

ESTONIA

Early Childhood Education and Care
ECEC Workforce Profile

Country report authors

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Glossary

EQF – *European Qualifications Framework*

Outcomes based (knowledge, skills, competences), eight-level reference tool to enable qualification comparisons between countries.

<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/european-qualifications-framework-efq>

ECTS – *European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System*

A system for enhancing student mobility through the Europe-wide recognition of credit transfers and credit accumulation in higher education

https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system-ects_en

ISCED – *International Standard Classification of Education*

An instrument for comparing levels and fields of education across countries, developed by UNESCO in the 1970s and revised in 1997 and 2011.

<http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/international-standard-classification-of-education-isced-2011-en.pdf>

About the authors

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1. ECEC governance in Estonia

Estonia has a unitary system of early childhood education and care. According to the draft Early Childhood Education and Care Act 2022, not only the ECEC centres/kindergartens (*koolieelne lasteasutus/lasteaed*) for children aged 1 year 6 months up to 7 years, but also childcare services now come under the overall responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Research (*Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium*) at the national level. Governance and system management are distributed between the national and regional levels, reflecting a multi-level governance model. At the local level, education and social affairs authorities are responsible for ECEC provision and management.

2. Who belongs to the early years workforce?

2.1 Regular contact staff in ECEC provision

Staff qualifications, professional education/training and remuneration are regulated. There are three main categories of staff: ECEC Teacher (*koolieelse lasteasutuse/lasteaiaõpetaja*), ECEC Assistant Teacher (*abiõpetaja*) and Childcarer/Nurse (*lapsehoidja*). Setting leaders are categorised as: Director (*direktor*) and Lead Teacher (*õppealajuhataja*). Assistants are required to have an ISCED level 3 qualification, Nurses/Childcarers an ISCED level 4 qualification, and ECEC Teachers ISCED level 6, Directors ISCED level 7 (Master's degree) and Lead Teachers an ISCED level 6 or 7 qualification.

According to the Early Childhood Education and Care Act (draft, Official Gazette 2022) teachers should create conditions for the growth and development of children in an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding with the children and their parents and take care of the life and health of the children at the ECEC centre. Teachers are required to provide advice on issues of learning and teaching to the parents of children, who attend the ECEC setting, and also to the parents of children not attending the centre but who live in the catchment area if the parents so request.

Table 1

Estonia: ECEC staff in centre-based settings

| Job title | Main ECEC work-place settings and age range | Main roles and positions | Main age-range focus of initial professional education | Minimum qualification requirement ECTS credits EQF level ISCED level |
|--|---|--|--|---|
| ECEC Teacher / Kindergarten Teacher <i>Koolieelse lasteasutuse õpetaja</i> or | <i>Koolieelne lasteasutus/ Lasteaed</i> | Core practitioner with group responsibility Centre Head (<i>Direktor</i>) | 1½–7 years | Bachelor's degree 3 years university ECTS credits: 180 EQF: level 6 ISCED 2011: 6 |



| Job title | Main ECEC work-place settings and age range | Main roles and positions | Main age-range focus of initial professional education | Minimum qualification requirement ECTS credits EQF level ISCED level |
|--|--|--------------------------|--|--|
| <i>Alushariduse pedagoog</i> <i>Profile:</i> Early Childhood Pedagogy Professional | ECEC centre/ kindergarten 1½–6 years ¹ | | | or (Centre Head/Director) ECTS credits: 300 EQF: level 7 ISCED 2011: 7 |
| ECEC Assistant Teacher <i>Abiõpetaja</i> | <i>Koolieelne lasteasutus</i> ECEC centre/ kindergarten 1½– 6 years | Qualified co-worker | 1½–6/7 years | Compulsory school leaving certificate and 1 year of studies at a Health Care College ECTS credits: n/a ² EQF: level 4 ISCED 2011: 4 (level 5 for work in preparatory classes) |
| Childcarer / Nurse <i>Lapsehoidja</i> | <i>Lapsehoiuteenus</i> Childcare service 1½–2 years | Qualified co-worker | 0–18 years | Compulsory school leaving certificate and 1 year of studies at a Health Care College ECTS credits: 60 EQF: Level 4 ISCED 2011: 4 (level 5 for work with children with special needs and parents) |

Box 1

SEEPRO profile categories for ECEC core professionals (adapted from Oberhuemer, Schreyer, and Neuman 2010)

- **Early Childhood Pedagogy Professional** (specialist focus, 0–6/7 years)
- **Pre-primary Education Professional** (exclusive pre-primary focus 3/4–6 years)
- **Pre-primary and Primary Education Professional** (focus on pre-primary *and* primary education 3/4–10/11 years)
- **Social and Childhood Pedagogy Professional** (mainly broad focus, including ECEC, usually 0–12 years, but sometimes including adults)
- **Social Care/Health Care Professional** (sometimes early childhood focus, sometimes broad focus, including adults)

¹ **Editors' note:** International data sources use varying ways of presenting the age range of children enrolled in ECEC settings. We have chosen the following age-inclusive format for the SEEPRO-3 reports for countries with a school starting age at 6: **0–2** years for children **up to** 3 years of age and **3–5** years for 3, 4 and 5 year-olds. In the case of Estonia, the relevant format is **1½–6** years, since children usually start school when they are 7 years old.

² n/a: not applicable

2.2 Centre leader

According to the Preschool Child Care Institutions Act (Official Gazette 1999) the duty of the Director is to ensure the effective operation and to direct the activities of the ECEC institution in co-operation with the teachers' council and the board of trustees. The Director is the legal representative of the ECEC institution during the period of validity of their contract of employment.

- To perform the duties provided for in this Act, the Director has the right to conclude transactions with the assets of the ECEC institution pursuant to the procedure established by legislation.
- The Director is responsible for the development of the ECEC institution and for the purposeful and expedient use of its financial resources.
- The Director shall submit a written overview of the learning and teaching provided at the ECEC institution and the financial situation and use of funds to the rural municipality or city government and the board of trustees once a year and shall give written notice of any material deterioration of the economic state of the ECEC institution and of any regulations issued by a supervisory agency.
- In order to fill a vacant position of a Director, a public competition shall be organised. The rural municipality or city government shall announce the competition and establish the procedure for its conduct. The person who wins the competition shall be appointed to office by the rural municipality or city government.
- The contract of employment with the Director shall be entered, amended and cancelled by the rural municipality or city mayor or an official authorised by him or her.

