



# Guidance: supporting youth to manage their careers

## Problem statement

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Young people today grow up in a rapidly changing world of work, where career pathways are increasingly diverse, specialised, and complex. Navigating these options and making informed choices about education and training can be challenging. Without the right guidance, many risk choosing learning paths that do not match their interests, skills or aspirations - increasing the likelihood of disengagement or early leaving from education and training.

Career guidance plays a crucial role in helping young people explore their potential, understand the opportunities offered by different pathways - including vocational education and training (VET) - and make decisions that are both meaningful and sustainable. However, several barriers can stand in the way:

- **Perceptions and biases** often lead students and families to favour general education over VET, even when vocational pathways might better suit a learner's abilities and ambitions.
- **Complex choices and procedures** within VET systems can make it difficult for learners to identify suitable options and access them confidently.
- **Stereotypes and stigma** can discourage certain groups of young people from pursuing opportunities aligned with their strengths.
- **Limited access to information** about programmes, occupations, and career prospects may hinder informed decision-making.
- **Lack of career management skills** can make transitions between education and work more difficult.

These challenges raise a key question:

How can career guidance effectively support young people in making motivated, informed, and positive career choices - and, in doing so, help prevent early leaving from education and training?

## GUIDANCE: SUPPORTING YOUTH TO MANAGE THEIR CAREERS

### WHAT IS IT?

IT IS A RANGE OF ACTIVITIES AIMING AT SUPPORTING INDIVIDUALS TO MANAGE THEIR CAREERS AND MAKE EDUCATIONAL, TRAINING AND OCCUPATIONAL CHOICES MATCH THEIR PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

IT INCLUDES: EDUCATION, TRAINING AND WORK OPPORTUNITIES; CAREER COUNSELLING

- EARLY AND PERSISTENT CAREER GUIDANCE IS IMPORTANT TO SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE IN CHOOSING VET AS A POSITIVE OPTION
- YOUNG PEOPLE WILL HAVE A MORE ACTIVE AND ENGAGED ATTITUDE TO EDUCATION AND LEARNING IN GENERAL
- STUDENTS WILL BE SUPPORTED AT TRANSITION POINTS – TO OTHER LEVELS AND PATHWAYS OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING, TO WORK, OR TO A RELATED OCCUPATION

### WHY IS IT USEFUL?

TO PUT THE FOCUS ON PERSONAL SKILLS, STRENGTH AND INTERESTS AND AVOID USUAL BIASES ABOUT LEARNING PATHWAYS

TO HELP STUDENTS NAVIGATE THROUGH MANY VET OPTIONS AND UNDERSTAND APPLICATION PROCEDURES

TO HELP STUDENTS UNDERSTAND THEIR LEARNING NEEDS AND CAREER PREFERENCES

### HOW TO PROVIDE IT?

GUIDANCE ACTIVITIES CAN BE DELIVERED BY PROFESSIONAL AND ENGAGED CAREER GUIDANCE PRACTITIONERS

ENSURE COORDINATION BETWEEN GUIDANCE PROVIDERS

OFFER A VARIETY OF GUIDANCE ACTIVITIES (WORK SIMULATIONS OR 'DISCOVERY WORKSHOPS')

INTEGRATE LABOUR MARKET INFORMATION INTO GUIDANCE

SUPPORT SHOULD BE OFFERED BEFORE AND DURING EDUCATION AND TRAINING AND IN TRANSITION PHASES

## Beneficiaries

- ▶ Early leavers from education and training
- ▶ Learners at risk of early leaving from education and training
- ▶ Learners at transition points and/or uncertain about career aspirations
- ▶ Learners who lack employability skills
- ▶ VET students (school-based learning)
- ▶ Migrants / refugees
- ▶ Low-performing learners
- ▶ VET students (work-based learning)

To prevent disengagement and early leaving from education and training, VET institutions can play a key role by offering career education and guidance from an early stage. These activities empower learners to develop self-awareness, decision-making skills, and the competences needed to successfully complete their programmes — or to make informed transfers or pathway changes when needed.

Early and continuous career education, including the development of career management skills (CMS), helps engage young people who may be at risk of leaving education early. It supports them in identifying personal challenges such as learning difficulties or programme mismatches, while also promoting personal support, self-reflection, and awareness of their rights and barriers.

