



Matching Practices for Elementary Schools – Estonia

Lauri, Triin, Kaire Pöder, and André Veski¹

Relevant country background

“Matching in Practice” is a research network that brings together the growing community of researchers in Europe working on the various aspects of assignment and matching in education and related labour markets.

These country profiles are part of a collective effort by network members to map matching practices across Europe

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The Estonian education system is largely decentralized. Local authorities are responsible for providing general education (from pre-primary to upper secondary), monitoring compulsory school attendance, and maintaining pre-primary institutions and general education schools. School education is compulsory and municipality-funded from age 7 till the end of lower-secondary school (in total 9 years).

Most schools in Estonia are public (only 1.3 per cent of primary and secondary level educational expenditure is private) (OECD 2012). In addition, most private schools (90 per cent; see European Commission, 2009) also receive public funding, but parents are allowed to make extra contributions.

Schools in Estonia have a considerable degree of autonomy. They decide on teaching duties, staffing, and they allocate operating expenditures (Eurydice, 2012). The main decision-making authority of a school is the school’s headmaster.

Estonia has a population of about 1.3 million, of whom 69 percent are native Estonians and 26 per cent of Russian origin. Most of the non-native population settled in Estonia between 1950s and 1980s when Estonia was part of the Soviet Union. The language of instruction is Estonian or Russian; all Russian-speaking schools offer Estonian language as a compulsory course. In 2009, approximately 14 per cent of all general educational institutions had Russian as their language of instruction. Starting from 2011 a minimum of 60% of classes must be taught in Estonian in those schools.

¹Lauri: Tallinn University of Technology - School of Governance, Law and Society, triin.lauri@tlu.ee. Pöder: Tallinn University of Technology - School of Economics and Business Administration, kaire.poder@ttu.ee. Veski: Tallinn University of Technology Institute of Informatics, andre.veski@gmail.com.

During the Soviet era, children were traditionally assigned to public schools according to their home address. Limited choice was introduced in 1993: parents obtained the right to apply to a school outside of their catchment area if it was tagged as “inter-district”. The distinction between inter- and intra-district schools was enforced by local municipalities by discretion. The “inter-district” tag was mostly given to high-reputation historical elite schools (which also existed in pre-soviet era). Many of them have a special emphasis either on language, math or music. The choice for inter-district schools had not only to be initiated by the parents, but in most cases also justified by some sort of special need – relocation, extraordinary parents’ job conditions, or some other special circumstance. Moreover, the school heads had the authority to accept or reject these applications.

Even though the main principle underlying the school system was to assign students to local schools, the local policy regarding the inter-district schools de facto allowed some comprehensive schools to select their students. This selection has taken the form of aptitude tests, where in early spring inter-district schools run school-specific entrance tests where 6-7 year-old kids are assessed based on spelling ability, problem-solving skills (math) and sometimes foreign language or drawing skills.

In 2010, the new Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act was passed to regulate school choice and apply centrally-determined admission criteria where proximity, sibling status, and parental preferences were promoted (PGS 2010). However, the formulation allowed for multiple interpretations of the priority criteria. For example, in the capital city Tallinn, the emphasis was laid on parental preferences in 2011. The result was the creation of an unregulated (decentralized) market for public schools with the abolishment of all catchment zones. Due to panicking parents and massive dissatisfaction with choice, in 2012 the status quo was re-established by tagging schools again as intra- and inter-district schools. The only difference compared to the situation before 2011 is the introduction of a so-called medium category among oversubscribed schools. These medium category schools have both intra- and inter-district classrooms, the latter keeping aptitude tests.

Summary box

Organization of education	National
Stated objectives of enrolment policy	Every student has the right to a seat.
Who's in charge?	Local authority in the case of intra-district schools; schools in the case of inter-district schools.
In place since	2010 with the main principles established by law; interpretation and admission practices varies across local authorities (and are subject to annual changes).
Available capacity	Upper (and lower) limits to class sizes imposed by law, local authorities can enforce exceptions.
Timing of enrolment	Starting date for registrations is set by local authority. Differs for inter-district schools and intra-district schools. Inter-district school enrollment results are announced before the intra-district registration process starts.
Information available to parents prior to enrolment	League tables based on state conducted graduation exam results,

