In a rapidly evolving labour market, navigating a path of learning and work is increasingly challenging. Good quality career guidance and information is therefore vital to young people (and adults) to ensure that they make the right choices. In Estonia, career guidance and information services have been extensively reorganised, and the system now has many strengths, but some gaps remain.

Some of the elements of career guidance should be made mandatory in basic schools and provision should start earlier, ensuring all students speak to impartial and independent career advisers. Mandatory provision helps to ensure that the guidance gets through to the students who need it most. This in itself would provide a firmer foundation for decisions about whether to pursue a VET or general education track. More accessible and understandable labour market information, including data from destinations surveys, would also be very helpful.

Young people can also benefit from being in contact with people from different professional backgrounds and from visits to actual workplaces, and activities such as short work placements and work shadowing.



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