Career guidance can also be a powerful tool to re-engage early leavers, providing compensatory measures and outreach activities that help them return to education or training. In addition, collaboration with labour market and social sector services ensures tailored support for these learners, offering integrated pathways to learning and employment.

## Addressing the problem

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## **Tips: Career guidance for retention and re-engagement in VET**

Supporting young people in making motivated and well-informed career choices is key to preventing early leaving from education and training. When learners can connect their studies with their interests, skills and future aspirations, they are more likely to stay engaged and achieve successful outcomes. Quality career guidance helps ensure that every learner — regardless of background — has the confidence, information and support needed to choose a learning pathway that suits them best.

Career guidance covers a wide range of activities that help individuals manage their careers and make informed decisions about education, training and work that align with their personal characteristics, such as strengths, interests and learning styles.

Career guidance can include:

- Career information and advice on education, training and employment opportunities;
- Career counselling, provided by qualified practitioners with psychological or guidance training;
- Career management skills (CMS) development, through activities such as:
  - Assessment – using tests, skills portfolios or self-reflection exercises to build self-awareness;
  - Sampling – offering work simulations, internships or short learning tasters to help learners explore career options and stay motivated to continue learning;
  - Teaching – integrating career education into VET curricula, for example through courses on self-efficacy, CV writing or job interview preparation. Career education can be offered as a standalone subject, embedded within another subject, or as part of a cross-curricular or whole-school approach;
  - Mentoring – providing individual guidance and support from experienced peers, teachers or professionals.

Career guidance can be delivered by career guidance practitioners or other trained professionals (e.g. teachers, counsellors) working in VET schools, career services, public employment services, or youth (employment) centres.

Guidance plays both a preventive and re-engagement role. It helps identify and address risks of disengagement early, supports learners at key transition points, and assists early leavers returning to education or training. However, guidance is most effective when offered continuously throughout a person's learning and working life, not only at transition points. Sustained access to guidance enables individuals to stay engaged, adapt to change, and make informed decisions that support employability, social participation and overall well-being.

While lifelong guidance benefits people of all ages, it is particularly valuable for young learners at risk of early leaving and adult early leavers. Tailored guidance activities - focusing on self-awareness, motivation, and practical career management skills - can help these groups stay engaged in learning, reconnect with education or training, and build sustainable career pathways.

Across these activities, there are several key factors to consider when using career guidance to prevent and tackle early leaving. The following tips are given as advice to policy-makers and practitioners involved in the design and delivery of such measures. The information is based on Cedefop research into successful measures.

For more detailed and country based information, you may visit [Cedefop's Inventory of lifelong guidance systems and practices](#).

 **Tip 1: Support young people in developing career management skills**

Career paths are shaped by many factors - personal choices, chance, circumstances, socio-economic background, peer influence, and previous learning or work experiences, among others. They evolve throughout life, involving multiple transitions between education, training, employment, unemployment, caring responsibilities, volunteering, and civic engagement.

Young people at risk of early leaving often struggle with these transitions. They can greatly benefit from effective career guidance that helps them build **career management skills** - enabling them to plan ahead and manage their learning and work trajectories amid change and uncertainty. Adults seeking to return to education can also benefit from such support.

Activities may include:

- **Enhancing self-awareness:** Helping young people, especially those at risk, and adult early leavers to understand their abilities, aptitudes, barriers, and interests - and how these influence their career development and decision-making.
- **Developing career planning skills:** Supporting learners to define long-term goals and recognise how short-term choices contribute to sustainable career aspirations.
- **Improving information-seeking capacity:** Strengthening the ability of vulnerable young people to access and analyse information about learning and work opportunities, relate it to their skills and interests, and make informed career decisions.

## **Tip 2: Ensure coordination between guidance providers and schools**

Preventing and tackling early leaving requires strong coordination among all organisations that provide guidance to young people. For VET learners in particular, collaboration between education and employment sectors is crucial. Providers need to be aware of each other's services, work in partnership, and avoid duplication to ensure no young person "falls through the net".

This cooperation may involve sharing personal data about young learners and adults. Practitioners must do so ethically, respecting privacy and complying with data protection laws.

It is equally important that all stakeholders stay informed about the full range of learning opportunities and how these align with local labour market needs. The ultimate goal is to **keep the young person at the centre** — ensuring they can access the guidance services they need, regardless of their first point of contact.

