

CHAPTER 1.

Introduction

Early leaving from education and training (ELET) is linked to unemployment, social exclusion, and poverty. There are many reasons why some young people give up vocational education and training (VET) prematurely: personal or family problems, learning difficulties, or a fragile socioeconomic situation. The way the VET system is set up and the environment in individual VET institutions are also important factors.

Since there is no single reason for early leaving, there are no easy answers. Policies to reduce early leaving from VET (ELVET) must address a range of triggers and combine education and social policy, youth work and health-related aspects such as drug use or mental and emotional problems.

Cedefop carried out the present study focusing on the contribution that VET can make to reducing ELET. The first volume of the study examined quantitative data to understand better the size of early leaving from VET and the factors leading to it (Cedefop, 2016). Volume II looks into the potential of VET policies to reduce early leaving from education, focusing on the following main issues:

- (a) understanding the role of VET within the policy arena addressing ELET;
- (b) analysing the features of VET measures that are effective at tackling ELET;
- (c) examining the conditions needed for evaluating and mainstreaming successfully VET policies and measures.

Conclusions aim to assist national policy-makers and decision-makers at different levels in improving VET policies to tackle ELET. By identifying good practices and existing gaps in policy impact evaluation, the study aims to support policy-makers and evaluators in their decisions on:

- (a) what indicators should be monitored and against which indicators a measure/policy should be evaluated;
- (b) which approaches and methods to choose in drawing conclusions from the change and how this is related to the measure or policy implementation;
- (c) how to make judgements about programme performance.

The study identifies indicators that can be useful to evaluate the impact of policies or programmes to tackle early leaving and provides examples of robust evaluations in this field.

Based on the findings presented in this paper, plus additional sources and evidence, Cedefop is developing an electronic toolkit for professionals designing

and implementing measures to tackle ELET to be available in 2017. The toolkit aims to provide guidance on:

- (a) how to identify early leavers and those at risk of early leaving;
- (b) how to intervene to keep them in or bring them back to the system, with a focus on VET approaches and methodologies;
- (c) how to evaluate the measures implemented.

The toolkit will be populated by examples of good practice and tools.

The following subsections provide the main elements of the national and EU context for VET in addressing early leaving, and reflect on existing gaps in understanding what works and why.

1.1. VET in national and EU early leaving policy

The definition of early leaving from education and training (ELET) used at EU level refers to ‘those young people who leave education and training with only lower secondary education or less, and who are no longer in education and training’ (European Commission, 2013a, p. 8). European statistics measure early leaving rates as the percentage of 18 to 24 year-olds with only lower secondary education or less and no longer in education or training ⁽⁴⁾.

Numerous policy documents at European level have identified the challenges of labour market integration and social inclusion for disadvantage groups including early leavers considered to be at risk of poverty or social exclusion. The Europe 2020 headline target reducing ELET to less than 10% has kept this issue high on national policy agendas and has contributed to promoting VET reforms (European Commission, 2015a).

Today, Member States seem to be on the right track, as ELET has been declining over recent years ⁽⁵⁾ but huge discrepancies remain between and within Member States. In 2014, an average of 11.1% of young people (aged 18 to 24) in

⁽⁴⁾ Early leavers from education and training are defined as persons aged 18 to 24 fulfilling the following two conditions:

- (a) the highest level of education or training attained is ISCED 0, 1, 2 or 3c short;
- (b) no education or training has been received in the four weeks preceding the survey. The reference group to calculate the early leaving rate consists of the total population of the same age group (18 to 24). All measurements come from the EU labour force survey (LFS).

⁽⁵⁾ Eurostat. Europe 2020 indicators – education: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Europe_2020_indicators_-_education#Early_leaving_from_education_and_training_is_declining

the EU-28 did not qualify in upper secondary education: in Spain, Malta and Portugal more than 20% of those in education and training left prematurely with Slovenia and Croatia at the other extreme at less than 5% (European Commission, 2015c).

The *Council recommendation of 28 June 2011 on policies to reduce early school leaving* notes that ‘vocational schools face a particular responsibility and challenge with respect to the reduction of early school leaving’ (Council of the EU, 2011, p. 4). In line with this, and focusing specifically on VET, the *Bruges communiqué* invites EU Member States to ‘maximise the contribution of VET to reducing the percentage of early leavers from education to below 10% through a combination of both preventive and remedial measures’ (Council of the EU and European Commission, 2010, p. 15).

In the Riga conclusions of 2015, the ministers for VET propose, as one of the new medium-term deliverables for the period 2015-20, to ‘enhance access to VET and qualifications for all through more flexible and permeable systems, notably by offering efficient and integrated guidance services and making available validation of non-formal and informal learning’ (Latvian Presidency of the Council of the EU, 2015, p. 4). Among the possible concrete actions suggested, the conclusions refer to ‘integrating guidance and counselling services provided by both education and employment sectors for both I-VET and C-VET, [and] promot[ing] measures to foster inclusiveness of VET systems (including preventing early leaving or second chance-VET programmes leading to qualifications)’ (Latvian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, 2015, pp. 8-9).

