



# Leaving education early: putting vocational education and training centre stage

## Volume II: evaluating policy impact



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**E**arly leaving from education and training (ELET) is understood at EU level as a failure to complete upper secondary education or a failure to gain qualifications or school leaving certificates. It can lead to a vicious cycle of unemployment, social exclusion and poverty, with costs for the individual and society that include reduced levels of economic activity, higher unemployment, poorer health outcomes and demands on state welfare systems.

The EU objective of reducing the share of early leavers to below 10% of young people aged 18 to 24 was first adopted as part of the Lisbon strategy and has been retained as one of the Europe 2020 headline targets. This Cedefop study focuses on the contribution that vocational education and training (VET) can make to reducing ELET. It is published in two volumes, the first of which looks to understand better the magnitude of early leaving from VET (ELVET). This second volume draws on examination of 337 initiatives across Europe that had the objective of reducing early leaving through VET. It aims to support national and EU policy- and decision-makers in improving ELET data collection and monitoring, and in developing measures to empower VET in combating and counteracting ELET.

## TAILORED RESPONSES TO INDIVIDUAL NEEDS

Policies and measures to tackle early leaving from education and training are more likely to succeed if they acknowledge the different factors that can influence it and are tailored to the specific profiles of young people at risk of leaving education and training prematurely.

There is no single blueprint of an effective intervention to tackle ELET: the detail of successful interventions differs by target group and setting. The study analysed 44 successful measures to tackle early leaving through VET and derived from these lessons for policy design, implementation and evaluation.

With some profiles of young people at risk of early leaving, small changes can make a big difference in retaining them in education and training.

The profiles of young people who do not continue in education and training vary. While some experience difficult personal situations that lead them to quitting education early, others are similar to those who eventually persist in education. The study identified six profiles of early leavers and learners at risk of early leaving. These profiles illustrate how

different risk factors can interact and lead to early leaving.

The profiles show different levels of disengagement and different types of challenge. Professionals who design measures to tackle early leaving need to reflect on the specific characteristics of their target group/s and select actions accordingly. This approach also requires policy-makers to refine and target their responses.

## EARLY LEAVING PREVENTION

Preventing early leaving does not necessarily require extensive and costly measures or creation of new structures and programmes; relatively simple adjustments by VET providers can make a big difference for those who are not yet significantly disengaged. This can have positive impact with young people who still attend education and training but are showing signs of disengagement or are facing challenges.

Around a third of policies analysed and with evidence of success used relatively simple and 'light-touch' activities in the context of existing education and training systems and institutions. Such actions could also be seen as core features of good quality education and training in general, as they are not specific to preventing early leaving.

Table 2 shows issues that can be tackled by education and training providers, solutions identified, and examples of measures to put some of these solutions in place.

**Table 1. Profiles of early leavers or learners at risk of ELET**

	<p><b>Learners escaping the system</b> They are not radically different from other students. Their education performance is average or below average and they have low future education aspirations. Education is not major interest: they need motivation and encouragement to raise their aspirations.</p>		<p><b>Learners confronting the system</b> Still in education and training but with high levels of absenteeism, low interest in education and training and gaps in basic skills, which is an obstacle for further progression. They need a combination of motivational activities and remedial training.</p>
	<p><b>Learners disengaging due to difficulties adapting after transition</b> They are starting to disengage during the transition period from one track to another. They have difficulties adapting to new work rhythms; they have inaccurate programme expectations and do not mix well with the group. They need support to engage fully in the programme.</p>		<p><b>Learners disengaging because they cannot find a placement of their choice</b> Typically this can happen due to lack of placements in apprenticeship or a particular VET programme, lack of information and guidance or a combination of unrealistic expectations and lack of work-readiness. They need to be reoriented towards a more suitable track, possibly a bridging programme.</p>
	<p><b>Learners who had to leave education and training because of caring, parenting or working obligations</b> They are not interested in education but need a source of income or have other duties. Even if they see the relevance of education and training, external circumstances make it hard for them to enrol (e.g. lack of childcare). They need solutions that enable combining working and learning, possibly with support from social services.</p>		<p><b>Learners combining multiple disadvantage, possibly facing health and psycho-social issues</b> They ended up leaving education and training for various reasons. They need complex support of which education and training is only a part.</p>

Source: Cedefop.

