

THE FIVE CHALLENGES OF ESTONIAN EDUCATION

ESTONIAN EDUCATION STRATEGY 2012–2020
DRAFT



Eesti tuleviku heaks



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SHORT SUMMARY

Based on a three-way agreement concluded by the Estonian Cooperation Assembly, Estonian Education Forum and the Ministry of Education and Research on 9 September, 2010, a draft of the Estonian Education Strategy for the years 2012 to 2020 has been drawn up. The strategy, which has been developed by expert groups and discussed with the education-related public, focuses on five great challenges for Estonian education and suggests a series of measures for meeting these challenges.

The following tasks in Estonian education need to be addressed as a matter of urgency: the network of educational institutions needs to be put in order,

including the separation of basic and upper secondary schools; the quality of teacher education must be improved, along with a guarantee of equitable teachers' salaries; the provisions of the national curricula for basic schools and upper secondary schools, together with the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act, must be implemented in reality; a financing model that ensures fair access to higher and vocational education and supports the quality of learning must be introduced; and a significantly broader range of employers must be involved in the development of curricula for vocational and higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Estonia is a small country, which desires to be among the world leaders with regard to the quality of life and economic capability. This can only be achieved through high-quality and accessible education. Several education indicators show that Estonia is already among the most capable countries in the world. This advantage must be utilised and developed, with the goal of achieving a situation where study becomes a part of life for every person in Estonia.

In the draft of the education strategy, education is defined broadly. Education is a precondition for a happy life and the basis for cultural sustainability and societal interaction. It also helps the country's economic progress and develops our common human assets.

According to education experts, over the next decade, Estonia will face the following five great challenges on its path to a smarter and more active society: to move toward a development- and cooperation-based approach to study; to improve the position and reputation of teachers; to increase participation in study; to strengthen the connection between education and a knowledge-based society and innovative economy; and to develop a new digital culture as a part of the Estonian education and cultural space.

The education strategy focuses on these points, and suggests ways to increase the quality of Estonian education and its personal and social performance.

CHALLENGE 1: MOVING TOWARD A DEVELOPMENT- AND COOPERATION-BASED APPROACH TO STUDY

SITUATION:

Several studies (PISA 2006, 2009, etc.) show that Estonian students have good levels of knowledge but modest creative, entrepreneurial, and problem-solving skills. However, these skills are necessary in today's society and economy. A great challenge for Estonian education is hidden here – in addition to good recitation skills and the ability to follow rules, the young Estonian generation have an ever greater need for social capabilities – the skill to express themselves, to lead and prove themselves; to think critically and creatively; to be leaders and take risks; to value diversity and cooperation; and to cope with uncertainty and failure. Meeting this challenge means a significant shift in both the treatment of study and the attitude toward school and learning – an educational institution is not just a place to acquire knowledge, but primarily an environment which shapes the personalities of young people and their ability to cope in an open world. This is an environment that includes significantly more joy of learning and less stress, fatigue and violence related to learning; an environment where talents are revealed and no one is left behind.

MEASURES:

..... The introduction of constructive and cooperation-based study models in educational institutions; strengthening of social competences in the curricula (communications and negotiation skills, critical thinking, stress tolerance, readiness for cooperation and leadership, self-regulatory skills, debating and performance skills, language proficiency, etc.) and the corresponding in-service training for teachers and school directors.

..... Placing greater importance on the personality differences of the students, different talents (practical, artistic, social, emotional) and different cultural backgrounds (including affiliation with ethnic minorities) and giving these greater consideration in teaching and grading.

..... Providing support to the educational institutions (training, counselling, methodological resources) in the shaping of school culture and values development. A distinctive school culture and value development directed at shaping the students' personalities must become an important criterion for the internal and external

evaluation of an educational institution.

..... Recognising the role of the school director and form master, and the establishment of responsibilities related to the support personality development; the activities of the form master must be specified in the professional standards for teachers and the framework requirements for teacher training.

..... Development of an integrated support system for teachers (e.g. school psychologist, social pedagogue, social worker, career adviser) which will help to prevent dropouts, school stress and violence, and to support the development of the students' various talents. The responsibility of the educational institutions must be directed at prevention, not smoothing out the consequences.

