



Leaving education early: putting vocational education and training centre stage

Volume I: investigating causes and extent



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Early 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 second of which reviews VET-related measures to tackle ELET. This first volume aims to understand better the magnitude of early leaving from VET (ELVET) and specific VET and labour market factors which contribute to this damaging aspect of young people's lives.

Part of the effort to address ELET focuses on the role of VET in helping retain in education and training learners who would otherwise drop out, and in bringing young people who have already left back into education and training. Countries with higher enrolment in VET tend to have lower ELET rates. Since academic failure is one of the factors prompting young people to drop out, VET can offer alternative ways of learning which can be more attractive.

DATA AVAILABILITY AND LIMITATIONS

While there are data on ELET to inform thinking and policy-making, due to conceptual/methodological and operational issues there is no agreed set of comparable statistics and indicators across European countries to help measure and examine early leaving from VET. This first volume of Cedefop's study of early leaving examines several ways of helping improve the situation:

- (a) analyse data available and improve the knowledge base on dropout and ELVET in Europe;
- (b) collect and assess evidence to provide further insights into existing and emerging ELET monitoring systems;
- (c) make use of data available to investigate factors influencing ELVET;
- (d) produce new evidence on the role of VET in addressing ELET.

These insights should assist national and EU policy-makers and decision-makers in developing existing ELET data collection and monitoring systems and informing targeted policies to empower VET in combating ELET.

The study methodology combined:

- (a) analysis of microdata from two international large-scale surveys: the programme for the international assessment of adult competences (PIAAC) and the adult education survey (AES); this sought insights into early leaving focusing on VET, compared to labour force survey (LFS) data;
- (b) analysis of microdata from longitudinal data sets in France and the Netherlands, for early leaver information according to training programme orientation;
- (c) desk research and literature review across Europe on national definitions of early leaving and analysis of VET-related factors;
- (d) semi-structured interviews with 409 policy-makers and practitioners in Belgium, Denmark, Germany, France, Croatia, Italy, Austria, and Portugal to identify factors leading to early leaving, also asking whether and how they use monitoring data to design responses to early leaving;

- (e) two expert workshops to discuss and validate preliminary findings.

The findings highlighted the need for better data and their systematic use for shaping targeted policy to tackle early leaving.

The current EU indicator on early leaving hides important variations in individual situations of those concerned. More detailed information on young people's education trajectories would be useful in identifying the types of programmes and situations that most commonly result in early leaving.

The EU indicator on early leaving is a political compromise. It enables EU-level comparisons but it is not sufficient to monitor progress at national and regional levels. The EU definition of early leaving combines three main dimensions: age parameters of young people (18 to 24), current status (not in education and training) and a variable about education achievement (completion of upper secondary education). This definition was designed for international comparisons between different education systems across the EU and is recognised as serving this purpose well.

However, the definition cannot distinguish between:

- (a) non-starters: those who decided not to continue or start any programme after completing education below the expected level (lower secondary education or short upper secondary education);
- (b) dropouts: those who started a programme that should lead them to the threshold qualification level but who dropped out before completion;
- (c) those who fail at final examinations, after completing the full programme.

Data could be differentiated further according to the type of programme from which the person drops out, to understand which types of programmes seem prone to early leaving.

While some countries use the EU indicator as their main source, most of those that have developed monitoring systems to identify early leavers, detailing the field of study or type of programme followed, use these systems to identify appropriate solutions. This suggests a way to develop the EU indicator to offer greater potential in policy-making.

IMPROVING THE EU INDICATOR

To be able to measure ELVET, the EU indicator should be further broken down by programme orientation and other characteristics of the learning pathway.

