



Flexible education and training systems

Problem statement

Addressed problem: Closed doors and lack of choices

Flexible education systems enable learners to move within and across education, training and employment. Flexibility means that young people can adapt their learning pathway as they go along, to suit their interests and abilities.

In systems that lack flexibility, it is difficult for young people to make transitions from one learning pathway to another. They may find that they are restricted to their original choice, even if they have realised that this choice isn't right for them. This can be a factor leading to drop out.

Barriers to flexibility:

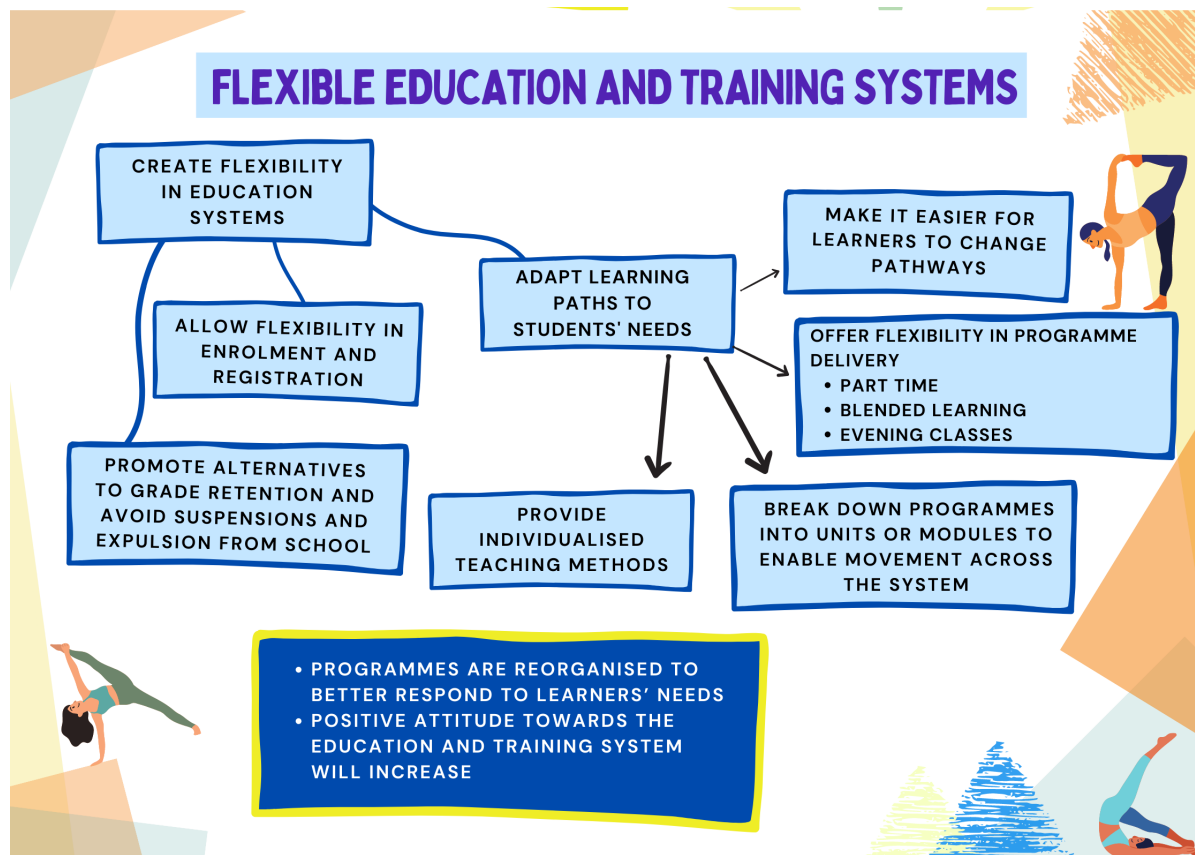
- Repetition of learning: When previous learning experiences and credits are not validated, repetitions in learning may occur, which can be highly demotivating for young people. Learners who are able to switch courses, but are required to start from the beginning, can be discouraged by the need to repeat content they have already covered in their previous course. Cedefop evidence shows that limited recognition of prior learning and lack of credit transfer are key structural barriers to flexible pathways and increase the risk of early leaving.
- Delivery and timing: Flexibility in the delivery and timing of learning opportunities means that young people who have other demands on their time can continue to work towards their chosen qualification, or can return to learning if they have already dropped out.

