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6. The State of Vocational Teacher Training in Estonia

1 Factors Influencing the Organisation of Vocational Education and Vocational Teacher Training in Estonia

In order to better understand the state and principles of vocational teacher training (VTT) in Estonia, some background knowledge about the Estonian Republic, its people, and its system of education is necessary.

Estonia is a small country with an area of 45,227 km² and a population of 1,356,000 (2003) people. Estonian is the official language of the country. The population increase in Estonia is negative and, in the last 4 years, the difference between births and deaths has fluctuated between 6,000 and 5,000, with deaths outnumbering births. The ageing of the Estonian population is one of the fastest in the world. Conversely, the number of children going to school is decreasing every year and the number of graduates from basic school is approximately half of that of the previous generation (Kutsõpeasutuste võrgu, 2003).

68% of the population are ethnic Estonians and 32% non-Estonians (~26% Russians). In the last census there were representatives of 124 nationalities among the residents of Estonia. A large majority of non-Estonians consider Russian their mother tongue. Compared to the 1989 census, the proportion of Estonians has increased from 61.5% to 67.9%. Estonians are in the majority in most of the counties, towns and parishes, but there are also regions (i.e., Ida-Virumaa county) where the proportion of Estonians is only 20% and, for example, in one of the towns of the region Sillamäe, there are only 4% Estonians. The average proportion of Estonians in cities is 57% and in counties 91%. In the capital city of Tallinn, the proportion of Estonians is 54% (Rahvastiku koosseis, 2000). The fact that the population speaks different languages makes qualitative delivery of vocational education, as well as vocational teacher, training...
complicated. Up to now, vocational teacher training has been carried out in the Estonian language and teachers have also been Estonian by nationality. Since the academic year 2002/03, 43 vocational schools have Estonian as the language of tuition, 18 have both Estonian and Russian as languages of tuition and 18 have only Russian as the language of tuition (Kutseõppeasutuste arv, 2004).

According to the 2000 census, 67% of the population of Estonia live in cities and 33% in counties (Rahvastiku koosseis, 2000). 37% of the entire Estonian population live in Tallinn.

The majority of the establishments of vocational education are situated in larger towns and settlements, which has given rise to the reorganisation of the network of institutions of vocational education. As part of this process, some of the vocational schools located in rural areas will be closed down, and some will be merged. New, larger ones will be established in cities. Based on the prospective number of students, the planned number of institutions of vocational education in Estonia is 71, which are 13 less than at the moment (presuming that the optimum size of a vocational school is 500 students). Studying at vocational school is not popular in Estonia and this attitude is strongly influenced by public opinion and a trend in the society that overestimates higher education. In 2002, only 28% of basic school graduates, and 19.9% of secondary school graduates continued their education at a vocational school (Kutseõppeasutuste võrgu, 2003).

Currently the vague borderline between institutions of applied higher education and vocational education is the source of much confusion. Several institutions of applied higher education are treated as establishments of vocational education, although according to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED97), they provide the level 3 education (5A). A uniform national attitude does not exist and universities look askance at the higher education provided by institutions of vocational education. The problems listed above are mainly caused by the very different requirements for the teaching staff at vocational schools and universities. When speaking about vocational education and institutions of vocational education, I mean level 2 education—vocational education based on basic education (3B) or secondary education (4B). Another problem of VTT is the limited demand for vocational teachers of certain specialisation. In the academic year 2003/04, the same state-commissioned special areas were taught at various vocational schools (Table 1), but there is no need, or even the possibility, to train a whole group of vocational teachers in the same field of specialisation.

While training vocational teachers, developments within the country have to be considered. More specifically this refers to the reduction in the total number of institutions of vocational education in Estonia, including the closing of four vocational schools that train personnel for prisons.