None of the EU data sets examined enables constructing an indicator on the share of early leavers from VET. The main limitations are:

- (a) the question about the VET orientation of a qualification or education programme is not asked of all those who have participated in upper secondary education;
- (b) in the PIAAC data set, questions about the dropout event only ask about the programme level, not its orientation;
- (c) in the AES data set, the question about dropout is complicated, requiring respondents to understand the ‘hierarchy’ of education programmes and qualifications in the country. Further, the number of countries using these questions from the survey is small;
- (d) with a few exceptions (France, Poland and Portugal) the samples sizes for the group that are both ELET and dropouts are small.

To enable measurement of ELVET, the indicators derived from the LFS should be adjusted:

- (a) a question should be asked about whether the respondent started an education/training programme that s/he did not complete, and at what level this programme was. This question should be asked of all those who did not achieve a qualification at international standard classification of education (ISCED) 3c long and above;
- (b) a question should be asked of all respondents about the vocational or general orientation of studies they followed at ISCED 3 (independent of whether they completed the programme or not).

Sample size is an issue with international data sets such as AES and PIAAC, which can only be analysed at EU level. Their questions on ELVET and associated factors look at a small subsample of a given survey and do not allow conclusions about a risk factor or intervention. A larger sample of early leavers would enable more detailed analysis to draw meaningful inferences about their characteristics, the role of VET and what factors are associated with ELVET compared to early leaving from general education.

Without appropriate data, there are difficulties in estimating the degree to which early leaving is predominantly an issue of general or vocational education. This study explored one possibility of developing an indicator, using existing international data, and another analysing national data sets. Due to the limitations of the available data, it has been possible only to identify trends, rather than reaching robust conclusions on actual rates of ELVET at EU and national levels. Analysis of the AES from 16 EU Member States in 2011-12 suggests that there are slightly more dropouts from VET programmes than from general education. However, the data are based on small sample sizes and have to be used with caution.

VET AS PART OF THE PROBLEM

Early leaving appears to be particularly acute for those enrolled in VET programmes.

National data use different measurement approaches and in most cases (Belgium, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Austria) VET appears to result in higher shares of early leaving than general education. There are exceptions; for example, VET colleges in Austria, which offer a higher level of VET, have a lower rate of early leavers than general education.

Analysis of data sets from France and the Netherlands confirms that early leaving is more common in VET pathways:

- (a) French data show that 93% of students in general education tracks qualified compared to 76% of students in VET tracks;
- (b) the Dutch data showed 96.5% of students in general education tracks qualified compared to 79.5% of students in the prevocational track.

There are national differences in dropout rates between types of VET programme and sectors or professions. These are influenced by the attractiveness of VET, which can combine characteristics such as employment opportunities, wage levels, level of participation or image of the profession. More popular and prestigious types of VET (at higher level, when such levels exist) typically have a lower share of early leaving than those considered as last resort option (e.g. in Belgium, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and Austria). More demanding and prestigious programmes tend to attract a different population – higher achievers and young people who are strongly motivated – and

similar trends can be found in differences between professions.

Research has shown that work-based learning can have positive effects on motivation and professional identity, and ultimate retention, so there is expectation that work-based learning tracks should retain young people better than school-based ones. Analysis of data sets in France and the Netherlands – where qualifications can be achieved through school- and work-based forms of training – showed the reverse:

- (a) in France, 77% of students in school-based tracks qualify compared to 73% of students from work-based tracks;
- (b) in the Netherlands, 84% of students from school-based tracks qualify compared to 77% of students from work-based tracks.

This difference in retention rates may be explained by work-based learning tracks attracting greater shares of disadvantage students: older students, who are likely to be those who repeated a class, or those facing other difficulties. The difference in retention rates could be a matter of student selection rather than the actual programmes.

Although there is no doubt that work-based learning may be beneficial for learners, its effectiveness in retaining people in education and training can be strengthened when supportive measures are in place to address the needs of learners at risk of dropping out.

VET BENEFITS ELET REDUCTION

VET is not only part of the problem, it can also be a solution, helping retain or return learners and young people to education and training.