Young people facing barriers to learning or who have had to interrupt their education may benefit from an extended period to complete their studies, the possibility to attend courses on a part-time basis, or an alternative teaching method (e.g. online or blended learning).

Moreover, the systematic use of grade retention as a means to reduce the educational delay of low-achieving pupils, and of suspension or expulsion from school as disciplinary measures for students with behavioural problems, can lead to early leaving. Research shows that students who repeat grades have higher chances of dropping out, generally do not improve performance, and have a more negative attitude towards school. Suspended students are more likely to drop out, to misbehave again, and to have poor academic performance. There are also strong links between school exclusion and social exclusion.

Furthermore, permeability means that young people can progress to programmes at higher level and take forward their long-term career, regardless of the pathway they have chosen. If systems are not permeable, progression (e.g. from VET to higher education) becomes difficult. This can reinforce negative perceptions of VET as a 'second-class' option.

Finally, it is essential to address the “return to learning” barrier. People who have dropped out before completing secondary education often face difficulties re-entering the system due to entry requirements or a lack of flexible provision. Cedefop research highlights that short, targeted learning opportunities, including micro-credentials, can play a key role in re-engaging early leavers by offering accessible entry points back into education.



Beneficiaries

- 📖 **Early leavers from education and training**
- 📖 **Learners at transition points and/or uncertain about career aspirations**
- 📖 **Low-performing learners** 📖 **VET students (school-based learning)**
- 📖 **VET students (work-based learning)** 📖 **Migrants / refugees**

All young people can benefit from flexibility and permeability in education and training systems. It is important for students who would like to change to a different programme, and for young people who are looking for an opportunity to re-enter the system. Young people facing external barriers to learning (e.g. they need to work to support their families or have caring responsibilities) may also need flexibility in the way a course is delivered.

Poor school performance and inappropriate behaviour are often associated with disadvantaged socio-cultural backgrounds. Measures that prevent or avoid repetition, suspension or expulsion can be particularly important for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Addressing the problem

Tips: Making education systems more flexible and permeable

More flexible and permeable VET pathways can be achieved in a variety of ways. These include modularisation, credit transfer, recognition of prior learning, flexible delivery modes, and individualised teaching methods.

Cedefop evidence also highlights the growing role of micro-credentials as a complementary tool to support flexible, learner-centred pathways and lifelong learning.

The following tips are given as advice to policymakers and practitioners involved in the design and delivery of such measures. The information is based on Cedefop research into successful measures.

Tip 1: Make it easier for learners to change pathways

It should be possible, and relatively simple, for learners to move across to a different programme. Learners should not have to repeat curriculum content they have already successfully completed. Repetition can be avoided through modularisation, credit transfer, or recognition of prior learning. Micro-credentials can further support this by certifying specific learning outcomes in a transparent and portable way, allowing learners to accumulate and transfer achievements across institutions and systems.

Using interoperable digital platforms storing learners' academic records can facilitate automatic recognition of validated knowledge and modules, reducing administrative burden and preventing demotivating repetition.

Tip 2: Break learning down into manageable blocks

Modularisation or partial certification enable learners to certify their skills gradually. This can increase motivation and provide a sense of achievement. Micro-credentials operationalise this approach by offering short, targeted, and assessed learning experiences that can be “stacked” towards full qualifications.

This is particularly beneficial for:

- learners with low self-confidence,
- early leavers returning to education, and
- learners needing to update or complement specific skills.

Moreover, stackable micro-credentials and digital modules allow learners who have dropped out and wish to return to education or training to target specific skill gaps without restarting a full programme.

Tip 3: Promote alternatives to grade retention

Grade retention should only be used in exceptional circumstances. It is important

to assess the benefits of repetition and alternative measures on a case-by-case basis. Parents and students should be involved in the decision about grade repetition. Furthermore, students must not be simply held back. To ensure that repetition has a positive impact, specific measures should be in place to promote the academic achievement and social skills of students who repeat a grade. Evidence shows that grade retention is often associated with lower achievement, reduced motivation, and a higher risk of early leaving; therefore, preventive and supportive measures should be prioritised.

