

# Higher Education in Estonia

## 2023

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## Legal framework

General legislation for higher education in Estonia is detailed in the following legal acts:

- [Republic of Estonia Education Act](#)
- [Higher Education Act](#)
- [Private Schools Act](#)
- [Organisation of Research and Development Act](#)
- [Standard of Higher Education](#)

**The Higher Education Act** describes principles that govern the organisation of studies at the level of higher education (i.e., Bachelor's studies, studies in professional higher education, Master's studies, Doctoral studies, and Integrated bachelor's and master's studies), general requirements for studying at higher education level (requirements for admissions, form of studies, students' rights and obligations), describes different types of higher education institutions and requirements for each type (i.e., public university, state-owned professional higher education institution, and private higher education institutions), academic staff positions and employment relations between the institution and academic staff, and the system for higher education external quality assessment.

The purpose of the **Organisation of Research and Development Act** is to provide the grounds for the organisation of research and development and to ensure legal means for the preservation and further development of scientific and technological creation as a component of Estonian culture and the Estonian economy.

The framework document, the **Standard of Higher Education**, establishes requirements for higher education programmes, objectives and learning outcomes to be achieved, requirements for the members of the teaching staff, and study programme groups where given educational institutions have the right to conduct studies and to issue qualifications. The Standard of Higher Education is based on other acts related to higher education and is valid for all cycles and forms of higher education, irrespective of the ownership or the legal status of the higher education institution.

The Ministry of Education and Research is responsible for the implementation of the Standard of Higher Education. The administration of higher education is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Research (except higher education in the fields of public security and national defence).

The Ministry defines the principles of higher education policy. The responsibilities of the Ministry of Education and Research include:

- regulation of the establishment, merger, division or closure of universities on the basis of decisions made by the Riigikogu (Parliament), and in case of professional higher education institutions on the basis of decisions made by the Government;
- keeping the registry of state diplomas issued by higher education institutions and vocational education institutions;



- development of the rules for state financing of education, and distributing budgeted funds to higher education institutions;
- approval of the development plans of state professional higher education institutions;
- preparation and implementation of the national education and research development programmes;
- carrying out the state supervisory activities.

In its role, the Ministry of Education and Research is assisted by a number of management and consultative bodies with an administrative or teaching capacity. Professional higher education institutions for public security are state agencies administered by the Ministry of the Interior and professional higher education institutions for national defence are structural units of the Defence Forces.

## Higher Education Qualifications

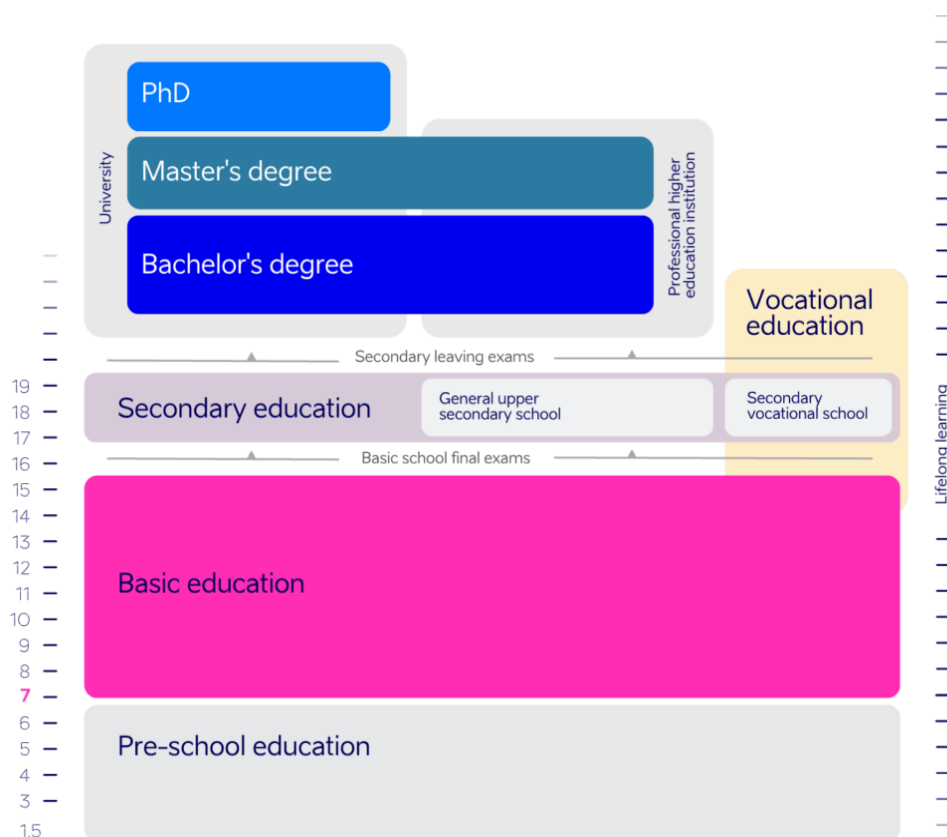
As a result of a major higher education reform and the restructuring of study programmes, the recent system of higher education qualifications (degrees and diplomas) was introduced in the 2001/2002 academic year. In 2019 a new Law on Higher Education was launched

