

EUCLASS ALLIANCE
Studying EU Citizenship Education in VET Settings
WP2.1 National Desk Research Report - Estonia

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INTRODUCTION

This document addresses the European Union citizenship education in vocational education and training (VET) context in Estonia. It explains how the topic is described in curriculum, teaching methods and teaching materials used in different schools, also addressing the training needs of teachers.

As of 2025, the Estonian VET system is undergoing a curriculum reform aimed at young students (aged 15-20, after basic school). At the same time, access to free vocational education is being restricted for certain adult groups in order to redirect funds towards younger age groups. As a result, the impact of VET on EU citizenship education is likely to decline for adult learners while increasing for younger students.

In the new curricula, the share of general education subjects (math, languages and social studies) will be expanded for younger students, potentially creating a positive impact and providing opportunities to cover topics related to the EU and its values.

This report examines both the current state and upcoming changes in the curricula.

2. BACKGROUND RESEARCH

This report is based on desk research of policy documents and web sources. Several survey results related to citizenship and EU were reviewed. In addition, qualitative interviews with experts and teachers were conducted.

2.1 MATERIALS AND METHODS

For desk research, both general education and VET were taken into account, as many of the programs, materials and opportunities apply for both fields of education. As well as general public information available for teachers and students regarding to EU Citizenship.

Experts for qualitative interviews were chosen so that different VET schools were represented, also one NGO. Interviews followed the guidelines created within the EUCLASS Alliance project.

Interviewees were:

1. VET school headmaster & EU VET Team member
2. NGO representative & debate educator
3. VET teacher of social studies, entrepreneurship & tourism
4. VET teacher of idea generation & value creation
5. VET teacher for various modules
6. VET school Erasmus+ projects manager

2.2 DEVELOPMENT OF THE DESK RESEARCH

POLICY LANDSCAPE

Social and civic education has been part of the national curricula in Estonia as general subjects for many years.

In general education, the national curriculum states that social and citizenship concept is one of the general competencies, including the following learning outcome:

“Acts as a dialogue-capable member of society in the context of Estonia, Europe, and the entire world.” (Riigi Teataja, 2011)

Estonian Act for Vocational Schools states that giving competences for participation in the life of society is one of the three aims of VET. Two other aims are participation in worklife and in life-long learning (Riigi Teataja, 2013).

In 2022, the Ministry of Education and Research initiated a reform of vocational education, resulting in the development of 4-year curricula (instead of the previous 3-year ones) for young students. They will be entering VET in ages 15-17 after completing 9 years of basic education. Main aim of the curricula reform is to increase general education competences (math, languages, social sciences, etc).

In new curricula, the modules for general subjects, including social and civic education, have been expanded in both content and volume.

The study time of social sciences will increase from 7 credit points to 13 (one credit point is 26 learning hours). Specifically, the topics related to citizenship and society will increase from 3,5 credits to 6 credits. They will offer more time to cover topics like democracy and government, EU and its values.

Draft guidance document for the social sciences states 6 learning outcomes. One is:

“Explains the active role and responsibility of a member of society based on the importance of civic engagement, environmental protection, and human and civil rights in a democratic society.”

This learning outcome includes evaluation criteria:

„Explains the functioning of major international organizations (UN, EU, NATO) and their own opportunities and responsibilities in relation to them in the context of a democratic society.”

Based on this, it can be stated that VET students will encounter basic knowledge on EU and democracy during their studies. New curricula will be piloted starting in academic year 2025-2026. From academic year 2026-2027 all VET curricula for young students will be based on this new concept.

TRAINING AND RESOURCES

Future teachers can acquire EU citizenship education knowledge in various ways. Estonian teacher training programs include courses and modules focused on civic education, including European Union topics.

For working teachers, various projects and initiatives funded by European Union programs support the development of citizenship education. Erasmus+ program offers opportunities for teachers and students to participate in international exchanges and mobilities, increasing awareness of the EU and its values (Erasmus+ ja Euroopa Solidaarsuskorpuse Agentuur, 2025).

Tallinn University offers various courses and training aimed at supporting the professional development of social studies teachers. The master's program "European Studies" at the University of Tartu provides more comprehensive knowledge about Europe.

For teaching materials, virtual social studies textbooks on several e-study platforms can be used.

There are lot of materials accessible on EU on the internet. Different EU institutions have created study materials. These are also translated into Estonian. E.g. there are detailed lesson plans for different age groups on civic education (European Union, 2025).

Teachers can invite experts to their classes for free to talk on democracy, EU policies, NATO etc. (Representative Office of the European Commission, 2025).

Tallinn University has developed a comprehensive methodological tool for teaching the elective course "European Union" (Tallinna Ülikool, 2025).

The European Experience Center in Tallinn, opened in 2024, is a resource for every social studies teacher, offering opportunities from virtual tours and visits to contact exhibitions (European Parliament, 2025).

In addition to official sources from EU institutions and Estonian government, there is website Good Citizen that has been created by the NGOs association (Network of Estonian Nonprofit Organizations, 2025).

Selected students can apply for specific selected activities. Previous president Kersti Kaljulaid has created Democracy Academy. Still the website of this academy states that it is more entered for gymnasium students on general education (President Kaljulaidi Fond, 2025).

It can be concluded that there is widespread availability of general materials, events, speakers on EU that are made available for teachers.

CHALLENGES AND GAPS

National studies, reports, and practices provide several important conclusions about the teaching of European Union citizenship education in Estonian VET institutions.

The results of the 2022 International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) source show that Estonian 8th grade students have a high level of civic knowledge. Estonian students rank fourth internationally, indicating that civic education is well integrated and effective in Estonian basic education.