According to the draft Early Childhood Education and Care Act (Parliament of Estonia 2022), the qualifications required for the position of Director are a Master's degree or equivalent. The pedagogical, managerial and leadership competence requirements of a Centre Director are described in the Professional Standard for Teachers. Management and leadership competences are assessed by the employer in the following areas: organisational development; design of the learning environment; human resources management; general resource management; management of the learning process; and self-management.

The competency and career model of educational leaders prepared in 2023 (Good Deed Foundation et al. 2023) describes what high performing educational leaders do and know, and how the development of leaders in the field of education should take place. This tool can be used by educational leaders themselves in planning their own development and career, as well as in the recruitment, development, and future planning for Centre Directors and Head Teachers in ECEC institutions as places of employment. In addition, the competence model provides state institutions and universities with a good basis for the development of programmes and advanced training courses for educational leaders. Coping with today's challenges requires educational leaders to apply high-level leadership skills in supporting and managing their teams.

2.3 Centre-based posts of responsibility

In Estonia, there are no specifically designated positions for specialised pedagogical work across the ECEC centre (e.g. with a focus on working with the parents of migrant children or on students completing a practicum). The qualification requirements for a teacher working in a group of children with intensified support and a group of children with special support are higher education and a teaching qualification or higher education and pedagogical and special pedagogical competences.

2.4 Co-ordinating and supervisory staff

Each ECEC centre has a **board of trustees**. According to the Preschool Child Care Institutions Act (Official Gazette 1999), the co-ordinating and supervisory tasks of the board are the following:

- 1) The board of trustees is a permanent body whose function is to make sure that the learning and teaching provided at the ECEC centre corresponds to the development and interests of the children and to co-operate in this field with the centre staff.
- 2) The board of trustees shall include a representative of teachers, representatives of parents of each group and a representative of the rural municipality or city.
- 3) The board of trustees shall:
 - Hear the report of the Director on the learning and teaching provided and the management of the ECEC centre.
 - Make recommendations to the Director and the rural municipality or city government for the preparation of the budget of the ECEC centre and for the expedient use of the budget funds.
 - Submit proposals to the Director and the rural municipality or city government to ensure a favourable environment for development for children.
 - Through a representative (representatives), participate in the work of the committee of a competition organised to fill the vacant position of Director.
 - Decide the daily cost of catering for children.
 - Decide on other issues placed within the competence of the board of trustees by this Act or a resolution of the rural municipality or city council.
- 4) The board of trustees has the right to obtain information necessary for its work from the director and from the rural municipality or city government.
- 5) To organise its activities, the board of trustees shall elect a chairperson and deputy chairperson from among its members.
- 6) The work format of the board of trustees shall be a meeting, which is to be held at least once a quarter on the proposal of the chairperson of the board of trustees or the director.

2.5 Specialist support staff

A **Health Care Professional**, who is employed daily at an ECEC centre, is required to carry out the following tasks:

- 1) Monitor the health of the children based on the health protection and health promotion requirements for children established by a regulation of the Minister of Social Affairs and by a regulation of the Government of the Republic and inform the parents and the doctor of a child of any health disorders the child may have.
- 2) Prepare the daily schedule of the ECEC centre, which complies with the requirements for the daily schedules established by a regulation of the Minister of Social Affairs and approved by the director.
- 3) Verify whether the catering for the children meets the requirements for catering for children as established by a regulation of the Minister of Social Affairs.
- 4) Advise parents and teachers on issues related to children's health.

3. Structural composition of ECEC workforce: qualifications, gender, ethnicity

In 2021/2022, a total of 8,012 teachers were working in Estonian kindergartens/ECEC centres (IMO 2023). Among these were 6,678 ECEC Teachers/Kindergarten Teachers, 581 Music Teachers, 477 Physical Education Teachers, 185 Special Education Teachers working with children with special needs, 171 Estonian Language Teachers, and 47 Swimming Instructors. One regular ECEC Teacher and two Assistant Teachers are assigned to each group of children.

The age distribution of the ECEC Teachers was as follows:

763 teachers were below the age of 30; 1,667 between 30–39 years; 1841 between 40–49 years; 2,277 between 50–59 years; and 1,507 teachers were over 60 years of age.

Most teachers are women. Only 62 men work in ECEC centres.

Table 2

Estonia: Structural composition of ECEC workforce, 2021/22

| Staff categories | ECEC Teachers | Child-carers | Specialist support staff | Administrative staff | Total | Proportion of workforce |
|---|--|--------------|--------------------------|----------------------|-------|-------------------------|
| Staff with specialist higher education degree (BA) | 4,114 | 466 | 151 | 330 | 5,061 | 49% |
| Staff with specialist higher education degree (MA) | 1,630 | - | 439 | 646 | 2,715 | 26% |
| Staff with specialist vocational qualification (post-secondary) | 898 | 351 | 6 | 6 | 1,261 | 12% |
| Staff with non-specialist qualification | 1,296 | - | 11 | 9 | 1,316 | 13% |
| Men | 62 (under 1%) (including male administrative staff; no systematically compiled data by qualifications and workplace) | | | | | |
| Staff with a background of migration | No systematically compiled national data | | | | | |

Source: IMO 2023

Since 2015, all ECEC Teachers are required to have a higher education degree. Higher education in early childhood education has been available at Tallinn University since 1967 and at Tartu University and its affiliated Narva College since 2004. Whereas in 1995 the proportion of ECEC Teachers with higher education was only 20.9%, by 2001 it had risen to 25.6% (Torm 2002, 465), by 2016 to 66% and by 2022 to 72% – a remarkable rise over a period of less than 30 years (IMO 2023). Currently, 20% of ECEC Teachers, well over half of Lead Teachers (58%) and 67% of Directors have a Master's degree (see Table 3).