Alternatives to grade retention can include:

- One-on-one or small group support, tutoring or counselling
- Cooperative learning and peer tutoring
- Support with homework, such as school-based homework clubs or support by university students
- Parental involvement, including the development of routines and time management for homework and out-of-school activities
- Strengthening positive teacher-pupil relationships
- Organisational measures, such as grouping students by level of achievement in certain subjects, multi-age grouping, or smaller class groups
- Participation in extracurricular activities to increase motivation
- Increased instructional time at school, out of school, or during summer breaks

Alternatives to grade retention can be promoted at system level by giving schools autonomy to adapt curricula and assessment to individual needs. Cedefop evidence highlights that flexible, learner-centred approaches – including modular learning and personalised pathways – are more effective than repetition in supporting learner progression and preventing early leaving.

The use of digital technology and artificial intelligence (AI) can help tailor these alternatives to the individual needs of learners at risk of repeating a grade. AI-powered diagnostic tools can identify specific learning patterns and neurodivergent needs early on. These tools can provide timely feedback, help identify patterns in learning difficulties, and suggest tailored practice exercises and assistive learning strategies to address the root causes of underperformance before grade retention is considered.

Tip 4: Develop alternative arrangements to suspension or expulsion from school

Serious behavioural offences may require a student to be excluded from school. Nevertheless, suspension or expulsion should be used in very limited circumstances, and only after careful consideration of alternative measures, such as:

- Counselling and on-site support with multidisciplinary teams;
- Short courses (online or in-person) to promote social skill development, conflict resolution, and behavioural change. These can address specific topics such as discrimination, sexual harassment, alcohol or drug use, inappropriate language, among others;
- Parental involvement, including better communication between school and parents and a coordinated approach to behaviour change;
- Behaviour contracts that specify expected behaviour, consequences of misbehaviour, and incentives for appropriate behaviours. These contracts should be negotiated with the student;
- Behaviour monitoring, including the use of behaviour checklists for students,

- parents, and teachers, and feedback sessions focusing on positive behaviour when it occurs;
- Restitution, such as an oral or written apology or participation in activities to clean and improve the school environment.

In-school suspension should be preferred to out-of-school suspension and expulsion. It should be combined with measures to promote behavioural change and allow the student to continue academic instruction. Procedures must be clear for students and staff, and improved behaviour should be linked to the student's return to the regular classroom.

VET schools and the education system should also promote preventive measures to reduce the use of suspension and expulsion. This includes introducing early warning systems to [identify at-risk students](#) (e.g. low attendance, declining grades) and address emerging issues before they become disciplinary problems. It is also important to promote a positive school climate. Evidence shows that exclusionary disciplinary measures are associated with a higher risk of early leaving and social exclusion; therefore, preventive and supportive approaches should be prioritised.

Research has shown that using AI and machine-learning analytics in early warning systems can improve their efficiency in identifying low-performing learners and those at risk of early leaving. By intervening before behavioural issues escalate, schools can shift from punitive measures to proactive support, maintaining a positive and inclusive school climate.

Tip 5: Enable young people to return to mainstream education

It is important that young people who have left the education and training system can return to mainstream education. This includes learners who have taken part in [second chance](#) or compensatory measures.

Maintaining links between these alternative opportunities and mainstream education is key to ensuring that all learners have the opportunity to complete upper secondary education. This includes finding ways to recognise the learning outcomes achieved through second chance and compensatory measures and tackling negative perceptions of this type of provision. Digital qualifications and micro-credentials can provide a transparent and flexible way to validate skills acquired in non-formal and informal learning contexts. Cedefop evidence highlights that micro-credentials can support re-entry into education by offering accessible, targeted learning opportunities, and by making prior learning more visible and portable across institutions and systems.

Tip 6: Ensure that VET pathways can lead to progression

VET should be linked to the General Education system. If learners do not have the

VET should not be a closed path. Opportunities to pursue lifelong learning should be available to all learners, and progression routes into higher education from VET should be ensured. Stronger collaboration between VET and higher education providers is essential to support successful transitions.

Cedefop evidence highlights that flexible and permeable pathways, supported by modular learning and micro-credentials, can facilitate progression across education and training systems.

VET providers should make learners aware of future opportunities, introduce them to higher levels of study, and expose them to the world of work. Collaboration with higher education institutions can be fostered through interactive virtual or in-person meet-ups, presentations, AI-driven career simulations, and joint educational or vocational projects, allowing learners to explore advanced pathways.

