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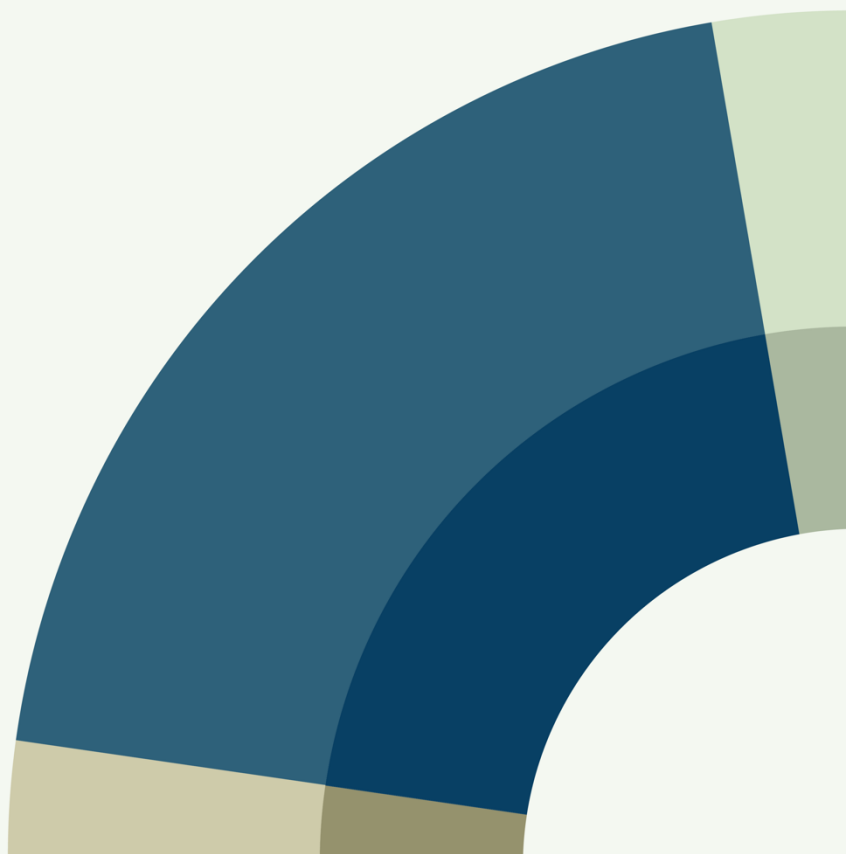
INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE REVIEW

ACCOUNTABILITY POLICY

Summary of country report (3 pages)

Authors: AI generated with human checking
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Estonia



Authorship. This AI generated summary has been created and checked by the CES team (see ces.partners/resources/methodologies). It is based on the original Country Reports created by EPPI. The author of the full report has not made final checks for accuracy.



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Estonia – AI generated Accountability Policy summary

RQ1: Purposes, Values and Aims

The accountability system in Estonian secondary education is defined by the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act (2010), which aims to ensure educational quality, efficiency, and legality, and to support school development through mandatory School Development Plans. These aims align with the Education Strategy 2021-2035 goals for evidence-based decisions and public transparency. Core values include trust, shared responsibility, transparency (via EHIS and HaridusSilm), inclusion, and continuous improvement. While not explicitly linked to learning theories, the system reflects the Lifelong Learning Strategy's focus on learner-centeredness. Since the 1990s, priorities shifted from compliance toward a trust-based, data-driven, improvement-oriented, and risk-based evaluation framework.

RQ 2 – Levels, measures, and mechanisms of accountability

Estonia employs a multilevel accountability structure, characterised by a low-stakes, highly decentralised governance model that prioritises trust and autonomy over external controls. The system balances vertical mechanisms (state-led oversight) with highly supportive horizontal mechanisms (peer collaboration and internal processes). This framework relies heavily on diagnostic monitoring, encouraging schools to engage continuously in self-evaluation based on a School Development Plan (SDP).

Vertical accountability establishes a hierarchical relationship where schools and local governments report to higher authorities, primarily the Ministry of Education and Research (MoER). The MoER is tasked with overseeing the legality and compliance of educational institutions with national legislation. External evaluations are risk-based, focusing targeted inspections on schools identified through specific challenges, complaints, or concerning trends detected in national data, such as high dropout rates. Inputs for vertical accountability include national standards and curricula, along with comprehensive data from the Estonian Education Information System (EHIS). Outputs include publicly available inspection reports and, when significant deficiencies violate standards, legally binding mandatory precepts. Non-compliance with these precepts can result in financial penalties (up to €10,000) or, for private institutions, the revocation of activity or education licenses.