Table 3

Estonia: Directors and ECEC Teachers according to qualification, 2021/22

| Education level | Directors (direktor) N=592 | % | Lead Teachers (õppealaju- hataja) N=436 | % | ECEC Teacher N=8,150 | % |
|--|----------------------------------|-----------|---|-----------|----------------------------|-----------|
| Doctoral degree | 4 | 0.7 | 2 | 0.5 | 3 | 0.04 |
| Between MA and PhD | 22 | 3.7 | 7 | 1.6 | 39 | 0.5 |
| Master's degree | 397 | 67 | 253 | 58 | 1,630 | 20 |
| Bachelor's degree / Bachelor professional (<i>ra- kenduskõrgharidus</i>) | 162 | 27 | 169 | 38 | 4,114 | 51 |
| Between secondary and higher education | 3 | 0.5 | 6 | 1.4 | 898 | 11 |
| Secondary education, with long years of work experi- ence | 3 | 0.5 | 3 | 0.7 | 1,296 | 16 |

Source: IMO 2023

4. Initial professional education (IPE)

4.1 Initial qualifying routes (higher education and vocational)

Historical developments: On 1 September 1967, the Tallinn Pedagogical Institute (renamed Tallinn University in 2005) opened the first specialist degree course for early childhood education and psychology; students were admitted for both full-time and part-time learning. Between 1993 and 1997 a four-year common degree was introduced for Pre-Primary and Primary School Teachers was established and between 1994 and 1998 this was extended to include a child psychology specialisation (a four-year bachelor's degree course).

Between 1995–2002, the Pre-primary and Primary School Teacher education lasted five years. Between 1998–2005, it was possible to receive a four-year degree in Educational Sciences, specialising as a Pre-primary and Primary School Teacher. The education of students who graduated in those years has currently been equalised with a Master's degree. The new 3+2 curricula for ECEC Teachers were compiled in 2001 and the first students both for Bachelor's and Master's levels were admitted in the academic year 2002/2003. Since 2002, the ECEC Teacher Bachelor study programme has a duration of three years. The following Master's programmes have been available since 2002.

- 2002–2004: ECEC Teacher-Counsellor studies (one year, 40 ECTS credits). The first Master's students graduated in 2003.
- 2003–2010: ECEC Teacher-Counsellor Master's studies (two years, according to the new curriculum 120 ECTS credits).
- Starting in 2010 and up to the present, the nominal study period for the MA in Early Childhood Education (*Alushariduse pedagoog*) is two years (120 ECTS credits) (Veisson et al 2011).

- Since 2015, Early Childhood Education BA and MA study programmes have been administered by the teacher education and educational science department at Tallinn University School of Educational Science. Other study programmes in this department include primary education, general education, vocational education, and adult education.

Current context:

The goal of teacher education is to support the preparation of teachers who are professionally competent and able to participate in the development of educational institutions as organisations. The activities in the field of teacher education and educational sciences are also supported by the Centre for Innovation in Education.

The study programme of early childhood education of Tallinn University gives a contemporary scientific preparation at either the Bachelor's (180 ECTS credits) or the Master's level (120 ECTS credits). These degree qualifications guarantee students' professional competencies and skills of self-reflection as ECEC Teachers. The courses also prepare students to become early childhood education experts who understand educational-political processes. They provide graduates with qualifications to become ECEC Teachers (*alushariduse pedagoog*) who can direct children's development, create a favourable learning environment and to cooperate with other adults including parents, other teachers, and specialist support staff in the community network. The bachelor's degree also supports each learner's personal development and enables them to continue their studies at the Master's level.

Bachelor level studies

The study programme of early childhood education at BA level comprises 180 ECTS credits. It mainly includes in-depth courses in the principal subjects:

- Teaching the first (home) language and Estonian as an additional language – *emakeele didaktika ja eesti keel teise keelena*
- Mathematics and teaching mathematics – *matemaatika ja matemaatika didaktika*
- Nature studies and teaching about nature – *loodusteadus ja loodusteaduse didaktika*
- Art in early childhood education – *kunst koolieelses eas*
- Music and movement education – *muusika ja liikumine koolieelses eas*
- Educational science
- Psychology and
- A pedagogical traineeship (practicum).

According to the goals of the programme structure, the role of in-depth studies supports the future ECEC Teachers to form a general, cultural, social, communicative, ethical, and professional set of skills and to be prepared for pedagogical work with children aged birth up to 7 years in diverse ECEC settings.

The university bases its activities on the needs of Estonian society, relying on historical experiences and educational research, and cooperating with universities and educational institutions in Estonia and in other countries. Since 1967 we have educated over 2,500 specialists in early childhood education, in different time periods either following the four years, the five-year or 3+2 years' curriculum, and all of them have now been equalised by the Estonian Ministry of Education and Science with the currently valid Master's curricula.

Master's level studies

The curriculum of the Master's study programme enables students to acquire a scientific education qualification at Master's level, to deepen ECEC Teachers' competences, to complement



scientific knowledge in early childhood education, to acquire additional knowledge in the management of children’s institutions and to learn how to support a child’s smooth transition from kindergarten to school. Work on the Master’s thesis allows students to continue in-depth scientific studies towards the level of Doctoral studies. Studies take place in the form of lectures, seminars, independent works, practical work, and traineeships.

Former Masters students can work in managerial positions, e.g. in the Estonian Ministry of Education and Science, in the National Examinations and Qualifications Centre and at university colleges, as trainers of teachers in further education, in education departments, as Directors or Lead Teachers in kindergartens and as ECEC Teachers.