CHALLENGE 2:

IMPROVING THE POSITION AND IMAGE OF TEACHERS

SITUATION:

The situation is paradoxical – Estonian teachers are producing some of the best results in the world, yet studies show that a large percentage of teachers are not satisfied with their jobs or how they are valued; teachers assess their own self-efficiency to be low and the attitude of society toward the profession of teaching as unfairly critical. The result is that the teaching profession is not very popular among upper secondary school graduates (especially boys) and teaching staffs are being feminised and also ageing. A similar situation exists at the universities, where only one candidate applies for 80 percent of the faculty positions at Estonian universities. The movement of both Estonian schools and the entire educational system in a personality- and development-centred direction is not possible without self-confident teachers, who find joy in their work, and without the position and image of teachers at all levels undergoing a significant boost in society.

MEASURES:

Balancing the rights, obligations and responsibilities of teachers while reducing control and bureaucracy – providing the teachers with more time and space for creativity and experimentation.

Teaching at all levels of the educational system will be connected to research and creativity, innovative teaching and the development of the student's social competences shall be plugged into the system for evaluating and promoting teachers.

The teachers' salary system will do more to motivate professional development and the diversity of the teachers' roles; teachers' salaries must

be separated from their class load. Once every five years in their teaching career, teachers will be given the opportunity (while retaining their salary) to take a half year off from teaching, which will be used instead for self-education, aimed at resulting in the fulfilment of definite developmental assignments (compiling teaching materials, textbook manuscripts, research, etc.).

The inequality of remuneration for teachers across various local government administrations must be eliminated.

A support and acclimation system for young teachers must be implemented to the fullest extent. The openness of the teaching profession should be increased, and opportunities created for people to become teachers without traditional teacher training (for instance, the "Young People to Schools" program as a prototype).

Universities will accept direct responsibility for the development of teacher training. In order to involve better specialists, including from foreign universities, in the preparation of teachers, the factor for teacher training must be increased. The universities will develop innovation centres of education, where new (including digital) teaching methods and ways of organising study will be tested and developed.

When university faculty members are chosen and their work evaluated, research work will be valued equally with pedagogical skills; together with top research centres, top centres for university teaching will also be created that develop and promote better study methods and teaching approaches (similarly to the Centres of Excellence in University Teaching started in Finland in 2008).

CHALLENGE 3:

INCREASING PARTICIPATION IN STUDY

SITUATION:

Both extremes of the educational scale are a problem – the undereducated and the top students.

Today about 12-14 percent of Estonia's young generation does not get any further than a basic education (or has not even acquire that) and does not even acquire any skills to cope in the labour market. The result is a so-called "undereducated" social class, which cannot find a proper job or often even establish a family, is prone to alcohol abuse, etc.

Men predominate among the undereducated, and this is where an educational inequality between men and women begins, and which reaches a situation in higher education that is unique in the world – for every 100 Estonian men with a higher education, there are 250 women who have achieved the same level of education. The undereducated are a challenge for the entire Estonian society – this is an indefensible waste of our human assets.

It is in Estonia's interest to have all our most talented young people realise themselves in Estonia. An authoritative higher education sector that provides the best quality education and pays sufficient attention to the top students is a precondition. No capable young Estonian person should have the doors to an educational institution closed to him or her (for economic, regional, linguistic or other reasons). The content of higher educational learning should be a step ahead of the events in the society and economy, and thereby provide challenges and excitement for the best students and support the strengthening of the national intelligentsia.

Today, there is no guarantee of fair access, no timely discovery of and support for talent, or authoritative quality, which results in a loss of human assets and the insufficient implementation of developmental potential.

MEASURE FOR THE UNDEREDUCATED:

..... The creation of a system for the detection of educational problems early on and the monitoring of one's educational path, whereby the progress of every dropout will be examined and if necessary help provided for continuing one's education.

..... A system of study counselling and career services, which help to direct people wit-

hout specialised preparation towards occupational training and continue their interrupted educational path.