Table 2. Examples of effective prevention measures

Early leaving issues	Solutions	Examples of measures analysed
Not keeping pace with the training programme. Some key learning outcomes have not been achieved preventing progression. As failure accumulates, s/he becomes increasingly disengaged. The bigger the gap, the harder it becomes to catch-up.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organise remedial support early, before the gap becomes too wide.</li> <li>Motivate and engage through discussions, demonstrations, and showing interest in his/her development.</li> <li>Organise the education and training programme to support success by adjusting working rhythms during the day, working on the classroom climate, reviewing the role and frequency of assessment.</li> </ul>	BE-fr <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Expairs</i> (school-level innovation)</li> <li>Certification by unit (system reform)</li> </ul>
		DE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vocational training accompanying measures (abH)</li> <li><i>Carpo</i></li> <li>Pre-training EQ</li> <li>Programme of qualified supervision in vocational schools and companies (QuABB)</li> </ul>
		FR <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>AFEV volunteer support</li> </ul>
		LU <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guidance and professional initiation courses</li> </ul>
		NL <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Drive to reduce dropout</li> </ul>
Lack of a positive project for the future They do not see learning as important, resulting in disinterest and disengagement.	<p>Work with the young person to develop future goals, integrating education and training.</p> <p>Many measures include elements of coaching, mentoring and guidance. Key aspects are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>young person drives the process, not the counsellor;</li> <li>it is the goal-setting and positive reflection on the future that are key, not programme choice;</li> <li>the goals need to be motivating and realistic at the same time.</li> </ul>	AT <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>apprenticeship coaching</li> <li>youth coaching</li> </ul>
		DE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Carpo</i></li> <li>vocational orientation programme (BOP)</li> </ul>
		DK <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Youth guidance centres</li> </ul>
		EE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pathfinder centres</li> </ul>
		FR <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>AFEV volunteer support</li> </ul>
		LU <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Local action for youth</i></li> </ul>
		HU <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Springboard</i></li> </ul>
		LU <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Second chance school</li> </ul>
		NL <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Drive to reduce dropout</i></li> </ul>
PL <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Voluntary labour corps</li> </ul>		
Negative perception of the education programme as second or third choice. Negative self-perception and self-efficacy. This hinders learning and triggers resistance and disengagement.	<p>Valorise the training programme by making it more interesting and relevant. Use engaging teaching methods and pedagogies.</p> <p>Link theory to practice in the training programme.</p> <p>School-level activities to raise awareness among teachers.</p>	BE-fr <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Expairs</i> (school-level innovation)</li> </ul>
		DK <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Youth guidance centres</li> </ul>
		EE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pathfinder centres</li> </ul>
		LU <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Local action for youth</i></li> </ul>
		NL <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Drive to reduce dropout</i></li> </ul>
		NL <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Getting started</i></li> </ul>
		PL <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Voluntary labour corps</li> </ul>
		DK <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Retention caravan</i></li> </ul>
		FR <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New chance school</li> </ul>
HU <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Integrated pedagogical system</li> </ul>		
The student is excluded by the education and training institutions, removing a problem from the institution. This fosters disengagement and marginalisation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provider-level action plans.</li> <li>Designate a person to combat early leaving with the support of leadership and the whole institution.</li> <li>Raise awareness among teaching teams; together develop activities to reengage those at risk of early leaving. Put in place early warning measures that identify the persons at risk.</li> </ul>	FR <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Foquale</i> and PSAD</li> </ul>
		BE-fr <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Expairs</i></li> <li>Certification by unit</li> </ul>
		DK <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Retention caravan</i></li> </ul>
Young people with learning difficulties, at greater risk of falling behind and eventually dropping out.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Early diagnosis and support to develop strategies to cope with one's difficulties.</li> <li>Individualised programmes and assessments to cater for special learning needs.</li> </ul>	HU <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Springboard</i></li> <li>Integrated pedagogical system</li> </ul>
		NL <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Medical advice for sick-reported students</i> (MASS)</li> </ul>
Parents are not sufficiently involved in children's education, do not feel at ease discussing education issues at home, so this is seen as not important by the young person.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Engage parents, organise dialogue with them. Make them aware of their child's education choices. Get them involved in supporting and motivating their children.</li> </ul>	DK <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Retention caravan</i></li> </ul>
		DE <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vocational orientation programme (BOP)</li> </ul>
		AT <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Youth coaching</li> </ul>
		LU <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guidance and professional initiation courses</li> </ul>
		NL <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>Drive to reduce dropout</i></li> </ul>

Source: Cedefop.