## **Tip 3: Make guidance user-centred and youth-led**

Guidance should be a **user-centred, empowering process**, enabling young people to take an active role in shaping their learning and career paths.

Techniques such as reflective questioning can help build self-efficacy, self-management, and the ability to make informed choices.

Cedefop's Working Paper, [Minimising Early Leaving from Vocational Education and Training: Career guidance and counselling as auxiliary levers](#) highlights the value of combining broad, general guidance services with more tailored and personalised support. This dual approach ensures that each learner's unique challenges and circumstances are addressed effectively. At the same time, adopting a holistic, case-management perspective requires close cooperation among guidance practitioners, other support services, and professionals - as well as the learner's family and peers. Such collaboration is essential to respond to complex needs and to help individuals overcome the barriers that keep them from continuing their education or training.

Outreach practices should also be targeted to reach vulnerable groups, such as migrants and refugees, ethnic minorities, young people with disabilities and those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. This can for example be achieved through multilingual guidance services, mobile guidance units, or even online guidance options, which tend to be both anonymous and stigma-free, to facilitate access for those who otherwise struggle to reach out for help.

This user-centred approach requires awareness of the needs of both the education and training systems and the labour market. Guidance practitioners play a key role in ensuring that young people are aware of all available options - especially those from vulnerable backgrounds who face a higher risk of early leaving.

Practitioners should have the training, skills, and resources to tailor their support to each individual, recognising strengths and addressing needs early on. This helps sustain or rekindle motivation for learning and career development throughout life.

## **Tip 4: Provide guidance throughout life and at key transition points**

Access to guidance should be **continuous** — available throughout a learner's educational journey and not only at transition stages. While guidance is crucial during changes such as moving between education levels, returning to training after work or caregiving, or re-entering the labour market, it also serves a **preventive function**.

Effective guidance helps [identify early signs of disengagement and potential early leaving](#), allowing for timely interventions. Ongoing support empowers young people - particularly those at risk of social exclusion - to continue learning, maintain employability, and participate actively in society. To be effective and inclusive, continuous guidance must include equal access to digital guidance tools, to help youths build digital career management skills and to start adapting to a highly digitalised economy.

Providing sustained, personalised guidance takes time, but it is essential to help young people and adults in difficulty identify resources, overcome barriers, and navigate transitions successfully.

## **Tip 5: Integrate labour market information into guidance**

Insufficient information about career pathways, job prospects, and working conditions can contribute to early leaving from education and training. When students perceive low chances of employment after completing VET, they may be discouraged from enrolling or completing their studies. Conversely, short-term labour market opportunities can lead some to drop out prematurely, unaware of the long-term benefits of completing qualifications.

Comprehensive career guidance should therefore include:

- **Timely and accessible information:** Providing up-to-date details on occupations, training options, required skills, and possible career paths - including transferable skills and how they apply across sectors.
- **Support for career autonomy:** Helping young people develop the capacity to explore labour market information, identify reliable sources, critically assess opportunities, and make informed, long-term career decisions.

Tools that support the understanding and use of labour market information may include online platforms, career portals, databases on employability and salaries, and self-assessment tools for interests, values, and skills.

Cedefop's [Lifelong Guidance Inventory](#) offers dedicated resources and examples of ICT platforms that can help practitioners integrate labour market data into career guidance and education. Practitioners are encouraged to build their own **portfolio of labour market tools** to inform and inspire their clients.

## **Tip 6: Offer diverse guidance activities, including hands-on exploration**

Career guidance can take many forms, all of which contribute to developing career management skills and keeping young people engaged. Activities can include:

- One-to-one or group counselling sessions with career advisors
- Access to digital and print information resources
- Support in preparing CVs, cover letters, and job applications
- Mock interviews to build confidence and communication skills
- Skills audits to identify existing competences and inform career plans
- Work simulations or “discovery workshops” that allow young people to test different career options based on their interests and abilities

Many of these activities can take place in a virtual form, such as virtual career fairs or workshops, online self-assessment tools, and AI-powered labour market data tools or job-hunting platforms integrating AI elements. This can potentially prevent social and territorial barriers from getting into the way of disadvantaged youth receiving quality guidance services.