..... Greater responsibility placed on educational institutions and teachers for the implementation of individualised studies, which take the gender differences of young people and various talents into consideration and thereby increase the interest, especially of boys/men in school and learning.

..... The role of the Unemployment Insurance Fund in directing job seekers to training and in-service training should be strengthened; a cooperation network including the Unemployment Insurance Fund and educational institutions will be created in order to achieve this.

MEASURES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION:

..... All Estonian residents that meet admission requirements will be guaranteed a free student place for studying their preferred curriculum for the duration of one higher education cycle at their preferred Estonian institution of higher education. The educational preferences of the younger generation will form the basis for shaping and developing the curriculum structure at Estonian universities and institutions of higher education.

..... The implementation of a need-based system of study allowances, which will result in Estonian students not being forced to work while they study. Obtaining a free student place and study allowance will be tied to a clear responsibility on the part the students for their study results.

..... Allowances for under-represented societal groups in higher education study, including measures to bring the percentage of Russian-speaking university students in Estonian institutions of higher education into conformity with their percentage among upper secondary school graduates.

..... The development of a rational division of labour between universities and institutions of higher education based on transitional evaluation and institutional accreditation. The consolidation of Estonia's higher education and curriculum landscape will be supported financially and politically by the government.

CHALLENGE 4:

STRENGTHENING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN EDUCATION AND A KNOWLEDGE-BASED SOCIETY AND INNOVATIVE ECONOMY

SITUATION:

Estonia's goal is to move toward an innovative knowledge-based economy, and to adapt its economic structure accordingly. The updating of the economy presumes the existence of educated leaders and a labour force with up-to-date training. Today, an unjustifiably large proportion (about 32 percent) of Estonia's working-age population lacks specialised (vocational or higher educational) training. This is clearly at variance with an economy that is directed at innovation and with the expectations of employers. The contradiction is also apparent in the appeals to specialise in teaching as well as research on the one hand, and on the other hand, in the need to develop not only a "project country" that is successful in a few fields of activity, but an integrated and sustainable Estonia.

MEASURES:

..... In a cooperative effort including the Ministry of Education and Research, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications and the employers, a system for monitoring and analysing the future needs of the labour market will be developed, which will support the curriculum development of the universities, institutions of applied higher education and vocational education institutions, people in their career planning and the planning of national education investments.

..... In order to increase a university education's contribution to the innovative capability of the Estonian society and economy, employers, along with analysts and international experts dealing with future development, will be given a greater role in the development of university curricula and studies.

..... In order to achieve continual and future-sensitive curriculum development, employers will be given greater responsibility for increasing the percentage and effectiveness of internships in the workplace and ensuring qualified instruction.

..... In addition to theoretical and practical knowledge, educational institutions will strengthen the continual development of the social competences that are necessary in today's labour market throughout the study process – the skill to cope with the information flow, to cooperate and solve problems; skills for organisational development and the administration of change; leadership capabilities and a tolerance for uncertainty; readiness for a flexible and mobile labour market, etc.

..... The involvement of opinion leaders and the media to promote the appreciation of work and skills in the society, including the popularisation of technological innovation among young people. The development of a respectful attitude toward the masters in one's field and an appreciation of professionalism in any and all fields of activity.

CHALLENGE 5:

DEVELOPING DIGITAL CULTURE AS A PART OF THE ESTONIAN CULTURAL SPACE

SITUATION:

The forceful entry of digital culture into all area of life – on the one hand it provides new solutions for education; on the other, it has been accompanied by an increasing inequality in information literacy and tensions between the sustainability of the Estonian

language and culture and the global openness and universality of the digital world. Since the digital world is multilingual in nature, inevitably pressure on the Estonian-language cultural space ensues. A solution would be to include information literacy as one of the basic skills acquired in school and used in all subjects, and to increase the capability of Es-

tonian people, primarily through education, to participate in the global cultural space as active participants and multilingual dialogue partners. The new digital culture must become a part of the Estonian cultural space – in this way we ensure its integrity and sustainability and participate constantly in the developing global communications circle.