Student workload is measured in credits. As of academic year 2009/2010, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) has officially been in use. One ECTS credit corresponds to 26 hours of work by a student. The workload of one academic year is 1560 hours, which corresponds to 60 ECTS credits.

The Estonian higher education system now comprises of three main cycles.



## Education system in Estonia



Source: Education Estonia <https://www.educationestonia.org/about-education-system/>

### Degree of Bakalaureus issued by universities

The first cycle qualification obtained is the degree of Bakalaureus (Bachelor). The nominal length of studies is predominantly 3 years and the workload is 180 ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) credits. In exceptional cases, the nominal length of studies may extend to 4 years (240 ECTS credits). The thesis or the final examination should form no less than 5 ECTS credits of the total workload for the study programme. The purpose of these studies is to increase the students' level of general education, so that they will be able to acquire the basic knowledge and skills within their field of study, to obtain the competencies necessary for a master's programme. The degree awarded at the bachelor's level should also be relevant to the labour market at an appropriate level of qualification. All first cycle degrees should give access to second cycle studies.

### Degree of Bakalaureus issued by professional higher education institutions

First cycle programmes are also provided in the professional higher education branch.



Such programmes are provided by professional higher education institutions (*rakenduskõrgkool*). Since 01.09.2019, according to the new Law on higher education the professional higher education institutions are issuing bachelor degrees. The purpose of these programmes is to acquire the competence necessary for working in the relevant profession or for continuing studies at the master's level. The nominal length of studies is 3 to 4.5 years (180-270 ECTS credits). The thesis or the final examination should form no less than 5 ECTS credits. The students who have completed a professional higher education programme are awarded the degree of Bakalaureus. The graduates have the right to continue studies towards a degree of Magister (a master's level qualification).

## **Degree of Magister**

The second cycle degree in the Estonian higher education system is Magister (Master). Master's programme is devoted to in-depth preparation for the field of study and includes a narrow specialisation. It also prepares the students for independent work after graduation. The main purpose of such study programmes is to educate a specialist of profound professional knowledge. The access requirement for master's study is a degree of Bakalaureus, a diploma of professional higher education or a corresponding foreign qualification. The nominal length of studies is 1 to 2 years (60-120 ECTS credits), but together with a first cycle programme no less than 5 years (300 ECTS credits). The thesis or the final examination should form no less than 15 ECTS credits of the total credit requirement for the study programme. Master's programmes are provided by universities and since 2004, also by professional higher education institutions.

## **Qualification of integrated long-cycle programmes**

In addition to the two-cycle general structure, the study programmes in the field of medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, veterinary medicine, architecture, civil engineering, and class-teacher training are one long-cycle studies. The nominal length of programmes in medicine, and beginning in the 2002/2003 academic year, also in veterinary medicine, is 6 years (360 ECTS credits); in other fields mentioned above it is 5 years (300 ECTS credits). Such single long-cycle studies, called integrated bachelor-master studies, are based on an integrated programme which contains both basic studies and profound specialisation.