At the same time, the ICCS study shows that although Estonian youngsters have high knowledge levels, their participation in school and community activities is lower compared to other countries. This suggests a need to provide more practical opportunities for applying civic education and participating in democratic processes (Haridus- ja teadusministeerium, 2025).

2.3 ANALYSIS OF NATIONAL EU CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN VET SETTINGS

Although mentioned in the evaluation criteria, the extent to which EU Citizenship topics are taught in VET varies significantly among educators, ranging from frequent coverage to occasional or rare inclusion.

Social studies teachers definitely need more and specifically targeted training on the principles of European democracy and citizens' rights, as the topics of the training sessions are often too broad. When looking at the continuing education opportunities offered by the European Union, most of them are focused on language learning. Additionally, information on teacher continuing education in Estonia is fragmented and needs a coordinated approach.

3. RESULTS

GAPS AND CHALLENGES OF CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

A primary theme in the interviews was the perceived lack of student interest in EU-related topics, often seen as obligatory rather than engaging. This presents a significant challenge, as these topics are crucial for preparing students to be active and informed European citizens. This is indicating a widespread need to find more effective ways to connect with students on these issues.

Another point of discussion was the abstract nature of EU topics, with many finding EU institutions and processes complex and hard to grasp due to a lack of clear visual connections. This underscores the need for teaching methods that can simplify and make EU concepts more accessible and relevant to students' lives.

The interviews also revealed a disconnect between the perceived importance and actual integration of EU Citizenship education. While some educators recognized the importance of these topics, they often struggled with how to embed them effectively into the curriculum, given the existing pressures and priorities.

Teachers often assume that students have a basic understanding of EU institutions and values, which is not always the case. This assumption can lead to challenges in teaching more advanced topics without revisiting the fundamentals.

Time constraints in the classroom pose a significant challenge to teaching EU Citizenship education effectively. Teachers feel that they need more time to cover the topics thoroughly and engage students in meaningful discussions and activities. With the curricula reform the teachers will have more time to cover these topics.

One major challenge is the shortage of teachers, which makes it difficult to ensure that EU topics are effectively covered in schools. Efforts have been made to recruit new teachers through training programs, but more structured support is needed.

There is a growing concern about democratic values, as political opinions are becoming more polarized, making it crucial to teach students about respectful dialogue, critical thinking, and the importance of democracy. While some teachers feel there is no shortage of materials—especially with extensive resources available through EU institutions and official channels—language remains a barrier, as many materials are only available in English.

To summarize: students' interest, language barriers and availability of teachers and limited study hours dedicated to the EU Citizenship are main challenges.

BEST PRACTICES OF TEACHING METHODOLOGIES

Based on the insights shared by the educators, here are some practices that could be implemented by other teachers:

- *Start with the basics:* ensure that students have a foundational understanding of EU institutions, processes, and key concepts before delving into more complex issues.
- *Make it relevant:* connect EU topics to students' lives, interests, and future aspirations. Show them how EU policies and decisions impact their communities and their own opportunities. One teacher emphasizes storytelling over pure facts, presenting a coherent narrative on the role of the EU and NATO in Estonia's development.
- *Use diverse teaching methods:* incorporate a variety of interactive and engaging methods to cater to different learning styles and maintain student interest. One teacher participated on a video contest organised by European Commission.
- *Encourage critical thinking:* foster a classroom environment where students feel comfortable expressing their opinions, questioning assumptions, and engaging in constructive debates.
- *Provide opportunities for hands-on learning:* utilize project-based learning, case studies, role-playing, and simulations to make EU topics more tangible and relatable.

A key perspective is that civic education should be approached from a comparative and multi-level perspective, considering local, national, and European contexts.

TEACHER TRAINING

Teachers emphasize the value of practical training, such as workshops, online courses, webinars, and conferences. Interactive teaching approaches, particularly role-playing and

simulation-based learning, are seen as highly effective. Short, focused workshops could be designed to teach students practical skills, such as writing formal requests or petitions to EU institutions, making these lessons more engaging and applicable to real life.

Collaboration with colleagues is also considered important, though the best way to organize peer learning groups or mentorship programs remains unclear. Teachers would benefit from more opportunities to discuss best practices and challenges with one another. Additionally, regular visits from EU representatives would provide valuable firsthand insights. Visiting EU institutions with students would also be an excellent way to deepen their understanding of how the EU functions and encourage greater civic engagement.

MEPs and policymakers could play a more active role in educating the public on EU matters, making the subject more approachable and relevant for students of all backgrounds.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In Estonia, the integration of EU citizenship education within VET is currently undergoing significant transformation. The reform of the VET curriculum aims to enhance general education, including social and civic studies, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of EU citizenship.

Despite this, challenges persist. A notable gap exists in the practical application of civic knowledge, as students often exhibit high theoretical understanding but limited engagement in community and democratic processes. The abstract nature of EU-related topics can hinder student interest and comprehension, indicating a need for more tangible and relatable teaching methodologies. Furthermore, while resources are available, there is a fragmentation in information and a lack of targeted training for educators, which can impede the effective delivery of EU citizenship education.

To address these challenges, the following recommendations are proposed:

Practical engagement: develop initiatives that encourage active student participation in community and democratic activities, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application.

Diversified methodology: implement interactive and relatable pedagogical approaches, such as project-based learning, simulations, and case studies, to demystify EU concepts and foster student interest.

Teacher training: Establish comprehensive and coordinated professional development programs focused on EU citizenship education, ensuring educators are well-equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills.

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