The same year, the Council adopted *Conclusions on reducing early school leaving and promoting success in school* recalling the importance of maintaining a focus on inclusive education and reducing early leaving (Council of the EU, 2015).

The potential of VET in preventing early leaving or as remedial measure is also recognised in the European youth employment initiative ⁽⁶⁾ (preceded by the European youth opportunities initiative ⁽⁷⁾), proposed by the European Council and backed by a budgetary envelope of EUR 6 billion for the period 2014-20. A

⁽⁶⁾ European Commission, Directorate-General Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion: *News: Commission proposes rules to make Youth employment initiative a reality*, 12 March 2013.

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=1829>

⁽⁷⁾ European Commission, Directorate-General Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion: *Youth opportunities initiative*.

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1006>

key measure of this initiative is encouragement for Member States to set up youth guarantee schemes. The principle of such schemes is that all young people outside education, training or employment should be actively supported by Member State authorities to start a new training programme (including apprenticeships), traineeship or job (Council of the EU, 2013). Youth guarantees should embrace vocational training measures, particularly traineeships or apprenticeships. Early leavers, or those at risk of early leaving, should be a key target group for these interventions. Young people who dropped out prematurely should be offered training opportunities leading to a qualification corresponding to labour market demand.

In line with previous initiatives, the role of VET has assumed greater importance in reducing early leaving in recent years throughout Europe. governments, as shown in more detail later in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, have actively sought to prevent pupils leaving education without an upper secondary qualification by launching a variety of prevention, intervention and compensation measures, often involving VET.

According to the latest country-specific analysis, most Member States implemented the 2011 Council recommendation (Council of the EU, 2011) either through adopting explicit comprehensive strategies (Belgium-fr, Bulgaria, France, Hungary, Malta, the Netherlands, Austria, Romania) or other national policies (Cyprus, Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, Finland, Sweden, the UK). Other countries have only partly or not yet (as of 2014) implemented comprehensive strategies or national policies (European Commission, 2015b).

The recent joint publication of Eurydice and Cedefop (2014) examined national strategies for whether and what role is given to VET within the policies to tackle ELET. While there is a significant number of measures indicating that VET is playing a role in this across Europe, this role is a more integral element of some strategies than others. Good examples of comprehensive strategies that cover the whole education and training sector, including both general education and VET, can be found in Belgium-fl, the Netherlands and Austria, (Box 1).

Box 1. Comprehensive ELET strategies covering VET: examples from Belgium-fl, the Netherlands and Austria

The Flemish action plan on ELET includes 19 specific actions. While most of the measures are general education specific, priority VET-related activity involves developing vocational courses (that lead to a formal qualification) as high quality second chance options for early school leavers (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2013).

The Dutch strategy for addressing early leaving considers the unique features of the problem within VET. The strategy foresees different targets for general secondary and secondary vocational education providers, since early leaving is higher in the latter. VET-specific measures are also promoted to address relevant early leaving weak points in a more targeted manner; overall, VET providers are given the freedom to design responses most relevant to their specific situation (Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2014).

The Austrian national strategy to combat early school leaving from 2012, also addresses both academic and vocational education, especially given the importance of apprenticeships in national education and training. The apprenticeship-coaching initiative aims to support apprentices during their training and boost completion rates (BMUKK, 2012).

Source: Cedefop desk research and interviews.

Denmark and Estonia also address ELVET in national strategies and have established targets for completion and ELVET rates.

Box 2. Setting national targets: examples from Denmark and Estonia

The Danish reform agreement improving vocational education and training, concluded in February 2014 and applied since August 2015, establishes the objective that the VET completion rate must be improved from 52% in 2012 to at least 60% by 2020 and at least 67% by 2025 (Danish Ministry of Education, 2014).

In Estonia, the lifelong learning strategy's vocational education and training programme 2015-18 aims at reducing the share of early leavers from VET among young adults (18 to 24) so that it is less than 20% by the year 2020 (Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, 2015).

Source: Cedefop desk research and interviews.

Despite these developments, the 2015 *Council conclusions on reducing early school leaving and promoting success in school* point out that the comprehensive strategies advocated in the 2011 Council recommendation are still missing in many countries (Council of the EU, 2011; 2015). However, many other measures have been implemented across European countries to tackle

ELVET, even if not necessarily mentioned in national strategies. Cedefop analyses the introduction of such measures in its monitoring report on VET policies 2010-14, while in its current analysis, the research team identified 337 measures to tackle ELET that have VET in their component (Cedefop, 2015a). Several countries are undertaking overarching VET reforms, aiming at expanding the offer or improving its quality and attractiveness, which can ultimately have an impact on attracting young people back to VET or preventing young learners leaving.

1.2. VET as a remedy to early leaving

Data analysed in Volume I provide quantitative evidence of the preventive and remedial role of VET in addressing and counteracting early leaving. VET systems accommodate large numbers of returning learners, who have either dropped out completely or are at risk of early leaving and have decided to change their studies from one course, provider or type of learning, to another. Evidence shows that many early leavers from both general and vocational education, if they return to learning, choose VET. Most of these remain and qualify in VET. This is facilitated by measures adopted in Member States, such as, the newly established vocational courses in Portugal targeting young adults who are at risk of early leaving or have left their studies early (Box 3). The challenge is ensuring that the programmes they join are sufficiently adapted to the needs of returning learners (so that they do not drop out again) and that the programmes lead to formal qualifications or provide a preparatory path onto mainstream tracks.