Table 4

Estonia: ECEC Teacher

| |
|---|
| <p>Job title in Estonian: <i>Koolieelse lasteasutuse õpetaja (Tartu University)</i> <i>Alushariduse pedagoog (Tallinn University)</i> Profile: Early Childhood Pedagogy Professional</p> |
| <p>Entry requirements: 12 years compulsory schooling with school leaving certificate; written test and oral examination.</p> <p>Professional studies: Three-year study route at university, including at least 18 weeks’ work placement.</p> <p>Award: bachelor’s degree/Early childhood education <i>Alushariduse pedagoog</i> at Tallinn University and ECEC Teacher qualification at Tartu University</p> <p>ECTS credits: 180 – Qualified Teacher Status (Teacher Professional Standard – <i>Õpetaja kutsestandard</i>)</p> <p>EQF level: 6, 7 or 8</p> <p>ISCED 2011: 6, 7 or 8</p> <p>Main ECEC workplaces: Kindergarten (<i>Lasteaed</i>), 1½–6 years; nurseries (<i>Lastesõim</i>), 0–2 years.</p> |

Table 5

Estonia: Childcarer/Nurse

| |
|---|
| <p>Job title in Estonian: <i>lapsehoidja/abiõpetaja</i> Profile: Social Care/Health Care Professional</p> |
| <p>Entry requirements: 12 years compulsory schooling with school leaving certificate</p> <p>Professional studies: One-year study route at a Health Care College</p> <p>Award: Qualified Childcarer Status (Childcarer Professional Standard – <i>Lapsehoidja kutsestandard</i>)</p> <p>ECTS credits: 60</p> <p>EQF-level: 4 (or 5 for work with children with special needs and parents)</p> <p>ISCED 2011: 4 (or 5, see above)</p> <p>Main ECEC workplaces: Kindergarten (<i>Lasteaed</i>), 1½–6 years; nursery (<i>Lastesõim</i>), 0–2 years; child care service, 0–18 years</p> |

4.2 Competences, curricula and pedagogic-didactic approaches in IPE programmes

An important document which regulates work in kindergartens is the Teacher Professional Standard (Estonian Qualification Authority 2020), classified at level 6 in the Estonian and European Qualifications Frameworks.

The Professional Standard is a document which describes professional activities and provides the set of skills, knowledge and attitudes or competency requirements needed for successful conduction of professional activities. The profession of teacher (level 6) includes the following parts of work and duties: planning of learning and teaching activities, development of learning



environment, supporting of learning and development, reflection and professional self-development, counselling of learner and parent. Main tools of a teacher are learning and playing equipment. Personal qualities needed for work are self-management, cooperativeness, initiative, responsibility, self-confidence, creativity, tolerance, empathy, integrity and a positive attitude.

Universities are free to put together curricula according to the new National Curriculum for Pre-school Child Care Institutions (*Koolieelse lasteasutuse riiklik õppekava*) (Official Gazette 2008) and the draft Early Childhood Education and Childcare Act (*Alushariduse ja lapsehoiu seadus*), (Parliament of Estonia 2022).

Box 2

Estonia: Bachelor study programmes at Tallinn University (2022a) and Tartu University (2022)

| Tallinn University |
|---|
| Objectives |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – To create opportunities for the acquisition of broad education in Educational Sciences in the area of early childhood education – To support the formation of skills to work in jobs that require an ECEC Teacher’s knowledge – To create opportunities for the continuation of studies in early childhood education at Master’s level. |
| Outcomes |
| <p>The BA graduate...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – has basic knowledge in educational sciences, systematic knowledge in early childhood education, knows the principles of child development, subject didactics, and methods of scientific research. – knows how to integrate theoretical knowledge into practical work with children and adults. – knows how to create a favourable intellectual and physical environment for child development. – knows how to plan, integrate, analyse critically, and evaluate pedagogical processes. – can search information by using various information sources in early childhood education and to seek answers to specific questions and problems of the field. – knows how to conduct empirical research, write and formalise a Bachelor thesis. – knows how to reflect upon one's own activities, to evaluate personal needs for self-education and further training, as well as being aware of the possibilities to continue at a post-graduate (Master’s) level. |
| Tartu University |
| Obligatory Basic Modules |
| <p>Module 1.1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Inclusive Education – Communication and Feedback in early years settings – Research Methods in Education – Teacher's Identity and Agency – Learning Environment and Teaching Resources – Basics of Learning – Teaching for Learning <p>Module 1.2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Basics of Academic Writing – Modern Estonian – The Child in Estonian Cultural History – Seminar Paper – Planning Research and Writing Report <p>Module 1.3:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – English for Early Years Teachers (B1) – English for Early Years Teachers (B2) <p>Module 2: In-depth field modules</p> |



| |
|--|
| <p>Module 2.1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Ongoing field studies in Early Childhood Education – Main Pedagogical Traineeship in Early Childhood Education |
| <p>Outcomes</p> <p>The BA graduate will...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – have an overview of child development as well as factors influencing children's behaviour; be able to notice and consider children's special educational needs. – be able to organise learning activities according to children's age and abilities, considering cross-curricular links and integrating theoretical knowledge with practical skills. – be able to provide a safe and motivating learning environment. – have knowledge of different cultures and consider the specific characteristics of a multicultural learning environment. – be able to co-operate and communicate effectively with parents, colleagues, and other specialists. – be able to analyse and evaluate their work as well as the needs for continuing professional development. – have knowledge of research methods and be able to conduct research under supervision. – know the curriculum of early years education. – be aware of the role and ethical aspects of their work. – be able to use information-communication technology in their everyday practices. – understand subject-related terminology in Estonian. – understand and communicate in at least one foreign language. <p>After completion of the programme students can continue their studies toward a Master's degree in education.</p> |

Box 3

Estonia: Master's study programme at Tallinn University (2022b)

| |
|--|
| <p>Objectives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – To create opportunities for broad analysis of international trends in early childhood education in the context of educational sciences and educational policy – To support the development of readiness for analysis of theoretical concepts of management and counselling in ECEC establishments – To support the development of professionalism as an ECEC Teacher in activities of early childhood settings, management of learning and educational activities and in guiding personal development – To create preconditions for continuing studies at Doctoral level. |
| <p>Outcomes</p> <p>The MA graduate...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – is familiar with local and international trends in educational sciences and educational policies and has a systematic overview of leadership and counselling theories. – knows how to manage activities in early childhood educational establishments, plan organisational development and evaluate the effectiveness of these activities. – knows how to evaluate ECEC quality in the context of children, teachers, and organisational development. – knows how to create a favorable environment for child development according to individual or special needs of the child. – can counsel parents and colleagues in teaching and educational matters. – is familiar with international scientific research in the area of early childhood education, is able to conduct professional educational scientific research and formulate it into a scientific thesis. – can plan, analyse and reflect upon professional development needs as an ECEC Teacher – is able to continue studies at Doctoral level. |

4.3 Alternative entry and qualification routes, system permeability

Currently, the only possibility to become an ECEC Teacher is either to study early childhood education (*alushariduse pedagoog*) at Tallinn University or to register for the early years' teacher



programme (*koolieelse lasteasutuse õpetaja*) at Tartu University and its affiliated Narva college. ECEC Assistant Teachers are required to follow only one year of training, which is organised by Health Care Colleges in Tallinn and Tartu.