## **Degree of Doktor (PhD)**

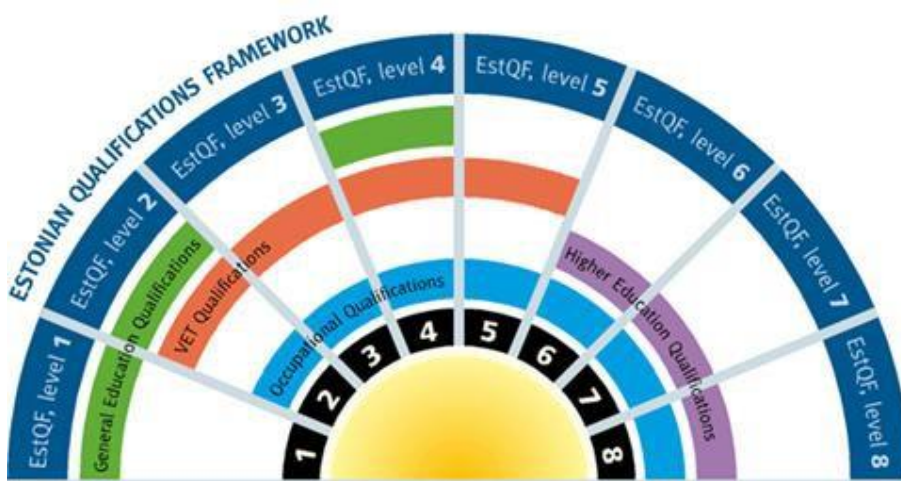
Doctoral programmes represent the third cycle of higher education with the purpose of acquiring knowledge and skills necessary for independent research, development or professional creative work. The access requirement for doctoral studies is a degree of Magister or a corresponding qualification. The nominal length of doctoral studies is 3 to 4 years (180-240 ECTS credits). Doktor is a research degree obtained after the completion and public defence of a dissertation – independent research or creative work. Estonian universities award the following doctoral degree: Filosoofiadoktor – Doctor of Philosophy



(PhD), with an indication of the field of study or the area of specialisation.

## Estonian Qualifications Framework

An eight-level EstQF was established in 2008, with the [Occupational Qualifications Act](#). [The descriptions of the qualification levels](#) are identical with the EQF descriptions.



Source: Estonian Qualifications Authority

## Higher Education Admission Requirements

The requirement for access to higher education is secondary education, certified by *Gümnaasiumi lõputunnistus* (Upper Secondary School Leaving Certificate), *Lõputunnistus kutsekeskhariduse omandamise kohta* (Certificate of Vocational Secondary Education) the corresponding qualifications of earlier education systems, and foreign qualifications giving access to higher education. The *Gümnaasiumi lõputunnistus* is issued after 12 years of schooling (9 years of basic education and 3 years of general upper secondary education). In order to complete general upper secondary education, it is necessary to take national examinations certified with the national examination certificate.

A higher education institution may introduce further admission requirements, such as entrance examinations, minimum scores of national examinations, interviews, etc.

## Recognition of Qualifications

As of 1 January 2012, higher education programmes may be provided only if the quality of the respective study programme group has been assessed and the Government of the Republic has granted a license to provide instruction in the respective group. Annex 3 to Regulation no. 178 of the Government of the Republic of 18 December 2008 “Standard of Higher Education” sets out the study programme groups and cycles of higher education



where educational institutions have the right to provide instruction. The right to provide instruction involves the right to issue national diplomas.

## External Quality Assessment

Since 2009, higher education quality has been assessed by *Eesti Kõrghariduse Kvaliteediagentuur* - EKKA (Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency), an independent agency functioning under the umbrella of the Foundation Archimedes. In 2015 EKKA was renamed Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education, and **in 2022 the new name is the Estonian Quality Agency for Education (HAKA)**.

In Estonia, only institutions of higher education which have passed the evaluation of quality of studies are allowed to provide higher education. As of 2012, studies at the level of higher education may only be conducted if the Government of the Republic has provided a so-called education licence for this purpose – the right to conduct studies in this study programme group and at this level of studies. This includes the right to issue state graduation certificates.