Box 3. Accommodating learners at risk of ELET: Portuguese example

The vocational courses in Portugal, mainstreamed after a pilot phase in 2012-14, target early leavers and students at risk of dropout in basic and upper secondary education. Basic vocational courses target students over 13 years old who do not meet the qualification criteria to access a professional course, young people who have a history of school failure, and early school leavers who show an interest in VET. Vocational courses in basic education lead to an academic certification (*), but aim at providing the student with a first contact with vocational pedagogies, including on-the-job learning in companies.

(*) This certification can correspond to the second or third cycle of basic education. The second cycle comprises years 5 and 6 and corresponds to the last years of primary education; and the third cycle comprises years 7 to 9 and corresponds to lower secondary.

Source: Cedefop desk research and interviews.

Examination of young people's pathways and other evidence analysed by Cedefop show that VET attracts learners at risk of dropping out or those who have already dropped out because they prefer VET specific pedagogies as a way of learning. VET pedagogies, such as work-based learning and other kinetic and labour-market-focused pedagogies, have a central role in policies addressing early leaving (see also Cedefop, 2015b; Psifidou, 2016a). For example, an overwhelming majority of second chance measures use pedagogies originating from VET, such as in-company learning, company visits, and practical learning in workshops. Many practitioners interviewed for this study repeatedly highlighted the appreciation of young people to be able to undertake practical work in second chance programmes from day one rather than having to spend days, weeks, months or years studying theory before being able to put into practice their desire to do something hands-on

Box 4. Second chance measures: examples from France and Italy

The French new chance secondary school in the region of Lyon has been integrating former early leavers in a VET pathway since 2002. Candidates have to undergo interview coupled with tests in French, mathematics and general culture. Around 200 students apply each year and about 100 are accepted. Successful students are integrated in VET or apprenticeship tracks where they spend three days at school and two days at an enterprise. There is no obligation for students to arrive at school with an apprenticeship contract, which is often a major factor of early leaving; instead, the school helps them find one. A tutor is assigned for each student and monitors their apprenticeship at the enterprise.

ENGIM, an Italian NGO working on professional training and orientation, undertakes a lot of work with young people who have dropped out of school because they were not motivated by traditional classroom-based teaching methods. Instead, they are attracted to practical components of professional training. This aspect is prioritised in the second chance learning opportunities of the organisation which seek to make every class relevant to the field studied and to the future profession, even in more academic subjects. As little time as possible is spent in a classroom; the rest is spent in 'laboratories' where students are involved in practical activities, and where they have the opportunity to do something for the community (such as improving public gardens). Such professional training is considered an important factor by interviewees since students particularly like this experience of getting out of the classroom and be in touch with the world of work.

Source: Cedefop desk research and interviews.

VET pedagogies tend to be a central characteristic of shorter-term time-out measures, which provide students facing personal or academic difficulties a respite from their studies outside a typical classroom setting (Psifidou, 2016b). There are ample national and local examples of time-out measures which rely on

VET pedagogies in Europe, as in the local authority run factory schools in Hamburg which promote personal and social development and practical learning in workshops and companies. Students at risk of dropping out can enter a factory school for three months, even if many choose to stay longer as these schools meet their interests and capabilities better than their home school.

Box 5. Using VET pedagogies in short time-out measures: German example

Factory schools (currently eight schools with up to 400 students) are an integral part of the regular transfer system in Hamburg (Germany) since 2011. Most students in this programme have not achieved a lower secondary education certificate or left school with limited training maturity (including basic school knowledge and personal and social skills needed to progress in education and training). These schools are characterised by individualised approach, focusing on learner potential instead of weaknesses, for example missing skills, and on practical activities to encourage learning.

The factory schools offer school-based learning elements and the simulated production process of a training company, focusing on practical work and support for personal development. Young people learn how to be responsible in production processes and get the chance to develop competences and skills and increase their self-esteem through direct contact with and feedback from customers in the school cafeteria.

Source: Cedefop desk research and interviews.

Remunerated apprenticeships within VET programmes help to retain learners who may have otherwise left education early to find work. An opportunity to work for an employer, earn a salary and gain a qualification while gaining valuable workplace skills and experience are important pull factors for young people who prefer a swift transition from education to 'earning' and for returning learners who do not want or cannot afford to lose income though they still want to pursue formal learning.

The competence-based approach promoted in VET also supports (re)integration of learners into VET. The emphasis on what learners can do as a result of training (learning outcomes) is particularly important for those with work experience who want to return to VET. Many reforms introduced by the Member States have sought to give students an opportunity to undertake work and performance-based learning that can be accumulated to a vocational qualification, allowing students to study at their own speed independent from strict course structures. These reforms include breaking down programmes into units or modules and offering opportunities for recognition of prior learning.