5. Guided workplace experience (practicum) in the initial professional education of core professionals

Practicum periods in ECEC settings are an integral part of all **BA study programmes**. Students undertake several placements to consolidate what they have learnt and to develop and test their skills and knowledge in a holistic way.

Guided workplace experience at Tallinn University

The traineeship takes place in five block periods over five semesters. The general aim is to give students the chance to familiarise themselves with the work in a variety of ECEC settings and the values and agreed rules within them. This includes learning about the specialised competences and role of an ECEC Teacher, setting goals for their professional development and analysing the importance and feasibility of cooperation with colleagues.

Structure

Teaching Practice I (3 ECTS) and *Teaching Practice II* (3 ECTS) aim to create opportunities for the practical application of theoretical knowledge in work with children up to 7 years of age, with a focus on toddlers (1½ to 3 years) in the second practicum; to support awareness of the links between acquired knowledge and educational activities; to enhance students' skills in supporting children's development; and how to communicate with colleagues as a teacher and organiser of educational activities.

Teaching Practice III (3 ECTS) includes a focus on children from multilingual backgrounds. Students learn about ways of transmitting Estonian as a second language and organising activities for multilingual learning among children with different family languages (including immersion approaches) and learn about the principles of monitoring children's language development.

Teaching Practice IV (3 ECTS) includes supporting the students' skills in terms of planning, conducting and analysing learning and educational activities based on the level of development of the group or the group of special children; supporting the development of individual children; implementing digital technologies and IT tools to make learning and teaching more visible; reflecting on and analysing one's own practices.

Teaching Practice V (6 ECTS) aims to consolidate all the goals of the previous teaching practices and supporting the student in planning professional development and forming a comprehensive picture of the role of the profession.

In the **Master's study programme**, teaching practice takes place twice during the course and is awarded 6 ECTS.

Teaching practice I (3 ECTS) aims to create opportunities for students to become familiar with planning, organising and leading an ECEC institution's educational activities; to support the students' skill of analysing the leadership of educational activities; to support the formation of connections between the students' analysis of leadership competences and acquired knowledge; to enable the student to acquire teamwork experience.

Teaching practice II (3 ECTS) aims to create opportunities for students to learn about the management of educational activities, the guidance of teamwork and the different forms of working

procedures; to try out the implementation of different forms of work organisation, to use different methods and suitable ICT tools in educational activities; to assess the teacher's actions and teamwork.

Courses and traineeships can also be undertaken abroad, with Erasmus+ placements abroad and other mobility schemes for undergraduate students; 15 ECTS are awarded on the BA programme and 9 ECTS on the MA programme.

Methods: Pedagogical traineeship includes both observation and practical activities in the assessment of children's development and activities, as well as in the planning and implementation of teaching and educational activities in ECEC institutions. Reflection on and analysis of the student's own development is a key focus.

Mentoring: One supervisor from the kindergarten and one from the university evaluate the student's practicum. At the end of all teaching practice session students are required to present a report in eDidaktikum and make an oral presentation.

Guided workplace experience at Tartu University (BA programme)

The university provides three courses and one main practicum in ECEC:

Course 1: Continuous traineeship in ECEC (3 ECTS)

The course has two main goals, to be achieved jointly with the domain- and subject-didactics:

- To support student's learning to be a teacher by creating opportunities to associate studies of domain- and subject-didactics with teachers' activities in an educational institution
- To give students an opportunity to perform traineeship tasks in different educational institutions at different age levels and with children with special educational needs.

Main Pedagogical Practicum in ECEC (11 ECTS)

The course has three main goals to support prospective teachers based on previously completed university studies and the course in continuous pedagogical traineeship. It aims to create opportunities for:

- Integrating acquired knowledge with practical teaching activities in an ECEC institution
- Exploring the educational process as a whole and teaching during a complete educational period in an ECEC institution
- Practising principles related to subject-didactics in an ECEC institution.

Course 2: Pedagogical Practice (4 ECTS)

The main goal of the course is to support students in becoming a teacher by creating opportunities to practice knowledge acquired from different basic module courses and domain- and subject-didactics courses before starting corresponding teaching practice in an ECEC setting.

Course 3: Ongoing Pedagogical Traineeship in ECEC (6 ECTS)

The course has three main goals to be achieved jointly with the basic module courses:

- Creating ongoing opportunities to associate theoretical knowledge with a teacher's activities in an educational institution.
- Developing skills and a habitus of reflecting on other teachers' and students' activities in order to support their own development as a teacher.



- Defining themselves as a member of the school personnel who collaborates, according to the type of the educational institution, with children, different teachers, administration, support specialists.

6. Continuing professional development (CPD) of ECEC staff

Regulatory framework: In Estonia there are binding frameworks at the national, regional and provider levels for regulating the CPD of ECEC workers. CPD is organised according to the Professional Standard of ECEC Teachers. In the Adult Education Act (2019), the Continuing Education Standard sets out the curricular requirements for continuing education, for the documents certifying the successful completion and participation in continuing education and a list of key curricular areas to be provided for.

Organisation, obligation, and funding: Continuing professional development for ECEC Teachers is organised either at the national or the municipality level as well as by the ECEC settings themselves. Based on national priorities and orders, universities organise CPD courses for kindergartens staff, including heads, teachers, assistants, and support specialists. CPD activities are obligatory. The Government of the Republic supports local governments in providing professional development for kindergarten teams (Ministry of Education and Research 2023). The funds are to be used to facilitate teaching in the Estonian language, to support a modern learning approach and the digital literacy of teachers and managers, and to promote collaboration and sharing experiences among professionals.