### Applying for right to organise studies

If an institution of higher education (private, public or state) wishes to apply for the right to conduct studies in a new study programme, it must submit its application with data describing the quality, resources and sustainability of the studies to the Ministry of Education and Research. The application is then proceeded with the help of HAKA. If approved, the right to conduct studies was till September 2019 confirmed with a regulation of the government of the republic in annexes to the standard of higher education. Starting September 2019, the Minister of Education and Research has the right to make the final decision.

### Quality assessment of study programme groups

**From 2010 to 2019**, the quality of study programme groups was assessed instead of the former assessment of study programmes. Quality assessment involves assessment of the compliance of study programmes, teaching and study-related development efforts based thereon with legislation, national and international standards and developments the study programme, study programme development, availability of resources, the study process, teaching staff and students are assessed).

Quality assessment takes place once every seven years, unless the Agency has established a term of up to three years based on the results of quality assessment. The result of quality assessment is a decision made by the Assessment Council of the Agency.



## **Institutional accreditation**

Institutional accreditation focuses on the internal quality assurance system of the educational institution and the functionality thereof, incl. the fulfilment of the tasks, duties and functions of the educational institution, the compliance of the management system with the goals and development plan of the higher education institution.

Higher education institutions are required to undergo institutional accreditation once every seven years, but if the Agency has detected any defects in the previous accreditation, it may grant a term of up to three years and during the term the educational institution must undergo the institutional accreditation again. The decision on institutional accreditation will be made by the Quality Assessment Council of the Agency.

## **Thematic Evaluation**

Thematic evaluation constitutes an element of the new higher education QA system to be phased in the coming years. The purpose of the thematic evaluation is to support changes in the improvement areas that have been identified in completed assessments. Thematic evaluations allow to take stock of the situation, share best practices, and receive independent feedback and recommendations from experts.

Thematic evaluations shall be conducted in some or all higher education institutions. The topics are horizontally relevant and as a rule, related to the quality improvement proposals made during external assessments of study programme groups (i.e. Purposefulness and up-to-dateness of teaching methods; Student assessment; Development of students' key competencies; Involvement of students from all cycles of higher education in RDC activities; etc.). Thematic evaluations predominantly use a research-based assessment method.

Thematic evaluations can be sample-based, but preferably include all of the HEIs (also the vocational education institutions, if appropriate).

## **Higher Education Institutions**

There are two types of higher education institutions in Estonia: universities and professional higher education institutions.

A university is an educational, creative, research and development institution where instruction corresponding to the Standard of Higher Education is provided at the three levels of higher education. Universities provide bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programmes, but may also offer professional higher education programmes. The universities may offer PhD programmes only in the research areas which have been positively evaluated by international expert panel.