VET can have a remedial role in tackling ELET, acting as a safety net for those who drop out from general education and who may otherwise have become early leavers. Analysis of young persons' pathways in France and the Netherlands shows that most of those who transit from general education to VET gain a qualification. In France, 10% of general education students switch to VET tracks; 79% of them qualify. In the Netherlands, 7.7% of students from general education tracks switch to VET tracks and 82.7% of them qualify.

Analysis of PIAAC data shows that dropouts from education and training at secondary level will ultimately qualify largely through VET; 40% of those

who dropped out achieve an ISCED 3 qualification or above (14 EU and European Economic Area countries). Nearly a quarter of those who drop out (23.7%) qualify through VET. Analyses in France and the Netherlands show similar trends. In France, 31% of early leavers return to education and training and qualify, most doing so through VET (80%).

Policy commitment should not only be geared towards reducing the rates of early leavers in VET but also focus on reducing ELET through VET. Since most young people who leave education and training for a longer period of time before qualifying do not return to education and training, there is also scope for more action to reach out to these groups.

APPROACHES TO MONITORING

There are current initiatives to strengthen the coherence and compatibility of data collection mechanisms in education and training subsystems; in most countries they are still at an early stage. In those few countries where such systems are well-established, there are clear benefits.

Most of the countries reviewed have systems to monitor early leavers or those at risk of becoming so. Data may be collected by the ministry of education, a delegated agency, public employment services (PES) or youth guidance centres.

Denmark and the Netherlands use unique student registers; others combine data from several sources such as the interministerial system of information exchange (SIEI) in France. There are also systems that follow up unjustified absences. Other countries collect data not on individuals but on student cohorts in defined situations: the number of students who complete a year, compared to those enrolled at the beginning, or the number of students who repeat a year. This information is typically collected as part of a school's annual reporting on headcount.

Apprenticeships are different. In Denmark and France, apprentices are registered with training institutions, but in Germany and Austria the link is between the apprentice and the employer, via a contract. Trade chambers may collect data on apprenticeship contracts: their registration, successful termination by an examination, or premature termination/dissolution. Contract dissolution does not equal early leaving as young people can start a new apprenticeship contract with another employer.

One challenge faced by countries setting up monitoring systems is distinguishing between those who drop out and become early leavers and those moving to a different programme or starting a new apprenticeship contract with another employer. This usually requires combining data from several VET subsystems, each with different governance and slightly different definitions, as well as combining data on apprenticeships with data on other forms of education.

There are initiatives to strengthen data collection within countries, allowing for student follow-up through the system. Some countries (such as Italy) envisage student registers that would allow for follow-up of learner trajectories. In most countries, this is work in progress.

Such systems have shown to be useful to:

- (a) increase awareness of the problem among local actors. Having detailed data at the level of a local area or a school creates a call for action;
- (b) set targets per territory or education institution and monitor progress. Targets are translated into action plans or strategies setting measurable objectives;
- (c) give real-time data annually (or more frequently) resulting in timely action; the longer a person is disengaged from education, the harder it will be to recreate learning aspirations and habits;
- (d) develop targeted measures in those areas or organisations where problems are highly concentrated;
- (e) reach out to those who dropped out, working with organisations to practise active outreach.

Some challenges remain:

- (a) developing mechanisms to support data collection by different education and training providers, and to quality assure this process;
- (b) undertaking data analyses to provide decision-makers with indicators which are simple to understand, to interpret and to use;
- (c) increasing feedback on data collected by national and regional authorities to local authorities and VET providers;
- (d) linking to decision-making, providing more up-to-date information and sharing it with stakeholders at different levels.

There is value in up-to-date, fit-for-purpose data on early leaving at different levels: individual, programme and measure, institutional, and local, regional and national. Implementing monitoring systems, however, is resource-intensive and

strengthening the coherence and compatibility of data collection mechanisms in education and training subsystems can be complex. This study acknowledges the challenges and identifies emerging and current initiatives to improve monitoring systems; these can be taken as useful models for those now aiming at improving their own monitoring systems.

