

Summary

This study looks at the demand for career services, their accessibility and current usage in Estonia. The study objectives were defined as follows: to determine the level of career management skills in the target groups of career services, plus their expectations and requirements to career services; to assess how helpful career services are in aiding different target groups in making and pursuing their career decisions; to describe how collaboration works in the provision of career services and how the parties rate the career services system and organisation after the career services reform; to put forward recommendations on how to improve and develop career services and impact assessments, based on international practices. The career services reform was implemented in 2019, during which career counselling service used by schools was transferred from Rajaleidja (Pathfinder) centres run by foundation SA Innove to the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund. SA Innove was merged with other educational authorities in 2021 and renamed the Education and Youth Board (HARNO).

The study is based on the data from surveys and interviews carried out in Spring 2021. A combination of online questionnaires and phone surveys was used to survey 18- to 26-year-old youths and 27- to 64-year-old adults. The questionnaire aimed at adults had a separate section for parents who had children between the ages of 15 and 26. As part of the study we also surveyed six general education schools, where we talked to the management, careers coordinators, class teachers and students, as well as the representatives of different career services interest groups, such as the Ministry of Education and Research, the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Unemployment Insurance Fund, the Education and Youth Board. In addition, we surveyed careers services in various higher education institutions, the members of the Association of Estonian Career Counsellors and various employers.

In order to assess the level of career management skills, comparison is required with a previously measured level or with a comparison group. Since no such measure has been previously determined or agreed in Estonia, it is currently not possible to assess the level of career management skills or how it has changed over time. As part of the study, we tested measuring career management skills based on a selection of dimensions from the Career Resources Questionnaire (Hirschi *et al.* 2018 and Marciniak 2020), which we adopted for the Estonian context. The factor analysis revealed, however, that the statements did not describe well the five measured indicators – labour market knowledge, social career support, career confidence, career clarity and participation in life-long learning. In order to be able to assess the level and development of career management skills, it is necessary to formulate and validate suitable measures and to apply them consistently henceforth.

Since the study gathered representative data about the Estonian population in a point of time, we were able to compare the career management skills of different sociodemographic groups with each other. The data revealed that young people who were not in education or in employment and adults who were not working rated their own career management skills at a lower level than those engaged in studying or working. These two target groups need more help from career services than others, incl. help to develop their career management skills.

Based on people's responses, there is a great demand for career services that can help make decisions on learning, professional training and work: the majority of 18- to 26-year-olds said they needed a career service (81–86%); among 27- to 64-year-olds it was 64–70%; and 52–63% of parents said they required some advice or help to support their child. Older people and those with higher education reported lower demand for career services than other groups.

According to school interviews, students have different levels of confidence in their career decisions and consequently different needs for career services. Career services to students should be differentiated based on their levels of career confidence, career management skills and potential career choices. Compared to the majority of students, who continue to upper secondary after basic school, the career choices are more complicated for those who instead choose to go into vocational education – a more common path for special needs students. This is a target group that needs more career services support in making suitable and considered choices.

According to the survey data, slightly more than half of young people and approx. a quarter of adults had used at least one career service in the last two years. The majority of service users among adults were unemployed or inactive. Among the working people, approx. one tenth had used some career services. The three most frequently used career services were same for both young people and adults: visits to companies or meeting employers, individual career counselling or careers information, and group counselling or careers information.

Interviews with general education schools revealed that young people tended to only attend compulsory parts of careers education and counselling. According to teachers, many students who would definitely benefit from developing their career management skills are not making most of these activities as they are optional. At the same time, there are students who develop strong career preferences early on and in these cases their teachers and the students themselves feel that their need for career services is consequently smaller.

Young people and adults who have used career services rate their usefulness at 6–8 on a scale of 10. The usefulness of different services is rated relatively similarly. However, approx. 10% of young people feel that the career service they require does not exist in Estonia. This is partly due to their dissatisfaction with the quality of existing services, but may also be linked to problems finding relevant information. Up to a third of survey respondents had experienced some problems accessing information. The most frequent problem for both young people and adults was that the information was too dispersed. Young people were slightly more likely to have problems with finding information than adults.

