# The approach to learning and how it is changing: A summary[[1]](#footnote-2)

Explanation of objective 1 of the Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020

## Background

The Estonian Lifelong Learning Strategy 2020 introduced the term ‘approach to learning’, and changing this approach is one of the strategic goals. This document suggests a framework of reasons and objectives for changing the approach to learning based on the Estonian context and the broader school culture[[2]](#footnote-3) in which the change will take place. The objective of the framework is to provide a background and support to practitioners, in particular educational institutions and their partners to help them understand the broader picture in which their activities will be placed.

## What is approach to learning?

An approach to learning is an understanding of the **goals** of learning, the **ways** learning takes place and the **relationships** between the participants of the learning process, as well as the purposeful implementation of this understanding. An approach to learning is part of a broader school culture. Updating the approach to learning requires professionals who show initiative and can lead the process of changing the management of school life, modernising the content of learning and teacher training, and using time in school and outside of school learning environments more effectively than before.



Physical, mental and social learning environment

**Changing demand for education**

Learning content and **APPROACH TO LEARNING**

Changes in the labour market

Social changes

Technological development

Political choices

Teacher
training

**LEARNER’S DEVELOPMENT**

Subjective well-being

Collaborative skills

Learning skills

Self-regulation

Subject knowledge and skills

Lifelong learning

Openness

Self-fulfilment

Leadership and organisation of school life

**Broader goals**

**Learning objectives**

**School culture**

**Figure 1.** Approach to learning, reasons for changing it, factors supporting changes in school culture, objectives and the broader goals of the changes.

## Why does approach to learning have to change?

Changing the approach to learning is a way in which a school can adapt to the changing demands for education in society as a whole, the labour market and technological developments. The need for a change also arises from political choices, i.e. what kind of future do we want to see and how can we respond to the developments coming from the rest of the world, incl. global changes in education. In addition to subject knowledge and skills, cross-curriculum skills and skills that go beyond subjects (key-competences) – such as communication and collaboration, the skill of critically selecting and using knowledge and making informed decisions, and the ability to work in different environments and in cooperation with representatives of other areas – have become more important.

## Objectives of changes in the approach to learning

The broader goal of learning is to cultivate a cohesive society created by educated and responsible persons. In addition to self-fulfilment – the realisation of one’s interest and abilities – education shall also provide the skills required for coping in life, incl. in the world of work. In the future, this will also mean being more open to change in order to understand the developments in one’s surroundings both locally and globally, and to be ready for constant self-development and lifelong learning. The specific objectives supported by changes in the approach to learning are:

(1) Good **subject knowledge and skills** as well as vocational and professional skills remain important for coping in life and continuing one’s education.

(2) **Learning skills** create opportunities for constant self-improvement, the acquirement of new skills and knowledge in and outside schools as well as independently later in life. In order to learn successfully, people need to be able to motivate themselves, concentrate their attention on achievable and rational objectives, and make an effort to achieve the desired results, using various – both subject-specific and general – learning strategies and techniques.

(3) **Collaborative skills** are important in learning as well as in future work. The skills of managing and motivating people and negotiation skills can also be seen as components of collaborative skills. Collaborative skills are based on emotional and social intelligence, i.e. skills of understanding and influencing the behaviour, thinking and emotions of oneself and others in different situations.

(4) **A self-regulated and independent** member of society is able and ready to define one’s needs and goals, choose well-considered ways for achieving these and evaluation of results, and be responsible for one’s actions and choices.

(5) **Subjective well-being** is related to better physical and mental health, and the absence of behavioural and addiction problems. Well-being at school also influences how a person generally copes in life, their performance at school and academic success, the probability of graduation and how people proceed with their education.

## How does approach to learning change?

Changing the approach to learning means changes in the learning content (curricula), learning strategies and techniques and teaching methods, and the relationships between those participating in learning. The three most important directions of change in the approach to learning are:

1. **constructivist approach,** which is based on the principles that learning is individual, active and activity-based, and takes place in a specific context. This means that the existing knowledge and skills base of the learners should be evaluated on a broader scale and the developments in learning psychology shall be taken into account;
2. **collaborative learning,** which means working towards a common goal. Maximising learning by every participant as well as other members of the group is important here. Collaborative learning creates more cohesion at schools, in communities and in society as a whole;
3. **autonomy,** which means moving towards the increased decision-making rights and freedom of action of the school, teachers and learners. Studies indicate that a more autonomous operational model supports the positive climate of a school, inner motivation of participants and is related to better learning outcomes, subjective well-being and self-regulation.

## Changes in school culture that support the approach to learning

Changes in the approach to learning are supported by leadership and the organisation of school life, problem-based and real-life related content of studies, teacher training and environments that favour collaboration.

1. **School management** shall distance itself from unnecessary hierarchy and control, instead moving towards increasing democracy, participation and decision-making rights as well as freedom of action of a school, teacher and learner. In addition to the lesson-based organisation of studies, the school day should also be considered as a whole and opportunities to study outside the school environment should be used more often. Engaging with parents and the wider community is also necessary in changing the approach to learning.
2. **Learning content** needs to be chosen and curricula to be updated in response to the constantly changing demand for education. This requires the systematic monitoring of developments in education.
3. The **teachers,** their pedagogical beliefs and capabilities, which include a broad *repertoire of teaching strategies* and the ability to create *relationships based on partnership* with the learners in the learning process, play a big role in changing the approach to learning.
4. *Collaborative learning* using *inquiry-based* exercises and projects, which have been placed in an *authentic* context, are an important part of **effective and supportive learning environments.** In order to create and maintain learners’ interest, it is important to introduce *variety* in learning environments and the learning process by learning *outside the school* and using different *technologies.* In addition to learning, attention should be given to the social and emotional needs of the learners, i.e. *to be accepted* and to feel *safe.* Breaks that offer opportunities for *physical movement* lead to better behaviour in class and help prevent school exhaustion.

## Monitoring changes in the approach to learning

Detailed changes in the approach to learning should be monitored at the level of specific schools associated with the provision of assistance and advice, e.g. by the educational innovation centres of universities. A monitoring programme is being prepared for evaluation of the changes in school culture and in the approach to learning nationwide – the **well-being of learners and teachers, their collaboration** and **autonomy** are measured within the scope of well-being surveys. It is important that feedback from learners, teachers and the community is obtained. The indicators can be improved, if necessary, after the first data collection and analysisin 2017.

1. This is a summary of the overview paper describing the foreseen changes in approaches to learning and teaching (shortly approach to learning) in Estonian education. Many contributors from Tallinn University, the University of Tartu and the Ministry of Education and Research participated in the preparation of this material. Two reviews of scientific literature commissioned by the Ministry of Education and Research are important points of reference: UT (2017). Report of the research project “A Systematic review of literature to find measuring instruments suitable for evaluation the changes in an approach to learning”. Tartu: UT. <http://hdl.handle.net/10062/55715>; Heidmets, M. (2017). Approach to learning: theories, studies, measurement. An analytical review. TU: School of Educational Sciences. <http://hdl.handle.net/10062/55716> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. This document uses the terms schools and teachers, by which we also mean other educational institutions and lecturers. The term ‘learner’ has been used instead of ‘pupil’ or ‘student’. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)