

Compliance of teachers with qualification requirements and subject-specific competencies

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and accurate information on the qualifications and
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Summary of audit results

Did you know that

the qualification requirements for a teacher in basic and upper secondary schools are a master's degree (higher education for teachers of elective subjects), teaching profession and Estonian language proficiency, which complies with the Language Act and the requirements established on the basis of this Act.

The Estonian language proficiency requirement will enter into force on 1 August 2024.

Source: Subsection 74¹ (4) of the [Basic School and Upper Secondary School Act](#)

There is no single definition of **subject-specific competencies**. Generally speaking, subject-specific competencies are knowledge of the content of a subject (speciality, subject area) and the theory and practice (subject didactics) of teaching it. Defined in this broad manner, subject-specific competencies cover all the teacher's competences described in the [professional standard of a teacher](#).

In the audit, the National Audit Office relied on diplomas and certificates of formal and continuing education to assess competence. They show the training or **preparation of teachers to teach the subject**. Independent self-development and the development of subject-specific competencies (e.g. through work experience, mentoring, collaboration, etc.) were not analysed.

The level of knowledge and skills of teachers has a direct impact on the quality of education, but in the opinion of the National Audit Office, the compliance of teachers in Estonia with qualification requirements is further from the national target than shown by official statistics. The Ministry of Education and Research does not have a reliable overview of the compliance of teachers with qualification requirements or a more accurate picture of subject-specific competencies of teachers. The data analysis of the National Audit Office showed that many teachers of natural and exact sciences have not had any subject-specific or didactic training. The problem of a shortage of professional teachers is therefore greater than suggested by the statistics on compliance with qualification requirements. Reliable data are necessary to make timely and relevant teacher policy decisions.

Main observations of the audit

The percentage of teachers who meet the qualification requirements was lower (76%) in the sample of the National Audit Office that consisted of teachers of natural and exact sciences (NEST) than indicated by the data of the Estonian Education Information System (EHIS) for the same teachers (82%). Estonia is far from the national target (90% by 2026).

- The target set in the action plan for ensuring the next generation of teachers sets is that 90% of teachers in general education schools must comply with qualification requirements by 2026. In the opinion of the National Audit Office, this target is unlikely to be achieved, firstly because the trend has been negative in recent years and in 2022, the proportion of teachers meeting the requirements was only 81% (see Figure 1 of the report). Secondly, the Estonian language proficiency requirement will enter into force in 2024, which will result in an additional number of teachers who no longer meet the qualification requirements.
- The problem is that one in four teachers in Estonian general education schools may not meet the qualification requirements. This situation proves once again that it is necessary to proceed decisively with the implementation of the action plan for the next generation of teachers as well as with making other educational policy decisions, for example, with regard to streamlining the school network.

Quality data are needed to make quality decisions, but the data from the Ministry of Education and Research (MER) on the compliance of teachers with qualification requirements is neither accurate nor relevant.

- There are two main reasons for the problem – school leaders make mistakes when assessing qualification requirements because there is too much room for interpretation when assessing compliance, and data is incorrectly entered into EHIS.
- Accurate and relevant data are needed to see changes in the teaching workforce, to understand what needs to be done in order to ensure quality education and how much money and people are needed for this. Therefore, it is worth contributing to the assessment of qualification requirements and streamlining the data in EHIS.

Teaching NEST subjects at a good level requires knowledge of the subject and the subject didactics, but in the sample of the National Audit Office, only 34% of teachers had the necessary training in all the NEST subjects they teach. This is too few. 27% of teachers had not been trained in NEST subjects. This is too many.

- In other words, the preparation of Estonian NEST teachers leaves a lot to be desired.
- The analysis by the National Audit Office showed that in a situation of teacher shortages, lessons in NEST subjects are often taught by other subject or class teachers working at the school, and by [career switchers](#), who often do not have the subject-specific or didactic training required for teaching the subjects.
- These problems suggest that the shortage of professional teachers is a bigger concern in Estonia than the mere statistics on the compliance with qualification requirements indicate.

[Career switcher](#) can be understood as someone who at some point has acquired the education of a teacher, but has not worked as a teacher, or someone who comes from a different educational background and work experience and starts studying to become a teacher and/or working as a teacher.