Micro-credentials can further support progression by certifying specific skills aligned with higher education and labour market requirements, enabling learners to build towards more advanced qualifications over time.

Tip 7: Allow flexibility in enrolment and registration

Strict enrolment conditions and registration deadlines can be a barrier to participation in VET. Young people who are waiting for the results of their initial education, may apply to a programme and then not be able to access it because they do not attain the required grades. It is important to keep enrolment and registration open long enough to allow such students to apply to other programmes. This can help avoid dropout during periods of transition between education levels.

User-friendly digital enrolment portals should be designed for easy access, to prevent the risk of “digital exclusion”. Simplifying the interface helps ensure that the registration process itself does not become a barrier for those with limited access to technology, low digital literacy, or low administrative confidence. Cedefop evidence highlights that administrative barriers, including rigid enrolment procedures, can discourage participation, particularly among vulnerable learners.

For early leavers who decide to return to learning, offering opportunities to do so mid-way through the term or year reduces the risk that they will engage in alternative activities (e.g. take up a job) by the time the next academic year begins. Flexible entry points, including rolling admissions and modular or micro-credential-based provision, can further support timely re-entry into education and training.

Tip 8: Offer flexibility in programme delivery

Part-time, distance or blended learning (a combination of online learning and traditional face-to-face instruction) opportunities can be helpful for young people who face external barriers to learning. For example, young people who have caring responsibilities or who are in employment may be able to complete their

qualification through evening classes or online learning. The recent experience of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that digital technology can be leveraged to overcome barriers to the delivery of classes.

Cedefop evidence highlights that flexible delivery modes, combined with modular learning and micro-credentials, can increase participation among learners with external commitments or disrupted learning pathways.

Tip 9: Support learners to make informed decisions

[Guidance and counselling](#) should help learners develop career management skills and choose the right pathway from the very beginning. It can help those young people who are struggling with the path they have chosen, to decide how to move forward, and it can also help those who have left school to find a pathway back into education. Integrating, or ensuring strong links between, guidance and counselling services provided by the education and employment sectors for both initial and continuing VET could help support flexible learning pathways.

AI-enhanced career guidance tools can help learners map their interests based on real-time labour market data. This empowers students to develop “[AI agency](#)”, allowing them to make informed decisions about their future. Cedefop evidence highlights that combining personalised guidance with digital tools can improve decision-making, reduce drop-out risk, and increase alignment between learning pathways and labour market needs.

Tip 10: Support learners to identify and build on skills and competences they already have




Young people may just need an opportunity to re-assess their situation and identify a way forward. One way of doing this is through the use of a portfolio or skills audit approaches. Identifying and recognising learners’ existing skills, then building on these through [individual learning plans](#) and pedagogies may mean they do not need to repeat curriculum content in their new pathway.

[Validating non-formal and informal learning](#) can also help young people who have acquired skills outside of formal education, for instance through employment. By identifying and validating existing skills (through credit or a certificate), it can help young people return to education and obtain a qualification. AI-driven “skills-mapping” tools can analyse learners’ past experiences, including informal work or hobbies, and translate them into recognised competences in digital portfolios. Using these tools, practitioners can build highly individualised learning plans that respect the learners’ existing journey and prevent “learning fatigue”.

Cedefop evidence shows that recognising and building on prior learning, including through digital micro-credentials, increases engagement, motivation, and successful re-entry into education and training.

Expected outcomes

Flexible and permeable education and training systems can deliver positive outcomes at different levels:

 INDIVIDUAL	 INSTITUTIONAL	 SYSTEM
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better understanding of education options through guidance • More positive attitudes to learning and the education and training system • Improved education outcomes • Enhanced learner well-being • Lower absenteeism • Improved motivation and confidence • Reduced learning fatigue and greater recognition of prior learning • Improved social inclusion through personalised behavioural support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programmes reorganised to better respond to learners' needs • Higher retention and completion rates • More inclusive school environments, with reduced grade retention, suspension, and exclusion rates • Greater capacity for flexible delivery of modules • Stronger collaboration with higher education institutions and employers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interconnected services are used effectively • System can meet the needs of all types of learners • Higher overall completion rates • Enhanced systemic permeability through interoperable digital platforms • Fewer dead-end pathways through micro-credentials and digital portfolios • Improved public perception of VET

Related protective factors

 <p>Positive future vision for oneself and positive career choices</p>	 <p>Positive view of education and training compared to low-paid jobs</p>
--	--

Related resources

Statistics and data

 Statistics and data

Flexibility and permeability of education pathways prevents early leaving

Most countries in Europe have developed policies and measures for increasing flexibility and permeability of education pathways to help prevent early leaving from education and training.