period	admission criteria and schedules for admission tests available at individual schools
Restrictions on preference expression	Students apply to inter-district schools by taking their entrance examination. For intra-district schools students list up to three schools, but without preference ordering.
Matching procedure	Rural schools: Decentralized admission first-come-first-served basis Inter-district: Decentralized admissions: school proposing Deferred Acceptance to students with higher exam scores, students can either accept or reject. This is repeated until no more allocations or run out of time. Intra-district: Sequential allocation based on the student's set of acceptable schools with remaining capacity and where s/he has highest priority (by siblings or distance or both).
Priorities and quotas	For inter-district schools there are no priorities or quotas. For intra-district schools the priorities are based on sibling status and distance from home.
Tie-breaking	Students are considered in a random order

Description of current practices

Under Estonian law, every pupil is guaranteed a seat in a school. Proximity, sibling status and parental preferences can be used to determine priorities in case of excess demand (PGS 2010). At the same time, the wording of 2010 Act is so loose that, for instance, in the case of Tallinn, it has enabled to implement either decentralized choice (2011) by aptitude tests and/or centralized assignment by prioritizing siblings and/or proximity (from 2012 on).

School admission practices differ according to geography and the inter- versus intra-district status of schools. In rural areas, there is usually no congestion problem and seats are allocated on a first-come-first-served basis. In urban areas, admissions are organized differently according to the status of the school. For oversubscribed intra-district schools, student allocation is decided by a special commission at the level of the local authority, using as inputs the list of (maximum 3) acceptable schools that parents indicated as well as pupils' sibling status and residence. The exact procedure is not explicitly stated but it is understood to be sequential: pupils are considered in turn and the commission tries to allocate them to the acceptable school with remaining capacity for which they benefit from the highest priority. When all the listed schools are full, the student is assigned to a closest school that still has free seats.

School admission for inter-district schools/classes is decentralized. Acceptance criteria are decided by school heads. All inter-district schools/classes run entrance tests to select applicants. Parents do not submit rank order list but instead apply to every inter-district school in which they are interested by

taking the exams. If an application is accepted then the parent can confirm or reject the school if he/she has a better option. In the latter case the position is offered to the next student. In the event a student is rejected from all inter-district schools he can default to his intra-district school as no student is left without a seat.

Performance

The latest legal amendments to the Schools Act of 2010 have tried to centralize matching and prioritized proximity and siblings, but the effect of these amendments is not yet clear. Additional specific features of the system are: the remarkable autonomy of the inter-district schools over students' admissions and the marginal share of privately operated schools. The latter indicates that the choices have to be made within a public school system (in a single track system there are no substantial differences among schools neither in terms of curricula nor regarding leadership or teaching methodology).

Recent policy change

2010 Basic and Upper Secondary School Act, According to this national act, in case of over-subscription the school's admission formula should take into account proximity, sibling status and, if possible, the preferences of parents. However, designing and imposing concrete regulation is the responsibility of municipalities.

2011 Market experiment in Tallinn, where catchment areas were abolished and restored again later in 2012. Resulting also with some changes in admission criteria – intra-district schools have centralized matching with sibling and/or proximity priority.

Perceived issues

In Estonia the school choice practice permits testing children for admission to inter-district primary schools. All these schools are public, equally financed and rely on the same curriculum. 'Quality' differences are indicated by league tables – annually published results of state exams by schools.

The lack of information about test requirements has created a demand-driven phenomenon – preparatory preschools for inter-district schools. These prep-schools offer school-year-long courses to prepare children for the entrance tests and charge fees. In some extreme cases, parents enroll their children in multiple prep-schools or hire private tutors from the schools they wish to apply to, hence providing additional revenue for the inter-district schools. At the same time, the attendance rate of public preschools (generally known as kindergartens in Estonia) remains above 90%.

In general Estonia displays good results in international comparisons, both in terms of scores and educational equity (see PISA 2012 for instance). However, taking into account the increasing phenomenon of prep-schooling and harsh competition for inter-district schools, socio-economic and performance inequality is likely to rise. The segregation effect – low-SES children go to 'less good' schools – is the outcome of the current practices (Pöder and Lauri, 2014a; Pöder and Lauri, 2014b). Different components of family background characteristics, the family's educational strategy (prep-schooling) and location (or manipulation of the home address) affect the success in aptitude tests.