## INTERVENTION AND COMPENSATION

Strongly disengaged young people need additional support to tackle other challenges in their lives and increase their interest in education and training.

Intervention measures seek to address risk factors that could have a negative impact on young people's motivation and desire to complete their studies and are typically provider responses. Sometimes the difference between prevention and intervention is marginal. Compensation measures seek to integrate early leavers back into education and training.

Compared to prevention, compensation measures are more complex to design and implement. The target group is more heavily disengaged and the gaps to compensate are wider. Putting early leavers into programmes that have the same features as those from which they dropped out is unlikely to lead to much success: they need a change of environment and pedagogical approach as well as a different educational project.

It is important for compensation measures to provide the support that is right for the person. Flexibility is a key feature, with options including:

- (a) pooling resources from local support measures (psycho-social assistance, social services, health services);
- (b) transit to programmes that give access to mainstream qualifications, if the second chance programme itself is a bridging programme.

Table 3 details issues tackled by intervention and compensation measures, solutions identified, and examples of measures which have put some of these solutions in place.

## COMBINING MEASURES

A combination of VET with social and employment measures helps tailor responses to the different profiles of young people at risk of early leaving.

Measures to address early leaving can share features with other social services: psycho-social assistance, public employment services, and employment measures. Early leaving is not a new phenomenon and many countries and regions have had different responses for some time. One of the challenges is the multiplicity and the disconnected

character of these measures. Support services to address early leaving have to be interconnected and also connect with other services to be effective for:

- (a) identification and referral of young people. Many measures rely on other services to refer young people: public employment services, education and training providers, NGOs and the justice system;
- (b) matching young people with appropriate services. Young people cannot be expected to navigate opportunities on their own and identify those that best suit them. Intermediary organisations are needed;
- (c) efficient use of resources. Support can be shared across different measures and services, as with medical support, psycho-social counselling and therapy to help with learning difficulties, and guidance or similar services to help find a job.

Countries are at different stages in coordinating ELET measures nationally and regionally and make sure they complement each other and link well with other social and employment services.

## EVALUATING IMPACT

Systematic evaluation of VET-related measures to tackle ELET is indispensable to upscaling and mainstreaming while ensuring sustainability. Such evaluations are far from being systematic in Europe.

Of the 337 policies and initiatives mapped in the study, only 44 were supported by evidence of success. Few evaluations analyse the real impact on individual learning pathways; even fewer analyse how and why a given intervention or policy influenced education outcomes.

Several were based solely on output data, such as the number of beneficiaries. Such data provide information on the scale of the activity but not on success in addressing the initial problem.

Just over half of the evaluations looked at results: what happened to the young people exiting the intervention and their subsequent relationship to education and training. A much smaller number followed them and was able to make conclusions about whether they eventually qualified. There is no systematic information on whether a given intervention leads to the achievement of an upper secondary qualification.

Since policies aim to address risk factors, reducing opportunities for the individual to leave education and training, success can also be