In Estonia, 60% of class teachers and subject teachers who started working in a general education school for the first time in the 2021/22 school year were over 30 years old, and the average age of all new teachers was 36. Thus, this is unlikely to be the first job for a significant share of beginner teachers and they may be considered career switchers.

Source: [The pulling and pushing forces on the labour market of teachers. Overview of literature](#)

Although the share of teachers who do not comply with qualification requirements is large and many career switchers start teaching, heads of schools, owners of schools and the Ministry of Education and Research have paid little attention to developing the subject-specific competencies of teachers.

- In recent years, the development of subject-specific competences has taken a back seat in the continuing education of teachers, with the focus on developing other competences.
- Subject-specific and didactic competence is critical in teaching, and legislation and according to professional standards, it must be taken into account when recruiting and developing teachers. In the opinion of the National Audit Office, there is no need to emphasise the conditions of subject-specific competence separately in qualification requirements. There are other ways and tools for improving the subject-specific competence of teachers (see the recommendations).

Main recommendations

Recommendations of the National Audit Office to the Minister of Education and Research:

- In order to plan effective teacher policy measures and assess their impact, the Ministry of Education and Research must ensure that data on qualification levels are of high quality. For this purpose, the Ministry of Education and Research must formulate common and clear positions on how to deal with problematic cases when assessing compliance with the qualification requirements and make them available to schools. The monitoring of compliance with the qualification requirements, where the Ministry of Education and Research has combined supervision and advice, must also be continued.
- As an alternative to more effective information, counselling and monitoring, the Ministry of Education and Research could consider the possibility of centrally assessing compliance with the educational requirements in the case of those teachers who meet the qualification requirements, based on the implementing provisions of § 99 of the Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act.
- The Ministry of Education and Research should be more active and systematic in developing the subject-specific competencies of teachers. This means identifying the actual subject competences and development needs of the Estonian teachers, creating a tool for assessing and developing the subject-specific competencies of teachers, making subject and didactic training available to all who want it, and streamlining the data on continuing education in EHIS.

Response of the Minister of Education and Research: The Ministry of Education and Research (from 2024, mainly the Education and Youth Board, to which the Ministry has transferred responsibility for dealing with qualification requirements) will continue to contribute to improving data quality by organising training and information days for heads of schools and supporting schools in entering data into the Estonian Education Information System. In addition, updating the guidelines for assessment of compliance with qualification requirements continues. According to the Minister, it is possible to give schools even more encouragement and support, but as a result of supportive activities, heads of schools themselves should develop the skills and independence to assess compliance with qualification requirements in practice.

The Ministry of Education and Research disagreed with the expectation that the ministry should be more actively and systematically involved in the development of the subject-specific competences of teachers, as this is primarily the responsibility of each employer. However, the ministry is responsible for ensuring that teachers have opportunities for self-development and that funding is available for national priorities. Highlighting subject-specific competencies separately is not right – someone with a good knowledge of the subject may not be a good teacher by default.

The Minister emphasised that in the area of monitoring the assessment of compliance with qualification requirements, the Ministry of Education and Research has been particularly active in recent years, and this has been a very high priority. The Minister agreed that more attention could be given to the development of subject-specific competencies. A number of activities (e.g. within the scope of the Teacher Academy) are therefore planned to address the concerns raised in the audit.

Comment of the National Audit Office: The National Audit Office based its report on the same assumption as the Ministry of Education and Research that the primary responsibility for the development of the knowledge and skills of teachers lies with teachers themselves and their employers. As the small number of new teachers is a problem that has been known for a long time, and the audit showed that the teachers who teach NEST subjects have not had sufficient subject-specific and didactic training, the need to develop the teaching staff remains high. In order to meet the development needs, solutions must also be systematically sought at central government level.

The National Audit Office agrees with the observation that being a good teacher means much more than just knowing the subject he or she is teaching. And yet, the critical importance of the continuous development of subject-specific knowledge and skills as well as the need for better support from the state in this area was emphasised by both the experts interviewed in the audit and the representatives of the professional associations of teachers.

The Ministry of Education and Research has outlined its responsibilities and tasks in the development of the teaching staff both in its response letter and in the concept of continuing education for people working in the area of education and youth. The National Audit Office agrees with the statements made in these documents, but emphasises that the prerequisite for achieving actual results is determined central leadership and that the ministry should be more active in developing the subject-specific competences of teachers in addition to monitoring the assessment of compliance with qualification requirements and dealing with the broader issue of qualification requirements.