On the one hand, Centre Directors must direct their own professional development, and on the other hand, both the school administrator and the state must support them throughout their career. The updated competency and career model is a necessary tool for this. Next steps for the Ministry of Education are to implement the models: to create an implementation plan for providing the necessary support in recruiting leaders, supporting their professional development, and evaluating work results (Good Deed Foundation, Ministry of Education and Research, Fontes, Estonian Principals' Association 2023).

Main forms: Main forms of CPD are formal seminars/courses; centre based CPD activities (sharing of inspiring practices in the local, regional, and national level), open programmes for the cooperation of different ECEC institutions, webinars, and conferences (national and international).

Providers and certification: The main providers of CPD in Estonia are Tallinn University, University of Tartu, Estonian Kindergarten Teachers Association, Association of Estonian Early Childhood Education Principals and Hea Algas (NGO). The certification awarded by any one CPD provider is also recognised across the entire early childhood sector and by different employers. Certification requirements are set out in the Adult Education Act (2019) – noted above.

Formal career advancement: Beyond the regular profession of teacher (ISCED level 6), ECEC Teachers may gain a level 7 qualification through successful completion of a Master's programme. **Senior Teachers**, also at level 7, additionally support the development of other teachers and of the organisation and develop field methodology. A **Master Teacher**, at level 8, additionally instructs colleagues and leads development activities within the organisation.

Leave entitlement: To participate in formal education or continuing education, study leave shall be granted to employees on the basis of an application and a notice from the education institution for up to 30 calendar days in a year. In case of a training based on the interests of an employer, the Employment Contracts Act and Civil Service Act. Study leave shall also be granted for participating in formal education or continuing education of an equal foreign educational institution (Official Gazette 2019).

During the study leave granted for participation in formal education and continuing education with the purpose of professional development, an employee shall be paid the average study leave pay based on a calendar day for twenty calendar days pursuant to the procedure provided in the Employment Contracts Act. ECEC staff have similar access opportunities to CPD.

Content: In recent years, the focus in the CPD courses for ECEC Teachers has been on supporting children's language and speech, Estonian language, supporting children with special needs and using child-centered learning strategies, including digital pedagogy.

7. Working conditions and current workforce issues

7.1 Remuneration

Staff remuneration is independent of the age of the children.

At the same time, social guarantees for ECEC Teachers (pedagogues) are important. ECEC Teachers were the first in the educational system to feel the inequity in salaries due to the transfer of kindergartens/ECEC centres to municipal ownership. The remuneration issue of early childhood education teachers is defined by the local authorities and so far, it has not been regulated by the State. That means that wages depend on the decisions of local governments. Only the minimum wage is regulated.

Although the remuneration level of ECEC Teachers has been raised substantially, the differences between counties have remained. In 2023, salaries ranged from €1,574 to €1,749 per month for a teacher with a Master's degree or equivalent. This is an indicator of society's attitudes and low value of an ECEC Teacher's work, and this can, in turn, influence the education of the next generation of citizens.

ECEC Teachers' salaries are equal to those of Primary School Teachers in the two biggest cities, Tallinn, and Tartu, and in a few smaller municipalities. It is a decision of the municipal authorities. In most municipalities ECEC Teachers' salaries are lower compared to those of Primary School Teachers (roughly 10% less). But the aim is to pay Early Childhood and Primary Teachers equal salaries in all local governments.

Directors' and Lead Teachers' salaries are higher according to the posts of responsibility. Teachers' salaries are related to the level of education and work experience.

It is possible to live on this salary, but remuneration for teachers with a qualification below Master's level is only somewhat above the minimum wage – which amounted to €725 in January 2023 (WageIndicator.org 2023).

7.2 Full-time and part-time employment in ECEC provision

In 2022, 95% of ECEC teachers worked full time (35 hours/week and above). Only 5% of ECEC teachers worked part time (Estonian Education Information System 2022).

7.3 Support measures in the workplace for newly qualified and newly appointed staff

Novice teachers are provided with mentorship during their first year at work. The probationary year programmes are based on the Estonian Education Strategy 2021–2035 (Ministry of Education and Research 2021). The aim of the Probationary Year programme is to support newly qualified teachers in their transition to work and in coping with professional challenges. The trainee teacher is supported by a mentor in the workplace. After completing the probationary year, teachers are not left on their own but are welcome to participate in a supervision group for teachers.

7.4 Non-contact time

There is no officially specified non-contact time in kindergartens in Estonia. A full week comprises 35 hours and teachers spend all this time working with the children. Children sleep after lunch and teachers can use this time for documentation. Individual decisions about the allocation of non-contact time are made by the Director of the kindergarten.

7.5 Current staffing issues

In smaller municipalities there are sometimes shortages of teachers. Usually, the teacher is required to have at least a bachelor's degree. In cases of staff shortage, however, an exception is sometimes made, and students of the early childhood education teacher's specialisation are hired. This decision is usually made by the director of the kindergarten and a contract with the student is usually signed for one year only.

To fill vacant positions of teachers, the Lead Teacher or other persons employed in the field of learning and teaching, or the Director of the kindergarten is required to organise a competition, the procedure for which should be approved by the board of trustees. If a teacher who meets the qualification requirements is not found, the director must organise a public competition within a year.

8. Recent policy reforms and initiatives relating to staffing and professionalisation issues

Estonian Education Strategy 2021–2025

A fundamental policy initiative for the education system in Estonia is the Estonian Education Strategy 2021–2035 (Ministry of Education and Research 2021). The Strategy sets out principles, goals, indicators, and targets for all levels of the education system. Specifically related to the ECEC sector, these are the following:

Strategic goals: To have competent and motivated ECEC Teachers and ECEC Heads, a diverse learning environment and a learner centred approach to learning and teaching.

Action trajectories: A contemporary approach to learning and teaching curricula; smart learning resources and methodology based on the principles of contemporary approaches to teaching and learning; shared space of culture and values; high-quality Estonian-language instruction and learning of Estonian; next generation of teachers and support specialists and next generation of leaders of educational institutions.

Indicators:



- Subjective well-being of children and teachers
- Proficiency in the Estonian language
- 95% participation of children from 3 years old to school age in early childhood education (compared with 92% in 2021).