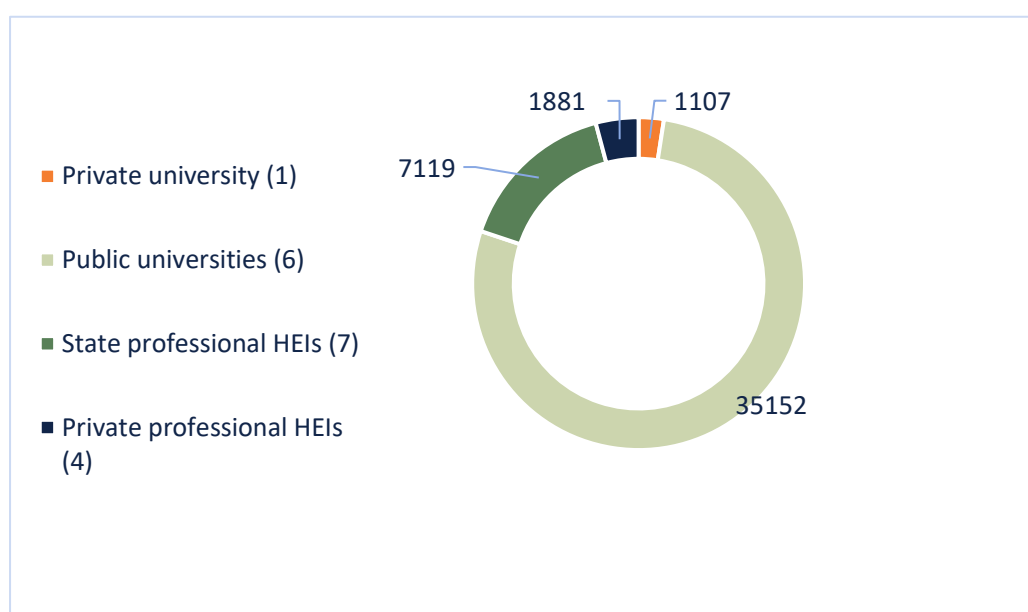




Professional higher education institutions offer professional higher education. A professional higher education institution may also provide master's programmes. The function of an institution of professional higher education is to promote lifelong learning responding to the needs of the labour market, to provide services covering study and development activities, to conduct applied research. In pursuing their mission, institutions of professional higher education cooperate with various institutions and communicate actively with the public, supporting society's development by conducting effective development and innovation activities and applied research in their field.

As to the form of ownership, educational institutions may be state, public, or private.

### Types of HEIs and student numbers in 2021



Source: HaridusSilm (<https://www.haridussilm.ee>)

## Funding of Higher Education

The public and state institutions of higher education are mainly financed from the state budget through activity support for covering study costs, administrative costs, investments and assigned operating costs. In addition, the budgets of higher education institutions include funds received from economic activities and domestic and foreign support; in case of universities, also from the provision of payable services related to their main activity and from research and development and other income.

From 2002 to 2013, outcome-based funding was applied where a higher education institution had to prepare a certain number of graduates at a certain study level. The institutions were mainly ordered to prepare specialists at Master's or Doctoral level. Up to 2013, higher education institutions were financed on the basis of state commissioned education, i.e. based on the number of admitted students agreed with the ministry.



Since 2013, funding of national higher education has been performed on a new basis. Since then, higher education institutions receive activity support for the provision of instruction at the level of higher education which, in general, on the first and second level study is no longer related to the number of specific study places or graduates. An educational institution will decide, on the basis of its profile, the assigned tasks and the existent training capacity, in which fields and how many study places are created. The central idea of the financing reform was to make the funding of universities dependent on the quality and effectiveness of the education, taking into account of the needs of the society. Increase in the funding by 25% compensates for the partial loss of paid study. Financing reform is implemented within the four years of transfer period. The new type of financing model was implemented in full in 2017.

In 2013, the allocation of means from the state budget to the educational institutions for the provision of instruction at the level of higher education took into consideration the volume of state commissioned education presented to the educational institutions in 2012 to the extent of at least 80% and the indicators related to the students reimbursing their study costs, provision of Doctoral studies and activities supporting the studies of national importance to the extent of up to 20%. In 2014 and 2015, allocation of resources from the state budget for the provision of instruction at the level of higher education took into consideration of the volume proportions of the activity support allocated to the education institutions the previous year to the extent of at least 80% and the extent, quality and efficiency of the provision of instruction in the educational institutions, provision of Doctoral studies and activities supporting the studies of national importance to the extent of up to 20%. From 2016 onwards, indicator-based financing is applied to the extent of up to 75% (e.g., the number of admitted students and that of full-time students, the quality of provision of instruction, the number of graduates from a university and the number of graduates in broad groups of studies of national importance, specifications for provision of instruction according to curricula and broad groups of studies, etc.). Universities and institutions of professional higher education are financed from the state budget.

For allocation of activity support to universities, a contract under public law shall be entered into for three years between the university Rector and the Ministry of Education and Research. The contract shall specify the rights and obligations of the parties, liability and procedure for the allocation of activity support. For the performance of the contract under public law, a performance agreement shall be concluded each year as an annex to the contract under public law. The performance agreement sets out basic obligations arising from the mission, objectives and functions of a university and necessities of the state, including the obligations regarding the extent, quality and efficiency of provision of instruction at the level of higher education and the conditions of financing thereof; exceptions to the partial reimbursement of study costs; bases and volume of allocation of student scholarship fund; volume and financing of Doctoral studies; curricula on the basis of which a university is allowed to conduct only part-time study and activities of national importance supporting the provision of instruction at a university.