Based on the survey of young people and the case studies from schools, students give a relatively low average rating to the careers education and counselling activities offered at general education schools. The usefulness rating for activities in general education schools was 4.7–6.4 on a scale of 10, whereas the graduates of vocational schools rated activities in their schools somewhat higher at 6.1–6.9. The problems voiced by young people included: too little support, careers information too superficial or out of date, not enough individual approach or practical advice or support. In students' view the school was generally of little help in making career decisions and at most some particular teacher or a class teacher was mentioned as a source of useful practical information.

The reasoning behind the career services reform was to reduce duplication of services and, among other things, to provide a smoother transition from studying to working for those young people who were less academic and in danger of dropping out. Policy-makers and career service providers found that it was too early to assess the effects of the reform. One general organisational issue that was mentioned was that due to Estonia's smallness the communication between different institutions was built on personal contacts of a few people, which is something that needs to be turned into a systematic cooperation between institutions. It was also said that the cooperation board that manages career services provision requires a number of practitioner workgroups by its side to develop study materials for schools, training for career specialists and teachers, and other such activities.

From schools' point of view, it doesn't matter which exact authority provides career counselling and careers information service. The current cooperation between schools and the Unemployment Insurance Fund is well organised and functions well, and the career services offered outside of school are highly regarded. There are, however, some general education schools that lack sufficient capacity to organise the provision of services despite the preparedness from the Unemployment Insurance Fund. This has been especially noticeable in Covid times. In a few cases schools had experienced that the Unemployment Insurance Fund did not have enough resources to provide sufficient volumes of suitable services to all.

The study covers a large number of generic and specific subject areas, which also means that our recommendations vary in scope. Below is a brief summary of main recommendations. More detailed recommendations for specific activities and services can be found in Section 6.

- At the moment, different schools apply very different practises and approaches to careers education and counselling. It is necessary to develop an ideal careers education and services model for schools, which would clearly define the school's role in it (e.g. does it only share information and make opportunities visible, or does it also support making choices, develop skills and offer guidance), and provide a set of recommended activities for careers education. The Unemployment Insurance Fund with its career counselling and careers information service must have a clear position in that model with its services meaningfully linked to all other careers education activities.
- There is currently no coherent system in school career services that would support career decisions; students often fail to see the link between the activities and their career management skills. It is necessary to address this issue and create a system that would ensure that the activities planned to support career decisions and develop career management skills are accordingly objectivised for and by students, that they are meaningful and can be supplemented by further activities if necessary.
- To help create career services systems in smaller schools and those at the periphery of county centres. Including helping to organise activities to develop career management skills (e.g. job shadowing, transport, introducing higher education opportunities, organising business studies, fairs etc.) by involving networks outside of school if necessary. To ensure that no child from these schools would miss out on career counselling or careers information service.

- To ensure that students that consider moving into vocational education after basic school have access to more in-depth and comprehensive career services that support their decision-making.
- To ensure that all counsellors and specialists working with schools have appropriate training to work with young people, to inspect the training of specialists, to make provisions for ongoing training and monitor their performance.
- The design of the career counselling service must allow for the differentiation of counselling based on the student's competence level and their potential career choices. To improve the effectiveness of counselling by gathering important information about the student as a preparatory activity. To increase the number of career counselling sessions to a minimum of two at Stage 3 in general education schools and at upper secondary level. To ensure access to counselling in Russian to all students that may need it. To do away with the possibility to replace an individual career counselling with a group counselling.
- Currently, employers do not see the need to offer specialist career services to their employees. However, a large number of working and non-working adults consider career services to be important to them, which means these should be continued. Adults, incl. working adults, expressed interest in career services that offer practical work experiences – provision of this should be considered.
- To supplement the Career Services Cooperation Board with practitioner level workgroups for at least the following areas: developing study and guidance materials, ongoing training for teachers and career specialists, competence measuring and impact assessment of career services. To harmonize ongoing training in careers education for teachers and to harmonize the content and topics of ongoing training for career specialists at the Unemployment Insurance Fund.
- Schools regard highly the employers' associations and non-profit networks that help them provide careers education activities at schools. Since there is now a proliferation of such employer and other networks as well as intermediary projects and organisations, the cooperation between schools and employers should be systematised in a way that would provide everybody with a clear picture of which organisations can be approached with which questions and activities.
- In order to be able to measure career services, clear systems and measures need to be created at all levels. It would also be a good idea to use the current situation to experiment with different career services solutions in different schools to determine most suitable solutions.