Horizontal mechanisms emphasise internal improvement, collaboration, and shared responsibility, aligning with the Estonian Lifelong Strategy. Key actors include school staff, who must conduct mandatory internal evaluations at least once during the SDP period (typically three to four years). School boards (boards of trustees), including representatives from parents and teachers, provide input on development plans, fostering stakeholder engagement. Teachers also participate in professional peer reviews to enhance pedagogy,

focusing on aspects like student engagement and differentiation strategies. Outputs, such as self-evaluation findings and SDPs, guide school improvement. Transparency is achieved by making Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) publicly accessible via platforms like HaridusSilm (Education Eye), covering national exam results, PISA scores, graduation rates, equity indicators, and stakeholder satisfaction. Failure to address issues identified through this data can result in increased external oversight, reputational damage, or the loss of local autonomy.

RQ 3 – Managing change and policy processes

Accountability policy change, managed by the Ministry of Education and Research (MoER), follows pre-implementation, implementation, and evaluation stages. The Education Strategy 2021–2035 was developed by integrating previous evaluation findings and consulting expert groups, researchers (including Praxis and the OECD, who provided data), and stakeholders, such as parents and local governments. The reform was motivated by challenges, including the need to reduce high dropout rates and align education with labour market trends and societal developments. Implementation is incremental, with existing systems being refined. For example, a new quality assessment model for general education, developed around 2022, is being piloted from 2024 to encourage school self-analysis. The Estonian Quality Agency for Education (HAKA) supports implementation by offering training and guidance materials to enhance self-assessment capacities. While the strategy acknowledges the need to "increase accountability," it lacks a comprehensive, integrated framework covering all forms of accountability.

RQ 4 – Assessments of effectiveness and evaluation

Evaluation of accountability policy is decentralised and project-based, lacking a systematic process. Assessments are conducted externally by the MoER's External Evaluation Department, and by bodies like the National Audit Office or commissioned institutions. Internal school evaluations conducted by school staff also contribute to monitoring. Explicit success metrics for the accountability system are not defined, but effectiveness is gauged via stakeholder surveys and participation rates. Unintended consequences, including equity gaps and teacher workload, are identified indirectly through EHS data, thematic inspections, and surveys like TALIS. Policy evaluation frequently drives change; OECD reviews and the mid-term evaluation of the Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020 informed Education Strategy 2021–2035 revisions, enhancing alignment with labour market needs.

RQ 5 – Historical, cultural, and political influences

Estonia's accountability system evolved from a Soviet-era, centralised, examination-driven model to a highly decentralised, trust-based system following independence. This reflects a state strategy to foster professional trust, local innovation, and autonomy rather than compliance with central mandates. The system is described as "Decentralised Centralism," maintaining national control through standardised assessments while granting schools significant autonomy for quality assurance and development planning. The system's

legitimacy relies on the expectation that professionals will act as responsible improvement agents, supported by comparative data and resources from the central government. Coherence exists with the education system's emphasis on collaborative improvement, but variability in the quality of self-evaluation practices across schools remains a challenge, dependent on local capacity and motivation

RQ 6 – Impact on outcomes and workforce

External evaluations drive compliance with national standards, yet an unintended consequence is the risk of narrowing the curriculum and discouraging innovation. The accountability system increases transparency through public evaluation reports and helps guide resource allocation to schools identified as underperforming. However, stakeholders often perceive an excessive focus on quantitative metrics, such as test scores, as prioritised over holistic development.

For the education workforce, the accountability system significantly influences teacher beliefs and practices. Research indicates that teachers hold mixed beliefs related to teaching, identified as "teacher-centred" and "student-centred," and attribute different purposes to assessment, including "teaching improvement," "examination," and "school and teacher accountability". This complexity shapes the experience of teachers and their response to reforms. Even though Estonia maintains a generally low-stakes approach, both internal and external assessments can still be perceived as "high stakes" for students and teachers. A noted challenge is the variability in the quality and depth of self-evaluation practices across schools; if local capacity or motivation is limited, the self-evaluation process risks becoming a bureaucratic formality rather than a meaningful tool for improvement.

Timeline- recent accountability reforms

- **1990s:** Comprehensive reforms introduced decentralisation and school autonomy alongside national standards and inspections.
- **Mid-2000s:** Internal evaluations became mandatory for schools, promoting self-assessment and institutional responsibility.
- **2014:** A risk-based evaluation system was adopted, shifting intervention toward underperforming schools based on indicators, moving away from cyclical inspections.
- **2020:** The Estonian Quality Agency for Education (HAKA) expanded its scope to include general and continuing education.
- **c. 2022:** Development and piloting of a comprehensive quality assessment model for general education to enhance school self-analysis and development.