Such experiential activities enable young people to make informed, realistic choices about their next steps — increasing the likelihood of success and reducing the risk of early leaving.

## **Tip 7: Ensure quality career guidance by**

## strengthening teachers', trainers', and guidance practitioners' professionalism

Teachers and trainers are often the first line of offering career support. Their ability to provide accurate information, identify early signs of disengagement, and direct learners to appropriate support services is essential. At the same time, specialised guidance practitioners play a crucial role in offering more in-depth and personalised support; they can help young people stay in education or training, make relevant career choices, and navigate important life transitions. The effectiveness of career guidance also depends on whether guidance practitioners have received appropriate training and continuing professional development.

Thus, to ensure quality guidance, education and training systems should promote the professionalism of all staff involved in guidance activities. This includes providing high quality and relevant initial and continuing [professional development for teachers, trainers, and guidance practitioners](#), as well as adopting ethical standards and quality assurance mechanisms (such as close monitoring and feedback loops). Supporting reflective practice, peer learning, and mobility programmes among practitioners can further enhance the consistency and effectiveness of guidance provision across education and training systems and institutions.

### Expected outcomes




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The role of career guidance in preventing early leaving - and in supporting adults to return to education and training - is widely recognised. Research shows that students with a clear career plan are more likely to engage positively with education, though outcomes depend on many factors.

Systematic, high-quality guidance and career education are especially important at transition points, helping young people move smoothly between levels and pathways within education or into the labour market.

Early, continuous, and well-coordinated career guidance encourages young people to **choose education and training - including VET - as a positive, informed option**, rather than viewing it as a default or secondary choice.

The following outcomes can be expected:

		
INDIVIDUAL	INSTITUTIONAL	SYSTEM
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raising awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses and building a career strategy for learning and working</li> <li>• Acquiring career management skills</li> <li>• Defining learning career goals</li> <li>• Developing a positive attitude to learning and education and training</li> <li>• Gaining a better understanding of education options</li> <li>• Raising aspiration – formulating long-term career plans</li> <li>• Making informed choices</li> <li>• Improving self-awareness - understanding of one's abilities, aptitudes and interests</li> <li>• Lower absenteeism</li> <li>• Gaining a better understanding of skills, occupations and career pathways</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased learners' awareness and responsibility in career-management</li> <li>• Tailored learning pathways</li> <li>• Validating cross-sectoral competences in occupational and qualification standards</li> <li>• Reduced risk of early leaving due to or negative orientation, or to a lack of a positive future vision of oneself</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Free and accessible provision of information on social and economic opportunities</li> <li>• Reduced rates of early leavers</li> <li>• Increased progression to further learning and work</li> </ul>

## Related protective factors

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**Positive future vision for oneself and positive career choices**

## Related resources

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## Good practices

 Good practice

### **BOP: Vocational orientation programme, offered at vocational training centres**

*Special focus on BFZ: vocational training centres of the educational institute of the Bavarian Industry and Trade*

The German Vocational Orientation Programme, 'BOP', aims to give students an insight into a wide range of professions. It also aims to inform students about their potential to develop an idea as to which professions might suit them better than others.

 **Germany**

 Good practice

### **Youth Guidance Centres**

*Ungdommens Uddannelsesvejledning, (UU)*

Danish Youth Guidance Centres organise guidance at lower secondary schools in collaboration with school principals, in order to provide an extra guidance resource to teachers.

 **Denmark**

 Good practice

### **Foundation Innove, Pathfinder centres (in Estonian: Sihtasutus Innove, Rajaleidja keskused)**

In Estonia, Pathfinder centres provide careers information; career counselling; speech therapy; psychological guidance; socio-pedagogical guidance; and special educational guidance.

 **Estonia**

 Good practice

### **JBA - youth labour employment agency**

*Jugendberufsagentur - Hamburg*

German youth labour employment agencies (JBA) bring together career guidance and counselling services in one single place.

 **Germany**

 Good practice

### **Guidance and professional initiation courses and professional initiation courses to diverse professions**

*Cours d'orientation et d'initiation*

 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

*professionnelles - COIP) et cours d'initiation professionnelle à divers métiers - IPDM)*

In Luxembourg, Guidance and professional initiation courses (COIP) include a traineeship of one week or a longer period in a company, and practical classes provided by teachers in a workshop format.