The purpose of the activity support system is to create equal possibilities for studying to all capable and motivated students and to ensure financial resources necessary for the educational institution. Performance agreements ensure a better possibility for specifying the areas of activity arising from the functions of the higher education institutions, enable to decrease the unreasonable duplication through the effect of financing indicators and support the areas of development of national importance. In addition, other criteria characteristic of competitive higher education can be taken into consideration – to assess the internationalisation of universities, support services for students, cooperation with business sector and development of common curricula and to allocate funds on the basis thereof.

Higher education institutions are, to a small extent, financed from the budgets of local governments. Higher education institutions may accept donations, scholarships, etc. as well as financing from third persons (entrepreneurs, graduates, etc.).

## Fees within Public Higher Education

Since 2013, studying at all universities in public law and state institutions of professional higher education in private law has been free of charge for all students who commenced their studies in the academic year 2013/14. An educational institution is not entitled to demand the reimbursement of study costs from a student who studies full-time following a curriculum (the curriculum is cumulatively completed in the amount of at least 75%), the language of instruction of which is Estonian and who has by the starting semester cumulatively completed the study load subject to completion under the curriculum in the previous semesters (30 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System credit points in a semester, 60 credit points in a year). Thus, from the second semester, the reimbursement of study costs depends on the volume of completed curriculum. The Government of the Republic of Estonia establishes upper limits to the partial reimbursement of study costs per credit point, on the basis of which a higher education institution establishes the procedure and rates for a specific partial reimbursement of study costs (since the academic year 2013/14, it is 50 euros per one credit point; with certain curricula the rate of reimbursement is higher – in the field of study of arts, 100 euros, in medical training, dentistry training and veterinary training, 100 euros, and with aircraft pilot curriculum, 120 euros per credit point).

An educational institution may demand reimbursement of study costs from a student who studies part-time (curriculum is cumulatively completed to the extent of 50-75%) or who follows a curriculum, the language of instruction of which is other than Estonian or who has been deleted from the matriculation register and matriculated again at the same curriculum within two years. A student who has studied within the state commissioned education and completed at least one half of the standard period of a curriculum can start studies at the same academic level without reimbursement of study costs within a period equal to three times the standard period of the curriculum.



The students who had been matriculated before 2013 shall be subject to the rules that were valid upon their admission, i.e. students are engaged either in state commissioned or non-state-commissioned education.

In general, the state does not allocate activity support to private higher education schools. Therefore, students studying in private higher education schools shall pay the tuition by themselves. Private educational institutions are free in establishing the volume of training services.

## Financial Support for Learners

Since the academic year 2013/14, need-based study allowance has been granted to a student who is an Estonian citizen or is staying in Estonia on the basis of a long-term or temporary residence permit or on the basis of a permanent or temporary right of residence in order to cover expenses related to the acquisition of education. In addition, students can also apply for state guaranteed study loan.

Need-based allowance is granted to a student

- who studies full-time and has by the starting semester cumulatively completed at least 75% of the study load subject to completion under the curriculum in the previous semesters or studies full-time in the first semester;
- whose family's monthly income per family member is up to 429 euros.

Need-based allowance is related to the size of the family of a 24-year-old student and the average income per family member. The family members of a student are deemed to be his or her parents, sisters and brothers, half-sisters and half-brothers in case the student is not married or a parent or a guardian of a child; the spouse of the student and/or a minor child whose parent or guardian the student is. The maximum average income calculated for the receipt of the need-based study allowance of students and the amount of study allowance are established by the State Budget Act of the respective year. In 2018, the maximum average income was 429 euros and the amounts of study allowance were as follows. If the average income per family member is up to 107.25 euros, the size of study allowance is 220 euros. If the average income per family member is between 107.26–214.5 euros, the size of allowance is 135 euros and the average income per family member of 214.51–429 euros ensures an allowance of 75 euros.

The students matriculated before the academic year 2013/2014 have the right to apply for need-based study allowance since the academic year 2013/2014.

Since the spring semester of the academic year 2014/2015, students have had the right to apply for need-based special allowance of 135 euros per month. Need-based special allowance is aimed at the students whose application for need-based study allowance has been declined because their earlier income exceeded the maximum average income



calculated for the receipt of need-based study allowance if their income has lately decreased considerably.