General targets for ECEC settings for 2035

Language proficiency: A plan for the development of Estonian-language education has been developed, starting from the early childhood level, that provides sufficient language proficiency to continue studies in Estonian at the following levels of education.

A new generation of qualified ECEC Teachers and ECEC Heads is ensured. The teaching profession is highly valued and prestigious. Preschool teaching staff has a strong identity and safeguards the reputation and dignity of the teaching profession. The sector provides good opportunities for professional development and self-fulfilment, involving changes in ECEC and the professional development of teachers and heads. The role of a teacher as coach and mentor is becoming more important.

The organisational culture of early childhood educational institutions is caring, collaborative and democratic, supports the development of general competences and the well-being of all, including better physical and mental health, diversity of views and constructive resolution of disagreements and crises.

Specific targets for the ECEC system for 2035

- The ECEC setting is child-friendly, learning takes place through play, in teaching and learning and everyday activities.
- There is a clear legal framework for ECEC, which is the part of the general education system.
- Teachers assess the development of children to identify the special needs of children and plan teaching and learning activities based on the child's individuality.
- The child-centred approach to learning is followed, focusing on the child's general skills, including play, cognitive and learning skills, social and self-regulation skills.
- Different fields of teaching and learning are integrated, e.g. language and speech, mathematics, environment, art, music, and movement.
- The initial education and in-service training of teachers is based on state standards. The current qualification levels are maintained and strengthened³. The aim is that all ECEC Teachers possess at least a BA degree and all ECEC Directors an MA degree.
- The state supports local governments in the organisation of continuing professional development.
- The salary of ECEC Teachers is equal to the salary of Primary School Teachers.
- The ratios of teachers to assistants per child make it possible to carry out teaching and learning activities in smaller groups and individually.
- There is a strong drive towards promoting inclusive education and supporting networking for children with special needs.
- Support specialists and services are more involved in ECEC settings. The learning opportunities of speech therapists, special education teachers and psychologists at university have also been increased for this purpose.

³ Currently in Estonia, 51% of ECEC Teachers have a bachelor's degree and 20% a Master's degree, 72% of ECEC Directors have a Master's level degree and 28% a Bachelor's degree (IMO 2023)



- The Estonian system of initial professional education will improve in accordance with research evidence. Based on the Estonian Strategy 2021–2035, it will be necessary to promote the professionalism of ECEC Teachers, ECEC Teacher Assistants and ECEC Directors through the development of scientific activities and continuing professional development. ECEC Teachers are key actors in planning, providing feedback, and supporting the teaching and learning process in ECEC institutions. ECEC Directors should create a learning culture and environment that supports learning and well-being, skilfully managing and implementing changes, and upgrading ECEC Teachers' cooperation with support specialists (Ministry of Education and Research 2021; Peterson 2022).

9. Recent country-specific research focusing on ECEC staff

ECEC Teachers' views on professionalism, teacher education and sustainability

Source: Veisson and Kabadayi 2018 (see References for further details)

Aims: Since education is a dynamic process and open to contemporary changes, professionalism which is vitally important for the sustainability of teacher education, has gained importance. Recent studies have emphasised the relations between professionalism, the quality of teacher education and sustainability. The aim of the current study was to interview preschool teachers and to explore their views and understandings about professionalism, quality of preschool education and sustainability in Estonian and Turkish cultural contexts.

Procedure: In this study qualitative research methods were used to analyse the data obtained from the participants. 15 preschool teachers from Estonia and 36 preschool teachers currently working in different parts of Turkey participated in the study. They were asked to respond to 15 open-ended questions about professionalism and the quality of teacher education and sustainability. Content analysis techniques were used for coding, finding the themes, and arranging the sub-themes for interpreting the data obtained.

Selected results: The result of the study put forward that the participants were intrinsically motivated with their job; and they admitted they had some strong and weak sides in their teaching profession. It was also seen that they had a lack of defining the terms of professionalism, quality of preschool education and sustainability. For example, they defined professionalism in teaching in an ego-centric way, mostly the proficiency of the teachers in action rather than a comprehensive definition including teaching learning processes, parents, environmental conditions, school atmosphere, needs of the students and the society etc.

Implications: Some suggestions were made to the teachers and educational policy makers related to the research findings. Estonian teachers expressed in the interviews that cultural sustainability is most important because Estonia is very small country, and this is a reason why we must keep our culture and language.

ECEC Teachers' views on initial professional education

Source: Mikser, Tuul, Veisson, and Goodson 2018 (see References for further details)

Aims: Educational requirements for early years professionals are increasing across the world. This is associated with the neoliberal reform policies of raising the status of early education professionals while regulating the field more tightly and increasing its accountability. The quality of pre-school professionals' education, and particularly the professionals' own perceptions of it,

substantially determine whether reform initiatives succeed and whether professionals are able and motivated to critically appraise and to influence reform policies.

Procedure: This paper introduces the results of a written survey conducted among Estonian preschool teachers (n=576). The respondents were asked to rate the pre-service programmes for preschool teachers in Estonia, specifically focusing on the relationship between theory and practice.

Selected results: It appeared that whereas the respondents rated the amount of time spent on theoretical studies as disproportionately large at the expense of field practice, they rated the quality of the theoretical studies the highest and the field practice the lowest.

Implications: A discussion point was that the mechanisms by which this contradiction threatens to decouple the practitioners from broader conceptual and contextual concerns in the field and to evoke 'policy evasion' rather than stimulating an active critical stance, as should be inherent in the notion of professionalism in its extended meaning.

ECEC Teachers' views and expectations of professionalism

Source: Mikser, Niglas, Tuul, Veisson, and Goodson 2019 (see References for further details)

Aims: Around the world, preschool education policy reforms have raised the qualification requirements for teachers. University preparation, research-based practice and high-quality in-service education have become important ingredients of preschool teachers' professionalism. However, teachers' views are often disconnected from or contradict these reform initiatives.

Procedure: This paper introduces the results of a written survey conducted among Estonian preschool teachers (n=576). We asked the respondents' views and expectations of reform policies concerning preschool teachers' professionalism. A cluster analysis enabled us to distinguish between five clusters of teachers.

