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General Education

Estonian general education is divided into basic education (*põhiharidus*) (Grades 1-9) and general secondary education (*üldkeskharidus*) (Grades 10-12).

A child becomes of compulsory school age when he or she reaches the age of seven by 1 October of the current school year. A person ceases to be of compulsory school age when he or she reaches the age of 17 or when he or she has completed basic education.

Schools are obliged to guarantee equal opportunities in education to all children subject to compulsory education resident in the service area of the school. Schools may admit children from outside the school's service area if there are vacancies. Education in public general schools is free of charge.

Compulsory school attendance may also be fulfilled at special education institutions or classes for disabled children as well as in the form of home study. Children in need of special education can study at the school of their area of residence or at specially created institutions.

The basic education institutions of Estonia aim at uniformity – the national curriculum ensures equal opportunities for all children to transfer smoothly from one grade to the next and from one school to another, when minimum requirements are met. Based on the national curriculum schools create their own curricula.

After satisfactory completion of the study programme and passing the basic school final examinations and carrying out a creative project, the students obtain the Certificate of Basic Education (*põhikooli lõputunnistus*) and can continue studies at a general secondary school (*gümnaasium*) or a vocational education institution (*kutseõppeasutus*).

Secondary education is divided into general (*üldkeskharidus* or *gümnaasiumiharidus*) and vocational secondary education (*kutsekeskharidus*). General secondary education is determined by the national curriculum (*Põhikooli ja gümnaasiumi riiklik õppekava*, *Gümnaasiumi riiklik õppekava*), vocational secondary education is determined by the vocational education standard (*Kutseharidusstandard*) and the national vocational curricula for certain professions. There are two main options after completing basic school: a general secondary school (*gümnaasium*) or a vocational education institution (*kutseõppeasutus*).

The Law on Basic and Secondary Schools establishes *gümnaasium* (Grades 10-12) as the main structural unit of secondary education. A secondary school, as an institution, may also include a basic school (Grades 1-9).

The period of study at general secondary school is three years (Grades 10 – 12). Graduation students must take the school examination (*koolieksam*), three state examinations (*riigieksamid*) and complete student's research or practical work. School examination and student's research paper or practical work are organised by the school. The state examination in the Estonian language (*eesti keel*) or Estonian as a second language (*eesti keel teise keelena*), mathematics (*matemaatika*) and foreign language (*võõrkeel*) are compulsory for all secondary school leavers.

In mathematics, the state examination can be chosen between the narrow mathematics and broad (extensive) mathematics. In the case of the foreign language examination student has a choice between German, English, French, or Russian language examinations. State examination of foreign language may be replaced by an internationally recognised language test on the conditions established by the Minister of Education and Research.

The programme concludes with a minimum of five final examinations, including three mandatory, centralized state exams (*riigieksamid*). Upon successful completion, students receive the *Gümnaasiumi lõputunnistus* (Certificate of General Secondary Education) and a

Riigieksamitunnistus (State Examination Report). These qualifications grant access to higher education, where admission is typically based on examination results. However, higher education institutions may set additional entrance requirements. After finishing vocational secondary education, a graduate can continue studies also at vocational school by a post-secondary vocational programme.

Vocational Education and Training

There are state, municipal and private vocational education institutions in Estonia.

Vocational secondary education may be started after completing basic education (9 years of study). The workload of vocational secondary education programmes based on basic education is 180 ECVET credits, including general secondary education courses in the amount of at least 30 ECVET credits. The students who have successfully completed the programme receive a certificate *Kutsekeskhariduse lõputunnistus* (Certificate of Vocational Secondary Education).

When vocational education is obtained after basic education, but without taking general secondary education subjects, the workload of studies can vary from 30-180 ECVET credits. The students who have successfully completed the programme receive a certificate *Neljanda taseme kutseõppe lõputunnistus* (Certificate of Vocational Education Level 4).

When vocational education is obtained after secondary education, the workload of study can vary from 60-150 ECVET credits. The graduates receive a qualification *Kutseerihariduse lõputunnistus* (Certificate of Specialised Vocational Education) upon completion of vocational education programme corresponding to Estonian Qualifications Framework Level 5.

Students have to pass at least one professional examination in order to complete their studies at a vocational education institution.

Higher Education

Higher education in Estonia is regulated by the following legislation: the Republic of Estonia Education Act (*Haridusseadus*), the Higher Education Act (*Kõrgharidusseadus*), and the Standard of Higher Education (*Kõrgharidusstandard*). The Standard of Higher Education establishes requirements for higher education programmes, objectives and learning outcomes to be achieved, requirements for the members of the teaching staff, and study programme groups where given educational institutions have the right to conduct studies and to issue qualifications and the principles of recognition of prior learning. The Standard of Higher Education is valid for all cycles and forms of higher education, irrespective of the ownership or the legal status of the higher education institution. The Ministry of Education and Research is responsible for the implementation of the Standard of Higher Education.

The status, purpose, functions, bases of operation and management bodies of a public university are provided for in an Act governing the university. There are governing Acts for each public university in Estonia.

The higher education system in Estonia comprises three cycles, the Bachelor-Master-PhD model. Universities (*ülikoolid*) provide professional higher education, bachelor's, master's and doctoral programmes. Professional higher education institutions (*rakenduskõrgkoolid*) provide higher education of first and second cycles. In terms of ownership, institutions are divided into state, public and private institutions.