MEASURES:

..... The digital information literacy of the teachers and students will be one of the main criteria for the productivity of the study process, in order to guarantee the necessary competences of both teachers and students for using the opportunities provided by the virtual cultural space. This includes developing habits and skills for the critical and purposeful use of e-libraries, e-literature and various data collections, as well as the utilisation of the opportunities provided by social media as a resource for collective knowledge creation.

..... Supported by a government commission, an Estonian-language virtual study environ-

ment will be created, which will allow printed study resources to be replaced with electronic ones; will create a platform for independently completing curricula; will stimulate and facilitate the study of Estonian and other languages, as well as familiarisation with the world's cultural treasury; will enable Russian-speaking students and children of families far from home, as well as foreigners in Estonia, to be involved in the Estonian-language-based interactive study process.

..... Interdisciplinary and multilingual study and innovation centres will be developed at the universities, which track the developments in e-study taking place in the world and propose suitable solutions for Estonia.

..... In a cooperative effort including the universities and the Ministry of Education and Research, an electronic teaching bank will be created which will introduce innovative individual-based pedagogies and innovative subject instruction, as well as the best practices when teaching various subjects.

EDUCATIONAL ORGANISATION WHICH SUPPORTS DEVELOPMENT

Meeting the challenges assumes an updating of Estonia's educational organisation – the development of an integrated lifelong learning system. Today, the parts of the Estonian educational system (general education system, vocational education, higher education system, adult education) and its supportive structures (standards, qualification system, quality assurance, and support structures that provide social support and protection) are not sufficiently interconnected and do not function in an integrated manner. The following steps are necessary:

The legal regulation of the educational field must be designed not to be institution-based, but based on study types and levels. As of 2015, the developmental planning for various education levels and types of schools must be assembled into a uniform document.

Governmentally-guaranteed opportunities for acquiring a pre-school education; in a cooperative effort including the national and local governments, development will be completed of an national net-

work of close-to-home basic schools (and institutions for pre-school education integrated with them) and upper secondary schools located in larger centres and providing various options, together with the development of the corresponding school transport system. Basic schools and upper secondary schools will be separated.

Fair access to education must be developed along with a financing model that supports the quality of education and the productivity of the educational institutions' activities. Along with the financing model, the responsibilities of the study participants regarding the content and productivity should be determined.

The national examination system should be reviewed, and replacing or supplementing it with evaluations of general competence levels should be considered. The objectives and role of the external evaluation of general education should be reviewed and the job profiles of the supervising officials at the national and county levels should be made more supportive of student and school development.

The development of a network of pilot schools, with the goal of supporting pedagogical diversity, and the testing of internationally popular innovative learning methods.

To ensure the validity of educational decisions, a commission-based system of educational studies must be initiated, which will include an analysis of the key problems (societal needs, effectiveness, access, international comparison, projections and monitoring) in the educational sector and the implementation plan of the education strategy should be adjusted based on these analyses. Within this framework, the development of the competences of

those ordering the education studies at the Ministry of Education and Research shall be ensured.

To ensure the fulfilment of the currently established requirements and regulations. The Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act, the Teacher Training Strategy, new curricula, etc. specify a series of modern principles, yet their implementation has not been sufficiently efficient. To make implementation more efficient, both legislative and financial levels and social influencers should be utilised – external evaluations of educational institutions, certification of school directors, training, etc.

APPENDIX:
DIAGRAM OF THE PROPOSED CHANGES
IN THE EDUCATION STRATEGY

EXPLANATION.

The diagram includes the three principles (*the large boxes on the right side of the diagram*) for the establishment of objectives in the education strategy, in which the following are fundamentally important:

a) the need for the total readjustment of the educational paradigm from institutional competition to subject-centred teaching on a productivity basis for the appreciation of the integrated development of the individual (*the developments related to this objective are shown in blue on the diagram*);