From the academic year 2016/2017, the right to apply for need-based special allowance has also been granted to the students matriculated before the academic year 2013/2014.

A Doctoral candidate is entitled to apply for a Doctoral allowance if he or she is enrolled in full-time Doctoral study or part-time Doctoral study in case the reimbursement of study costs is not demanded from him or her; he or she has passed evaluation under the conditions and pursuant to the procedure established by the university or is a first-year doctoral candidate; he or she has not exceeded the nominal period of studies according to the curriculum.

The size of allowance is established by the state budget and in 2018, it was 660 Euros per calendar month, paid for 12 months a year. The study support funds are allocated to an educational institution from the state budget through the budget of the Ministry of Education and Research.

Students who are on academic leave do not have the right to receive a study allowance.

Estonia has undertaken to create additional possibilities for supporting the studies abroad of students and individual development of the academic staff of higher education schools. In 2003, the Ministry of Education and Research, in cooperation with Archimedes Foundation launched the scholarship programme Kristjan Jaak, the objective of which is to support the studies of students of Estonian higher education schools enrolled in Master's or Doctoral study at foreign universities and assignments abroad of students and teaching staff related to study and research. In 2009, the possibilities for studying abroad expanded even further due to the programme DoRa funded from the Social Fund. The programme DoRa supports study migration of teaching staff, study and research of Master's candidates and Doctoral candidates in foreign universities and their participation in a professional conference, seminar or course taking place abroad.

Both students studying at universities in public law and those studying at universities in private law who are enrolled in part- or full-time study and work as teachers and participate in part-time teacher training programmes have the right to obtain a study loan. The students who comply with the requirements can apply for a study loan to the extent that corresponds to the nominal period of studies of the course to the extent of a maximum rate per year (in 2018/19 the maximum rate is 2,000 euros), which has been at the same level for the last five years.

Study loan is granted by credit institutions. The government secures the institution granting the loan the interest and the principal amount of the loan in case of insolvency of the recipient. In order to apply for a loan, a student is required to provide a guarantee or find a surety. The interest rate applied to loans is commercial interest rate, which is

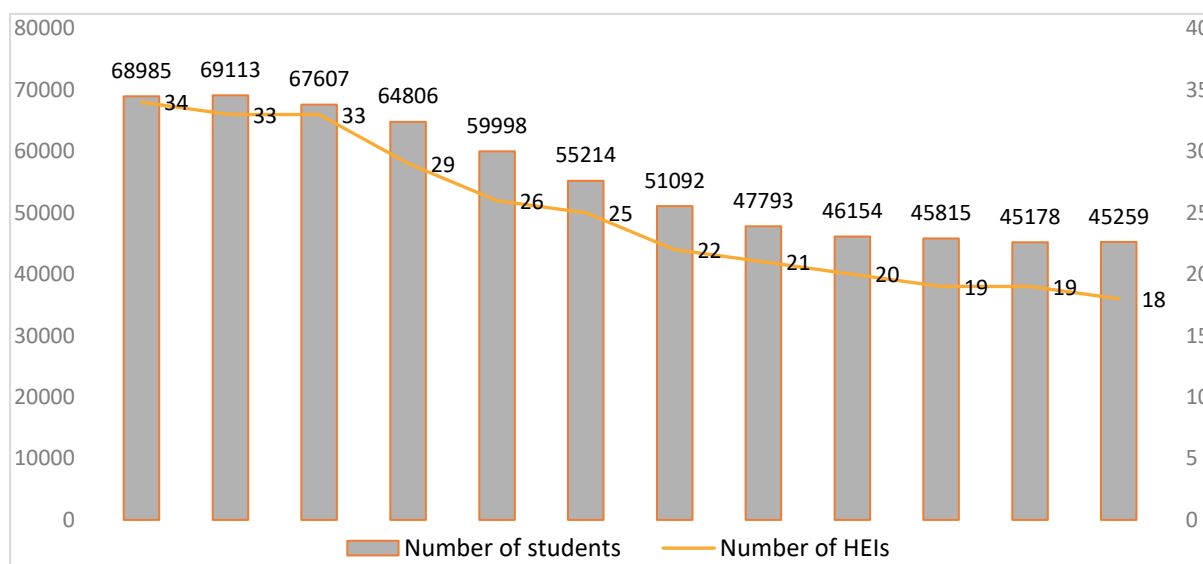


established by law but shall not be less than 5% per year. At the same time, the interest rate payable by students is fixed as 5%. If the actual interest rate exceeds the fixed interest rate, the government shall compensate for the difference.