DATA USE FOR POLICY-MAKING

Monitoring systems to track early leavers are used to support the timely development of targeted measures for at-risk learners and to help reach out to those who have already dropped out. However, they are rarely used to assess the effectiveness of the applied measures.

In the countries reviewed, the data on early leaving are being used to:

- (a) identify individuals at risk of leaving or who have already left education and training. Organisations need to have nominal information as well as contact details; the data need to be updated regularly and available promptly;
- (b) provide an overview of education institution performance, and possibly also municipalities or regions. Such data need to reflect how the entity performs compared to other schools/regions.

Availability and use of data on ELET is also important in the context of the European Social Fund (ESF). The new funding programmes are accompanied by a set of conditions that countries eligible for funding have to meet; one of these relates to ELET.

Although, existing monitoring systems are used to inform policy-making, national data appear to be rarely used to assess the effectiveness of preventive and remedial measures to address ELET. Data from the measures analysed do not provide information on:

- (a) whether any support was provided to those who were identified as early leavers;
- (b) if so, whether the support was taken up;
- (c) how the situation of the early leaver evolved (what were the outcomes).

Unique student registers and monitoring systems for at-risk learners can provide valuable data for evaluation of measures. They aid the tracking of individuals' educational pathways, showing if learners participating in a certain programme or

benefitting from a support measure have ultimately completed upper secondary education. This can provide information on whether a particular measure (perhaps focused on career guidance) has had the expected impact on risk factors, as in better understanding of education options.

REASONS FOR EARLY LEAVING

Alongside general factors that influence early leaving are specific reasons why young people drop out from VET. These should be the focus of policies and measures that aim to tackle ELVET.

There are benefits in collecting information on the reasons for dropping out and individual factors leading to early leaving. VET students can have background characteristics associated with early leaving: prior education failure (class repetition), lower socioeconomic background, migration background, and disability. But many early leavers from VET do not have these characteristics and leave prematurely for other reasons, more specific to VET:

- (a) VET is a second choice and often not a positive one. Young people and their families would have preferred to complete general education, so they enter VET half-heartedly. If the programme does not motivate them, they are more likely to disengage;
- (b) lack of a positive perspective for themselves. Many young people at risk of leaving VET pathways early do not have a positive relationship with education and training and do not see it as a path to a positive future;
- (c) negative perception of their own capacities linked to past failures. Such negative perception and low confidence in their own learning potential becomes self-fulfilling;
- (d) mismatch between expectations of a VET programme or profession and its reality. A stereotypical perception of a profession, or only

- a vague idea of what it implies, soon meets the reality of the training and the job. Negative experience of it puts them at risk of early leaving;
- (e) when entering VET programmes, young people expect more practical tuition. More academic and 'school-like' tuition may lead to disappointment and continued failure;
- (f) there are several specific issues linked to apprenticeships:
 - (i) readiness to work. Some young people at age 15 or 16 do not have the maturity to integrate in a company or the basic skills to convince an employer to hire them;
 - (ii) availability of placements. If they enrol in a programme before an apprenticeship placement is found, young people drop out from VET when they do not find a company to offer one;
 - (iii) conflicts in the workplace: poor relationships in the workplace may negatively affect motivation to complete a programme.

Two labour-market-related factors influencing VET students were highlighted by the interviewees:

- (a) working conditions. Sectors with long or antisocial working hours, health risks or stress, tend to experience high dropout rates;
- (b) remuneration. If young people have the opportunity to find unqualified jobs for better pay, they are more likely to quit their training.

The importance of VET-specific factors to early leaving varies with individuals. Some young people who leave without an upper secondary qualification have complex situations combining various disadvantages. Others are no different from those who, despite difficulties, remain in education and training, and qualify. Analysis of policies and measures to tackle ELET presented in Volume II (Cedefop, 2016) show that policies are more likely to succeed if they acknowledge the different factors that can influence early leaving and are tailored specifically to meeting them. ■