Selected results: It emerged that whereas teachers from different clusters espoused different views and expectations on most aspects, the respondents from all clusters attributed little value to university-based preparation, scientific and research-based practice, and engagement in research activity.

Implications: The possible social-political and personal reasons for this phenomenon were discussed.

Recent and future issues in professionalising ECEC staff – a discussion paper

Source: Peterson, Õun, and Ugaste 2019 (see References for further details)

In Estonia, preschool education is ensured to most of children aged 3–6 years, and there are requirements established concerning the education of kindergarten teachers as well as a national curriculum to ensure the quality of primary education. At the same time, studies have revealed several aspects that more attention needs to be paid to in the organisation of preschool education in Estonia, in the work of the staff and in the content of pedagogical activities. The Assistant Teachers and Childcarers in kindergarten and childcare institutions need better training in supporting the general skills of children. The professionalism of preschool teachers needs more support regarding the avoidance of cultural stereotypes in learning and educational activities, enabling children to take personal responsibility for creating a caring growth environment and enabling the children's smooth transition from kindergarten to school. Teachers and principals need more support to enhance their competence in addressing pedagogical leadership and human resource management issues. Family involvement is a challenge in the development of the quality of preschool education. Teachers need more knowledge and skills in how to encourage family members to participate in learning and in educational activities, create possibilities



for families to learn and to support one another, and promote family involvement in the community.

The professionalism and the professional development of teachers were priorities of the Estonian teacher policy for 2014–2020. Programmes at Estonian universities have undergone significant changes in the recent past, and these changes seem to be of a positive nature. The universities have a common platform that unites the effort across the university and provides the opportunity for an interdisciplinary approach.

The methods and forms of preschool teachers' initial training are modern and multifaceted, with an emphasis on student-centred approaches, and teaching and learning are supported by current technologies.

Better integration of pre-primary and primary education is important in improving the national curriculum of preschool childcare institutions so that the transition from kindergarten to school is smooth. Ensuring a smooth transition is also a challenge for the initial and in-service training of preschool teachers and primary teachers. According to the Estonian Education Strategy 2021–2035 (Ministry of Education and Research 2021) the role of preschool teachers is of key importance in carrying out changes. Their image in society needs to change as well: salaries must be more competitive and work organisation must be such that working as a preschool teacher would be highly valued in society. The objective in Estonian educational strategy is to make the evaluation and compensation of teachers and leaders in early childhood education proportional to their professional qualifications and their effectiveness in performing their tasks.

10. Workforce challenges – country expert assessment

Over the last five years there have been significant policy changes in the areas of curriculum, staff qualifications and child assessments in Estonia and further changes are planned in expenditure, staff to child ratios, quality inspection and monitoring, and teacher education and development. Despite these positive steps, several challenges remain.

A major challenge is to guarantee a **place in kindergarten for all children** who need it. This means that, since 2022, the Ministry of Education and Research together with local municipalities will be responsible and must offer sufficient places in kindergartens.

Providing for **research in early childhood education** is another challenge. Researchers need more research grants from the Estonian Science Agency and Ministry of Education and Research. Both the Ministry and the Science Agency have decided to give more responsibility to the universities to make decisions on how to use research money and on which studies should be granted.

A further challenge is to raise the **status of ECEC Teachers** in society and find finances to pay them the same salary as all other teachers.

The status of ECEC Teachers in society depends on all of us, but also on the quality of the legislative policies and legal acts concerning the work of early childhood education teachers. Decision-makers must understand and become aware of the influence of their decisions in examining various links in the chain of responsibilities for children's education and care. Although all political parties declare the importance of early childhood education in general educational policy, their understanding of the content of early childhood education is another matter. Over time,

the prevailing majority of ECEC Teachers have carried out their professional job in the best possible way; they have been keen to learn and have valued education and erudition. However, ECEC centres have a more meaningful role to fulfil in society today than we have previously thought.

The challenge is to enact **child-centred and play-based learning** and teaching in kindergarten. To reach these goals all universities and CPD programmes must offer these topics. Our study results showed that younger teachers work more according to these principles compared with more experienced teachers who received their education during the Soviet period. In those days, early childhood education was much more teacher centred (Mikser et al. 2020).

A further important challenge is, from 2024 onwards, to organise work in the kindergartens for children aged 3 up to school entry in the **Estonian language**. This decision was made in 2022 by the Estonian Parliament and current Government. All children with other native languages must have at least 50% of learning activities in the Estonian language. Directors can decide whether to support the use of other languages such as Russian or Ukrainian in the other 50% of learning activities.

Providing for **Ukrainian children** has been a major challenge since the Russian invasion in February 2022. Due to the difference between the start of the compulsory school age of children in Estonia and Ukraine (in Estonia at 7 years of age, in Ukraine at 6 years of age respectively) and the short-term stay of children in Estonia, kindergartens started to refer Ukrainian children to an out-of-school counselling team for routine assessment of development and school readiness. However, this is not considered justified in an ECEC institution, as the assessment of a child's development and school readiness is the obligation of the ECEC centre. Counselling centres (*Rajaleidja*) provide the necessary support for children with special needs and advice for local governments, parents, and kindergartens. ECEC Teachers have benefited from the guidelines elaborated and training programmes initiated by the Ministry of Education and Research and the Education and Youth Board. The training programmes (on site and online) on „how to better support a non-Estonian speaking child" are considered highly useful for Kindergarten Teachers. Regional methodological centres have been set up to support early childcare organisations with assistance. Teachers are offered thematic counselling, training courses, practical workshops, and study visits by these centres. Diverse guidelines and learning materials on how to support a refugee child not only for learning but also for mental health have been elaborated and disseminated to educational institutions.

Meetings are also held for families by local government representatives and kindergartens to introduce the setup and values of the education system in Estonia as well as to build relationship for future cooperation with families. Several events have been organised by the communities for fundraising to support children with everything that is needed for their well-being and learning.

Two major challenges arising from or accelerated by the crisis in Ukraine are:

- The need to change the legislation to ensure sufficient nursery places for children of 1½–3 years
- The sustainability of financial subsidies for social services; the financial resources available to support access to services for refugee children are considered of crucial importance by the local governments (United Nations Children's Fund 2023).



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