 Austria  Belgium  Bulgaria  Croatia  Cyprus  Czechia  Denmark

 Estonia  EU level  Finland  France  Germany  Greece  Hungary

 Ireland  Italy  Latvia  Lithuania  Luxembourg  Malta

 Netherlands  Norway  Poland  Portugal  Romania  Slovakia

 Slovenia  Spain  Sweden  The Republic of North Macedonia  Türkiye

 United Kingdom

Good practices

 Good practice

Certification Per Unit (CPU)

In the French-speaking community of Belgium, Certification Per Unit (CPU) allows students to validate their skills gradually. This gives value to the young person's learning outcomes and can help to avoid year repetition.

 Belgium  Belgium-FR

 Good practice

Second chance schools - France

Écoles de la deuxième chance

French second chance schools (E2Cs) offer training programmes which incorporate individualised learning paths tailored to the needs of each participant.

 France

 Good practice

Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA)

Students following the Irish Leaving

 Good practice

Certificate of practice (Praksisbrev)

The Norwegian 'Certificate of Practice'

Certificate Applied (LCA) accumulate credits by three different routes (satisfactory completion of modules; the student tasks; and the final examinations) over two years. They are certified on the basis of the total number of credits accumulated.

 **Ireland**

is a two-year programme with emphasis on practical training. After obtaining a 'Certificate of Practice', the learner can continue training towards a trade or journeyman's certificate.

 **Norway**

 Good practice

Orienta4YEL

Supporting educational and social inclusion of young early leavers and those at risk of early leaving through mechanisms of orientation and tutorial action.

 **Germany**  **Portugal**  **Romania**

 **Spain**  **United Kingdom**

 Good practice

Early School Workers (ESW)

Erasmus+ project "Early School Workers" was designed and carried out to provide VET teachers and schools with guidelines and tools to support learners from becoming early school leavers and increase the employability of youngsters while fostering their active role in the society.

 **Belgium**  **Germany**  **Italy**

 **Spain**  **United Kingdom**

Tools

 Tools

Books of good practices - 'Alternatives to grade retention'

Samen tot aan de meet (STAM)

As part of the STAM initiative in Belgium, a good practice guidebook has been published which looks at grade retention and alternative solutions. It analyses the context in which grade retention is embedded, provides an overview of research into the topic and provides guidance on implementation.

 **Belgium**

 Tools

PlugInnovation

In Sweden, a website has been developed which offers a central digital knowledge platform for people working in the area of early leaving. It offers information, guidelines, methods, checklists, questionnaires, and case studies in relation to success factors for retention, one of which is 'flexibility'.

 **Sweden**

Publications

 Publications

Degrees of success: The transition between vocational education and training and higher education

This study looks at transitions between vocational education and training and higher education and the learning experiences of young people.


Read the report  [here](#).

 **United Kingdom**

 Publications

Validation and early school leavers

Validation of non-formal and informal learning practices can enable individuals to have their skills recognised, or can simply be a way of helping them to formulate a learning / career pathway for the future.

Read the Cedefop report  [here](#).

 **EU level**

 Publications

Recommendations on inclusive education

Based on the COFACE Disability S.H.I.F.T. guide for a meaningful inclusion of persons with disabilities and their families. COFACE Families Europe is a pluralistic network of civil society associations representing the interests of all families.

According to article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), signed and adopted by the European Union and all its Member States, and of its General Comment No. 4, State parties must ensure the realisation of the right of persons with disabilities to education through an inclusive education system at all levels, including pre-schools, primary, secondary and tertiary education, vocational training and lifelong learning, extracurricular and social activities, and for all students, including persons with disabilities.

 Publications

OECD Digital Education Outlook 2026

Exploring Effective Uses of Generative AI in Education

The OECD Digital Education Outlook 2026 analyses emerging research that suggests Generative AI (GenAI) can support learning when guided by clear teaching principles.

 **EU level International**

Source URL: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/en/tools/vet-toolkit-tackling-early-leaving/intervention-approaches/flexible-education-and-training-systems>