Case Study - Estonia

Estonia - Country Overview

Estonia is a country in Eastern Europe with a population of 1.3 million and an area of 17,462 square miles. It is situated on the Baltic Sea, sharing a land border with Russia to the east and Latvia to the south. Finland lies to the north, across the Gulf of Finland. Estonia regained its independence in 1991 from the Soviet Union, and is presently a parliamentary representative democratic republic that has been a member of the European Union since 2004.

Estonia has made rapid progress since 2006 to become a very high-performing country in terms of its PISA results. The Estonian Ministry of Education and Research (2016) notes that in PISA 2015 in science, Estonian students received the highest scores in Europe and the third highest in the world (after Singapore and Japan). In mathematics, Estonian students scored 2nd in Europe (after Switzerland) and 9th globally, and in reading, they scored 3rd in Europe (after Finland and Ireland) and 6th in the world. Socio-economic background does not greatly affect academic performance (Santiago et al. 2016).

The OECD (2016) acknowledges Estonia as a high-performing country according to its PISA data, yet states also that 'the most critical problems of the Estonian education system are related to teachers' (p. 4). An important problem according to the OECD is that teaching has a low social status in Estonia: only 13.7% of Estonian respondents to the OECD’s Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) in 2013 agreed that the teaching profession is valued in society, compared to an OECD average of 30.9% (OECD 2014a). Furthermore, Estonia largely scores below the OECD average in self-efficacy (OECD 2014b), meaning that there is a lack of alignment between Estonian teachers’ relatively low confidence in their ability to teach and their pupils’ high performance in PISA tests. Loogma et al. (2013) attribute Estonian teachers’ relatively low satisfaction and self-efficacy partly to their loss of autonomy and power that resulted from the shift from a Soviet to a post-Soviet society. Power moved from pedagogues ‘to groups such as state institutions, parents and the market … [producing] widespread dissatisfaction among teachers’ (p. 296) (see also Erss 2015). The authors note also teachers’ ‘weakening connections with and commitment to the local community … which decreases the teachers’ social capital and collective power’ (p. 296).

Estonia - Professional Development

Estonia is one of only eight OECD education systems to have a separate budget allocated to staff (i.e. teachers’ and leaders’) professional development (Santiago et al. 2016). Professional development has moved from being entirely locally arranged to being slightly more centralised, with some funding being managed through central institutions (e.g. the Innove Foundation) and also through Tallinn University and the University of Tartu, who have been required to develop “competence centres” (Eurydice 2018b). These centres ‘are targeted at collecting and developing knowledge about learning and teaching, and passing on such knowledge to other educational institutions, incl. institutions of higher education’ (unpaged). This development is to enable the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research to achieve the aims set out for reforming education in its White Paper, “The Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020” (2014). Data are not yet available on the success or otherwise of these plans.

The overall current picture in Estonia is one where teachers are responsible for selecting appropriate professional-development activities from a range of providers, guided by school leaders and in line with a professional development plan that takes account of school objectives (Santiago et al. 2016).

There is no provision for sabbaticals or study leave for non-vocational teachers in Estonia. However, vocational teachers are entitled to ‘credit-bearing internships in industry … in a working environment which is directly linked to the area taught by the teacher [during which] the teacher is released from teaching’ (Eurydice 2018a, unpaged).
Estonia - Teachers’ Career Pathways

A new career progression model was introduced in Estonia in 2013. This, according to the OECD (Santiago et al. 2016) was intended to replace a former model that was based on a system of attestation. In that system, teachers needed to attend 160 hours of professional-development courses; contribute to education events or conferences; carry out a self-evaluation; and undergo both an internal and external evaluation. It is important to note that it is this former system of attestation that produced the education system that has succeeded so well in PISA assessments, despite its characterisation by the OECD as ‘complex and resource intensive’ (Santiago et al. 2016, p. 207). It must also be noted that Estonia is still undergoing transition to the newer, competency-based model. The Center on International Education Benchmarking (2018a), for example, reports that the 160 hours of professional development every five years must still be completed in order to progress up the levels, and years of experience also count as evidence. These features are expected to be phased out (Santiago et al. 2016).

The new model, when it realises its claims to be entirely competency or standards based, will be closer to that used by a number of other countries (e.g. Australia, Singapore and Ontario, Canada). Unlike e.g. Singapore, however, the structure is voluntary at the two higher levels and is not related to movement up a pay scale. Table 1 below shows the career progression model:

| Level 6: Teacher | • Awarded indefinitely.  
| • Applies only to new entrants to pre-primary sector.  
| • Follows completion of an Initial Teacher Education programme or recognition of professional qualifications for this level. |
| Level 7.1: Teacher | • Awarded indefinitely.  
| • Applies to new entrants to the teaching profession at primary level or above.  
| • Follows completion of an Initial Teacher Education Programme (at master’s degree level) or recognition of professional qualifications for this level. |
| Level 7.2: Senior Teacher | • Awarded for 5 years: further applications subsequently required.  
| • Beyond normal teaching responsibilities:  
| • Supports development of school and other teachers.  
| • Is involved in methodological work at school level. |
| Level 8: Master Teacher | • Awarded for 5 years: further applications subsequently required.  
| • Beyond normal teaching responsibilities:  
| • Participates in development and creative activities in and outside his or her school.  
| • Co-operates closely with a higher education institution. |

Table 1: Competency-based career progression model for Estonian non-vocational teachers. Adapted from Santiago et al. (2016, p. 195).