 Luxembourg

action.

 Germany  Portugal  Romania

 Spain  United Kingdom

## Tools

 Tools

### ePortfolio for Your Future (ePortfolio 4YF)

*Student Computer Art Society/SCAS - LLP project*

The ePortfolio for Your Future (ePortfolio 4YF) project combines an innovative multimedia self-assessment tool ('self-discovery game') and an ePortfolio to prepare students to overcome the mismatch between education and work.

 Austria  Bulgaria  Ireland

 Liechtenstein

 Tools

### LYCAM questionnaire

*Lycée, ça m'intéresse*

The LYCAM (Lycée, ça m'intéresse) questionnaire, developed by the French Ministry of Education aims at helping practitioners to identify secondary school students' difficulties, motivations and personal views of school.

 France

 Tools

### Catalogue of PES measures for the implementation of the Youth Guarantee

This Catalogue of PES Youth Guarantee measures includes examples of PES employment counselling and guidance services for young people.

 EU level

 Tools

### Need for all Youngsters

*Brug for alle Unge, (BFAU)*

The Danish initiative 'Need for all Youngsters' included national initiatives to raise awareness of the educational system, in particular VET, amongst parents from ethnic minorities.

 Denmark

 Tools

## PES practices for the outreach and activation of NEETs

The PES handbook offers national examples of how the public employment services work in partnership with youth outreach workers and other key services to engage and support young people at risk of early leaving.

 EU level

 Tools

## ELGPN Guidelines for Policies and Systems Development for Lifelong Guidance

The guidelines have been developed by the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN). The main aim is to help improve the quality and efficacy of the career learning experience. It can also be used as a reference guide for national and EU policy-makers to identify dimensions of policy to be taken into account when deciding on lifelong guidance services.

 EU level

 Tools

## The Guiding Cities model

Guiding Cities aims to create a model of guidance to promote coherent policy and strategic planning and to respond to the complex needs in the fight against early school leaving.

 Greece  Italy  Romania

 Spain

 Tools

## DIDO - Dropping-in the dropouts toolkit

The DIDO toolkit contains practical tools aimed at preventing dropout in adult education.

 Belgium  Denmark  Finland

 Netherlands  Portugal

 Switzerland

## Publications

 Publications

### School-based Prevention and Intervention Measures and Alternative Learning Approaches to Reduce Early School Leaving


This study shows that early warning

 Publications

### Personal, vocational and occupational guidance in second chance schools

*A comprehensive approach to support early leavers*

The article emphasises the critical role

systems usually cover more visible cognitive and behavioural indicators like students' grades, truancy or transgressive behaviour. This causes at-risk students who do not display such signs to remain undetected. The authors insist on the need to also monitor students' emotional well-being. Download the report  [here](#).

 **Netherlands**  **Poland**

 **Portugal**  **Spain**  **Sweden**

 **United Kingdom**

of personalised, vocational, and professional guidance in second-chance schools.

 **Spain**

 **Publications**

## **Educational Leadership Network Europe (ELNE) - Policy Recommendations 2025**

*Proposing a European definition of Collaborative School and Educational Leadership*

The ELNE Network, which brings together stakeholders and social partners in education, establishes a first EU-wide definition on collaborative educational and school leadership. They refer to a multidimensional process, which involves stakeholders committed to fulfil the educational mission of their institutions, including protecting education as a public good and fostering democratic values.

 **EU level**

 **Publications**

## **The rising issue of dropouts from upper secondary vocational schools in the Czech Republic: perspectives of career counsellors**

*Newly published research article on the importance of career counselling in VET*

This study examines student dropout from upper secondary vocational schools in the Czech Republic through interviews with school-based career counsellors.

 **Czechia**

 **Publications**

## **The untapped potential of disadvantaged young people for apprenticeships in skilled trades**

***ILO Working Paper exploring barriers and opportunities in apprenticeship completion and skilled trades integration***

This ILO working paper explores why socially disadvantaged young people are more likely to drop out of apprenticeships in certain skilled trades, identifying factors linked to poor retention and limited employability.

**International**

## Quick wins

★ Quick win

### **Taster opportunities**

Taster opportunities – giving young people the chance to try out different vocational areas before they choose a VET programme – help to tackle misconceptions around VET.

 **France**  **Luxembourg**

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