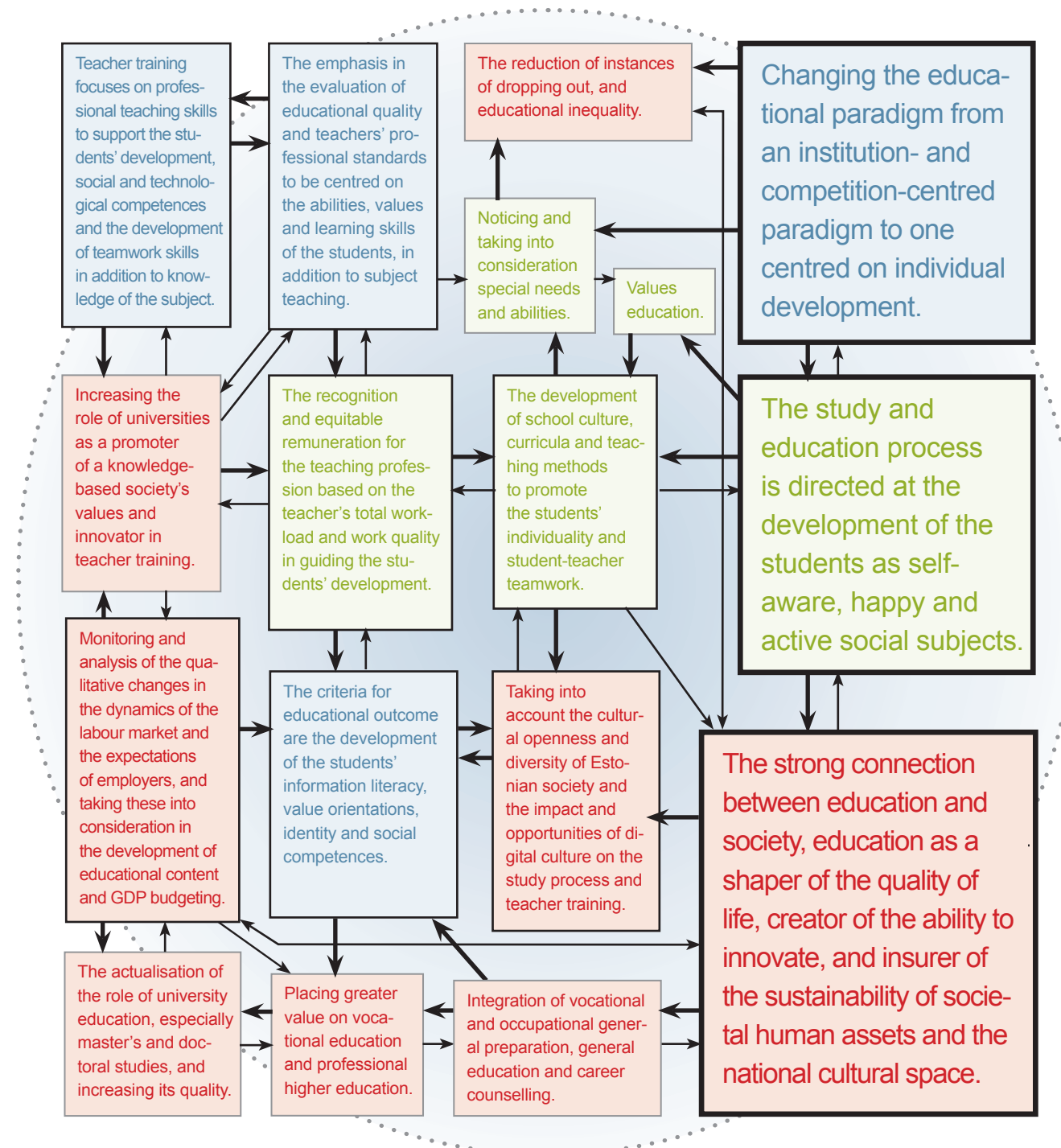
b) changing the study process through the development of school culture and teacher training, expanding the teachers' role and competences, noticing and taking into consideration the abilities and

special needs of the students, and values education (*in green*), and

c) increasing the connections between education and the changing needs of society, as well as economic, technological and cultural development (*in red*).

On the diagram, we can see the mutual intertwining and impact of the various goals and measures.

The diagram brings forth the most important points of the strategy: the central role of the teacher (and teacher training) and its connections to the criteria for evaluating the quality of education and school culture; also the need for analysing and taking into consideration the changes in society in the planning of study levels and forms, as well as the development of teaching content and methods.





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