State professional higher education institutions are financed by the state. Private professional higher education institutions provide programmes mainly in the fields of social sciences (economics, international relations, and law), business administration, theology, and fine arts.

Higher education programmes may be provided only if the quality of the respective study programme group has been assessed and granted the right to organise studies at the level of higher education.

The requirement for access to higher education is secondary education, certified by *Gümnaasiumi lõputunnistus* (Upper Secondary School Leaving Certificate), *Lõputunnistus kutsekeskhariduse omandamise kohta* (Certificate of Vocational Secondary Education), the corresponding qualifications of earlier education systems, and foreign qualifications giving access to higher education. A higher education institution may introduce further admission requirements, such as entrance examinations, minimum scores of state examinations, interviews, etc.

Higher Education Qualifications

• **Bakalaureus; Bakalaureusekraad**

First cycle

Level 6

Level 6

The *Bakalaureus* is a degree awarded after the graduation of first cycle of a higher education programme. The purpose of studies is to increase the students' level of general education, so that they will be able to acquire the basic knowledge and skills within their field of study, to obtain the competencies necessary for master's studies. The thesis or the final examination should form no less than 5 ECTS credits of the total workload for the study programme. The purpose of these studies is to increase the students' level of general education, so that they will be able to acquire the basic knowledge and skills within their field of study, to obtain the competencies necessary for a master's programme. The degree awarded at the bachelor's level should also be relevant to the labour market at an appropriate level of qualification. All first cycle degrees give access to second cycle studies.

First cycle programmes are also provided in the professional higher education branch. Such programmes are provided by professional higher education institutions (*rakenduskõrgkool*) and universities. The purpose of these programmes is to acquire the competence necessary for working in the relevant profession or for continuing studies at the master's level. The nominal length of studies is 3 to 4.5 years (180-270 ECTS credits). The thesis or the final examination should form no less than 5 ECTS credits. Until 2018/2019 admission, the qualification awarded upon completion of a professional higher education programme was the *Rakenduskõrghariduse diplom*. As of 2019/2020 admission, students who have completed a programme are awarded the *Bakalaureusekraad* (Bachelor). The graduates of the professional higher education programme have an equal access to Master's programmes. Until 2016, some state vocational education institutions had the right to provide professional higher education programmes and award the *Rakenduskõrghariduse diplom*.

Rights Granted

Provides access to second cycle higher education Master's (Magister) programmes.

Recognition Status

Accreditation at the study programme and institutional level is compulsory.

Other Information

<https://www.hm.ee>

<https://harno.ee/en/recognition-qualifications/qualifications/estonian-education-system>

• **Magister**

Second cycle

Level 7

Level 7

The second cycle degree in the Estonian higher education system is *Magister* (Master). Master's programme is devoted to in-depth preparation for the field of study and includes a narrow specialisation. It also prepares the students for independent work after graduation. The main purpose of such study programmes is to educate a specialist of profound professional knowledge. The access requirement for master's study is a degree of *Bakalaureus*, a Diploma of Professional Higher Education or a corresponding foreign qualification. The nominal length of studies is 1 to 2 years (60-120 ECTS credits). The thesis or the final examination should form no less than 15 ECTS credits of the total credit requirement for the study programme.

Master's programmes are provided by universities and since 2004, also by professional higher education institutions. Until 2011, professional higher education institutions had to have a cooperation with a university to provide master's programmes (except in the fields of theology, national defence and public security).

Qualification of integrated long-cycle programmes

In addition to the two-cycle general structure, the programmes in the field of medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, veterinary medicine, architecture, civil engineering, and class-teacher training are one long-cycle studies.

The nominal length of programmes in medicine, and in veterinary medicine, is 6 years (360 ECTS credits); in other fields mentioned above it is 5 years (300 ECTS credits). Such single long-cycle studies, called integrated bachelor-master studies, are based on an integrated programme which contains both basic studies and profound specialisation. Generally, the graduate of an integrated programme is awarded a degree of *Magister*, except in the fields of medicine, dentistry and veterinary medicine, where the degrees awarded are *Arstikraad*, *Hambaarstikraad* and *Loomaarstikraad* respectively. The qualifications give access to doctoral programmes.

Rights Granted

Admission to third cycle higher education studies.

Recognition Status

Accreditation at the study programme and institutional level is compulsory.

Other Information

<https://www.hm.ee>

<https://harno.ee/en/recognition-qualifications/qualifications/estonian-education-system>

• Doktor

Third cycle

Level 8

Level 8

Doctoral programmes represent the third cycle of higher education with the purpose of acquiring knowledge and skills necessary for independent research, development or professional creative work. The access requirement for doctoral studies is a degree of *Magister* or a corresponding qualification. The nominal length of doctoral studies is 3 to 4 years. *Doktor* is a research degree obtained after the completion and public defence of a dissertation (*doktoritöö*) – independent research or creative work. Estonian universities award the following doctoral degree: *Filosoofiadoktor* – Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), with an indication of the field of study or the area of specialisation.

Rights Granted

This is the highest academic qualification.

Recognition Status

Accreditation at the study programme and institutional level is compulsory.

Other Information

<https://www.hm.ee>

<https://harno.ee/en/recognition-qualifications/qualifications/estonian-education-system>

Useful Links

- [Estonian education system](#)
- [website of the Estonian Ministry of Education and Science including a wide range of information on education legislation and topical subjects.](#)
- [Estonia profile on ENIC/NARIC portal](#)

For more information, please visit ar-go.online.