This model is based on a set of professional standards for teachers: these are the responsibility of the Estonian Qualifications Authority (see Estonian Qualifications Authority 2018). However, the Estonian Association of Teachers certifies teachers’ progress up the career levels.

Estonia has a tradition of discrete vocational education pathways. A parallel, but separate model has therefore been developed to respond to the needs of vocational teachers, shown in Table 2:

| Level 5: Vocational Teacher | • Awarded indefinitely.  
| • Teaching comprises mainly practical methods that develop students’ practical skills and work habits. |
| Level 6: Vocational Teacher | • Awarded indefinitely.  
| • Teacher conveys theoretical knowledge and teaches practical working skills.  
| • Teacher develops professional training with industry and professional associations. |
Table 2: Competency-based career progression model for Estonian vocational teachers. Adapted from Santiago et al. (2016, p. 196).

Santiago and his colleagues (2016) anticipate that this new career progression model might well enable teachers to adopt diverse responsibilities and career paths more easily and with greater formal recognition than previously. They note that taking on such roles are generally recompensed through classroom release rather than through pay. Examples of possible roles include management of a subject; deputy headship; the creation of professional-development materials, programmes or activities; or the mentorship of a (group of) beginning teacher(s).

Estonia - Leaders’ Career Pathways

In their OECD report on education in Estonia, Santiago et al. (2016) note that school leaders are seen as performing a vital role in Estonian schools by policy makers, and ‘their professional development is considered crucial’ (p. 24). School leaders in Estonia have what Santiago et al. (2016, p. 24) call a ‘high’ level of autonomy, characterised by their responsibility for delivering the curriculum, managing resources, assuring the overall quality of education, recruiting and dismissing staff, setting teacher salaries, developing a school development plan and managing its implementation. Nonetheless, the authors point out also that ‘the position of “school leader” is perceived as unattractive and compensation is inadequate’ (p. 24). They also identify what they see as a number of issues with school leadership in Estonia:

- No systematic mechanism to provide professional feedback to school leaders;
- No central framework for school leaders’ appraisal;
- Non-mandatory appraisal;
- Where it takes place, appraisal criteria may not be aligned with those for organisational improvement.
- Professional feedback may not be linked to professional reward or sanction.
- No discrete career structure for school leaders.

Despite this lack of explicit career progression pathway (Santiago et al. 2016), the notion of ‘school leader’ comprises a number of roles, and so it is likely that movement between these roles constitutes an informal route to career progression, particularly between the first three of the four listed below. The key roles are:

- Headteacher. This is not the principal of the school in the UK sense, but is the lead teacher and senior manager responsible for teaching and learning in the school.
- School Director. This corresponds better to UK notions of principal or headteacher. The school director makes decisions concerning, *inter alia*, teacher recruitment and dismissal, teacher salary and conditions of service, formulating and allocating the school budget and overall quality assurance.
- Quality-Assurance Advisor. Schools are legally required to conduct self-evaluations, and so practising School Directors (and sometimes other members of the leadership team) may be trained in quality assurance and registered by the Ministry of Education as advisors. These advisors become available to other schools to help with their self-evaluation processes.
- School Owner. In a public school, this may be the municipality or the state. Otherwise, it is a private entity. The school owner is the employer of the school’s teachers and leaders.

The creation of an explicit career structure for leaders, aligned with a new competency-based set of professional standards mirroring those introduced for Estonian teachers, are key recommendations provided by the OECD following their evaluation of the Estonian education system (Santiago et al. 2016).
Concerning school leaders' professional development, however, from 2015, a three-staged approach was adopted. Targeted programmes now exist for each of the following cohorts: experienced, newly appointed and aspiring school leaders. The following details on these are adapted from Santiago et al. (2016, p. 177):

**School team development programme:**
- Aimed at experienced school leaders;
- Duration of 12 months;
- One school leader and two other staff members participate;
- Programme comprises modules covering various school-management areas;
- Each module consists of tasks on which a school-development project is based;
- Six months after the completion of the programme, a follow-up observation assesses the leaders' implementation of the project.

**Programme for new school leaders:**
- Aimed at newly appointed school leaders;
- Its purposes include role induction and familiarisation;
- Provides an overview of legislation, financial management, innovation and trends in education;
- Participants are intended to benefit from the professional network it provides.

**School leader offspring programme:**
- Aimed at aspiring school leaders;
- Duration of 24 months;
- Entry via competition: candidates include school and other staff;
- Each participant has a mentor and undertakes visits or placements in schools;
- The programme comprises various modules, including an introduction to pedagogy and, for those from outside the education sector, the management of learning.

To date, no evaluation of any of these programmes is available.