**Table 3.** Examples of effective intervention and compensation measures

Early leaving issues	Solutions	Examples of measures analysed			
Early leavers do not wish to enrol in programmes which remind them of negative experience. Also, being in a classroom with students who do not share their difficulties is discouraging.	Compensation measures offer alternative programmes and institutions: different environment and pedagogical approach.	EE	• KUTSE programme	IE	• <i>Youthreach</i>
		FR	• EPIDE insertion service • New chance school • <i>Innovation pole</i> • Second chance schools	LU	• Second chance school
		HU	• <i>Springboard</i>	PT	• Second chance school
Gaps in basic skills (numeracy, literacy) which hamper further learning and professional integration.	Tailor-made basic skills training using pedagogies specific to the issues they are facing.	FR	• EPIDE insertion service • Second chance schools	IE	• <i>Youthreach</i>
		HU	• <i>Springboard</i>	LU	• Second chance school
Personal issues (health, well-being, family, poverty) which hamper participation and success in education and training.	Case management to coordinate different forms of support, stabilisation of personal or other difficulties.	AT	• Apprenticeship coaching • Production school • Youth coaching	NL	• <i>Drive to reduce dropout</i> • <i>Getting started</i>
		DE	• <i>Carpo</i> • Programme of qualified supervision in vocational schools and companies (QuABB)	PL	• Voluntary labour corps
		FR	• EPIDE insertion service	PT	• Second chance school
Learning difficulties (dyslexia, dyscalculia) which make it hard for them to follow a standard track at upper secondary level.	Psycho-pedagogical support to help them tackle learning difficulties. Adjust the training programme to the target group, provide additional tuition, provide support such as speech-therapy, psychological counselling.	DE	• Vocational training accompanying measures ('abH')	HU	• <i>Springboard</i>
		AT	• Production school	IE	• <i>Youthreach</i>
		EE	• Pathfinder centres	NL	• <i>Drive to reduce dropout</i> • <i>Getting started</i>
		FR	• EPIDE insertion service	PL	• Voluntary labour corps
Negative self-perception and self-efficacy hindering effective engagement in a learning process.	Motivational activities (including sport, artistic activities, games), building confidence and understanding oneself.	DE	• <i>Carpo</i>	IE	• <i>Youthreach</i>
		FR	• AFEV volunteer support • EPIDE insertion service • <i>Innovation pole</i> • Second chance schools	NL	• <i>Getting started</i>
		HU	• <i>Springboard</i>		

Source: Cedefop.

measured by intermediary outcomes:

- improved educational aspirations;
- improved professional orientation;
- improved education results or skills and competences;
- improved work-readiness (behaviours, attitudes and social skills);
- changed risk behaviours such as absenteeism;
- improved motivation and confidence.

Measurement of such outcomes and analysis of how and why a given activity leads to the observed outcomes, was rare, with key weaknesses apparent in most of the evaluations analysed:

- few used a design enabling robust statements about the contribution of the policy to the change observed. Quasi-experimental designs may not suit all types of intervention but they can be used

more broadly;

- few looked at policy impact on gender, minority background, or socioeconomic disadvantage. Participation data may reflect gender and other characteristics without respective differences in benefits being analysed;
- none looked at the impact at local or regional level. Comparisons with baseline situations were rare.

Fewer than half the measures analysed were first piloted or used an example originating elsewhere. Trial and transfer of successful international examples also appeared rare.

The study found that important improvements could be made to the scale and focus of evaluations of measures to tackle early leaving; such evaluations should be encouraged in EU policies and guidelines.

## POLICY COMMITMENT AT ALL LEVELS

Transferring successful projects and initiatives into national policies and measures will improve early leavers' perspectives and retain learners at risk of dropping out.

A high level of commitment by policy-makers is crucial to ensuring sustainability of good practices. All successful examples analysed demonstrate quick pick-up on innovation, effective implementation and evaluation of pilot projects, subsequent upscaling of the measure, and continued financial and political support.

Having evidence of success is essential to informing policies, putting in place funding arrangements, and helping build necessary capacity. Supporting peer learning and exchange of good practices also helps understanding of what works. Cedefop has identified successful measures with comprehensive monitoring and documentation of activities.

National policy-makers have been giving increasing opportunity to education and training providers and other local stakeholders to develop their own approaches, using supplied guidelines, methods and advice. Better cooperation between national, regional and local authorities may ensure that best practices are captured and mainstreamed to make them available nationally.

## POLICY COMMITMENT TO VET

There is a need for strengthened policy commitment at EU and national levels to boost the role of VET in tackling ELET.

VET should have a clear place in EU and national programmes on early leaving, which seems to be more acute in VET than in general education. To reduce ELVET, there is a need for prevention

efforts to increase the quality, accessibility and attractiveness of VET.

It is also important to acknowledge VET as part of the solution to ELET. The study shows that VET's more practical approach, particularly when work-based, can make learning more meaningful for some young people and play a role in motivating them to continue in, or return to, education and training.

The study examined national strategies for roles given to VET within policies to tackle ELET but found that such strategies rarely have a clear focus on VET. More attention should be paid to using vocational pedagogies in national strategies to tackle early leaving.

This potential role for VET should also be recognised in EU reference documents, policies and programmes. Action to date has focused on guidance on how to address early school leaving. A next step could be to develop guidance on how to monitor and evaluate measures to address ELET. This is particularly relevant in the context of the European Structural Fund (ESF) criteria and other EU funding mechanisms, which emphasise the need for evidence-based policies and monitoring and evaluating policy delivery of expected results. ■

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