For inter-district schools, the time constraint placed on the process means that the decentralized matching might not fully execute the Deferred-Acceptance algorithm and the result might not be a stable match.

For intra-district schools the stated set of acceptable schools is capped at three. These might not be truthfully reported by the students, as they try to list schools that they like and schools where they have a reasonable chance (where they have higher priority) to be accepted.

Existing data

School-level data are available in EHIS (Estonian Education Information System) (in Estonian): <https://enda.ehis.ee/avalik/avalik/oppeasutus/OppeasutusOtsi.faces>

Legal texts

Webpage of the ministry of Education: <http://www.hm.ee/?1>

In particular:

PGS. Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act (2010)

<https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/13337919> (in Estonian)

Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act (1993)

<https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/28542> (in Estonian)

Other resources and references

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http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/eurybase/national_summary_sheets/047_EE_EN.pdf

[2] Eurydice (2012). Key Data on Education.

http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/eurydice_en.php

[3] Pöder, K. and Lauri, T. (2014a). When public acts like private: The failure of Tallinn school choice mechanism. European Educational Research Journal, Vol 2(forthcoming).

[4] Pöder, K. and Lauri, T. (2014b). Will Choice Hurt? Compared to What? School Choice Experiment in Estonia. TUTECON Working Paper No. WP-2014/3, Tallinn University of Technology, Working Paper Series.

[5] OECD 2012. Education at a Glance 2011: OECD Indicators, OECD Publishing.

[6] PISA 2012 Results in Focus What 15-year-olds know and what they can do with what they know. <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-overview.pdf>

MiP Country Profiles downloadable from matching-in-practice.eu

MiP Country Profile 1. Cantillon, Estelle (2011), [Matching practices for elementary schools – Belgium \(French-speaking region\)](#).

MiP Country Profile 2. Kübler, Dorothea (2011), [University admission practices – Germany](#).

MiP Country Profile 3. Irving, Rob (2011), [Matching practices for entry-labor markets – Scotland](#).

MiP Country Profile 4. Kiselgof, Sofya (2011), [Matching practices for universities – Ukraine](#).

MiP Country Profile 5. Biró, Péter (2011), [University admission practices – Hungary](#).

MiP Country Profile 6. Biró, Péter (2012), [Matching practices for secondary schools – Hungary](#).

MiP Country Profile 7. Chen, Li (2012), [University admission practices – UK](#).

MiP Country Profile 8. Chen, Li (2012), [University admission practices – Ireland](#).

MiP Country Profile 9 Cantillon, Estelle and Koen Declercq (2012), [University admission practices – Belgium](#).

MiP Country Profile 10. Chen, Li (2012), [Matching practices for elementary schools – Ireland](#).

MiP Country Profile 11. Chen, Li (2012), [Matching practices for secondary schools – Ireland](#).

MiP Country Profile 12. Manlove, David (2012), [Matching practices for primary and secondary schools – Scotland](#).

MiP Country Profile 13. Merlino, Luca Paolo and Antonio Nicoló (2012), [Matching practices for elementary schools – Italy](#).

MiP Country Profile 14. Merlino, Luca Paolo and Antonio Nicoló (2012), [Matching practices for secondary schools – Italy](#).

MiP Country Profile 15. Merlino, Luca Paolo and Antonio Nicoló (2012), [University admissions practices – Italy](#).

MiP Country Profile 16 Hiller, Victor and Olivier Tercieux (2013), [Matching practices in secondary schools – France](#).

MiP Country Profile 17 Calsamiglia, Caterina (2014), [Matching Practices for elementary and secondary Schools – Spain](#).

MiP Country Profile 18 Lauri, Triin, Kaire Põder, and André Veski (2014), [Matching practices for elementary schools – Estonia](#).

MiP Country Profile 19. Salonen, Mikko A.A. (2014), [Matching practices for secondary schools – Finland](#).

MiP Country Profile 20 Terrier, Camille (2014), [Matching practices for secondary public school teachers – France](#).

MiP Country Profile 21 Basteck, Christian, Katharina Huesmann, and Heinrich Nax (2015), [Matching practices for secondary schools – Germany](#)

MiP Country Profile 22 Cantillon, Estelle (2015), [Matching practices for secondary schools – Belgium \(French-speaking region\)](#).