The repayment of a loan commences 12 months after finishing or interruption of studies. Under certain conditions, repayment of a loan is suspended – e.g., for parents of children up to 3 years of age or for the period of obligatory military service. During these periods, the central government shall pay interest payable on the balance outstanding on the amount of the study loan balance of the recipient of the loan.

Need-based study allowance does not cover all costs related to studying, such as expenses on study materials or subsistence expenses. Most of higher education schools offer students dormitory places that are cheaper than rental apartments offered at the real estate market. Library services are also available.

### Dynamics in number of HEIs and students in Estonia 2009-2021



Source: HaridusSilm ([haridussilm.ee](http://haridussilm.ee))

## Funding of R&D

The main principles of R&D in Estonia are defined in the [Organisation of Research and Development Act](#). The purpose of the Organisation of Research and Development Act is to provide the grounds for the organisation of research and development and to ensure legal means for the preservation and further development of scientific and technological creation as a component of Estonian culture and the Estonian economy.

The main instruments of financing Estonian R&D activities:

1. baseline funding for R&D institutions;
2. research grants;



3. national R&D programmes;
4. financing of centres of excellence and doctoral schools;
5. covering the expenses of R&D

Baseline funding involves the financing of R&D institutions with the aim of realizing strategic development goals, co-financing foreign and domestic projects and opening up new research directions. It is provided from the state budget.

Research grants are applied for in a public competition on the conditions and in accordance with the procedure established by the Estonian Research Council. The Council awards research grants to individual researchers and research groups.

[Research and development programmes](#) are launched and funds allocated by the ministry responsible for the implementation of the programme. Estonia has currently running two national R&D programmes:

- Estonian Language Technology (2018-2027).
- Estonian Language and Cultural Memory (2014–2018).

Through [Estonian Business and Innovation Agency](#) and its sub-units, the Ministry of Economic Affairs finances R&D programmes that involve product development, co-operation with enterprises and entrepreneurs, and technology programmes for priority areas. Enterprise Estonia provides support for new companies as well as assistance to R&D activities of already active companies, NGOs and R&D institutions.

[Infrastructure](#) expenses of a state R&D institution, which are not covered from other funding instruments, shall be covered from the state budget through the budget of the ministry under whose area of government the research and development institution belongs. The Ministry of Education and Research together with the Estonian Academy of Sciences have launched a process of compiling the [Estonian roadmap](#) of research infrastructures. The roadmap is a long-term (10-20 years perspective) planning instrument, which lists research infrastructure units of national importance which are either new or in need of modernizing.

Researcher mobility support enables both Estonian and foreign researchers to carry out research in a new research environment to exchange experience, expand their co-operation networks and obtain new skills. The aim of postdoctoral grant is to support researchers with PhD degree or those with equivalent research qualifications to continue their independent research careers in strong collaborative research groups for up to three years.



## Strategies in the fields of education, research, youth and language policy

[Education Strategy 2021-2035](#)

[RDIE Strategy 2021-2035](#)

[Youth Sector Development Plan 2021–2035](#)

[Estonian Language Strategy 2021-2035](#)

## Databases

**HaridusSilm** is the visual educational statistics database, which provides statistical data about education, research and development, language policy and youth field in Estonia. The database is currently only in Estonian.

**ETIS** is the [Estonian Research Information System](#). ETIS concentrates information on research and development institutions, researchers, research projects and various research results. ETIS is also an information channel for submitting and processing grant applications and for submitting and confirming project reports.

The Estonian Research Information System is an information channel and a tool for researchers as well as R&D institutions. Researchers can use ETIS as a place, where they can submit applications for grant competitions, read news and chat in the forum about research. R&D institutions can submit applications through the Estonian Research Information System and introduce their research results more widely.

