

## CHAPTER 6.

# Conclusions and policy messages

### 6.1. Strengthening VET policy commitment to combat ELET

Vocational education and training (VET) is particularly exposed to early leaving. To reduce high rates of early leaving in VET (ELVET), important prevention efforts are needed to increase the quality, accessibility and attractiveness of VET.

At the same time, VET is part of the solution to the problem of early leaving from education and training (ELET). The study showed that VET programmes (particularly those more practical and oriented to work-based learning) can be effective in motivating young people who are discouraged and disengaged. This is why measures to counteract ELET can benefit from incorporating those vocational pedagogies that make learning more meaningful for certain young people.

However, this positive role of VET in addressing ELET is not sufficiently recognised in EU reference documents. The 2011 Council recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving recognises that VET is particularly concerned by the phenomenon of early leaving. It calls for countries to have strategies that cover both general education and VET. However, the recommendation does not identify the importance of VET as a solution to this phenomenon and the positive potential for vocational pedagogies to reengage young people.

The recent 2015 Council conclusions promote a whole-school approach to reducing early leaving. While this approach is applicable to general education and school-based VET, it does not tackle issues faced by apprenticeships. The study found that in several countries where data are available (including France, the Netherlands and Austria), early leaving from apprenticeships is not negligible. Further, the 2015 Council conclusions mention VET only marginally and without emphasising the potential of vocational pedagogies. The role of VET was more clearly stated in the 2013 report of the first thematic working group on early school leaving set by the European Commission (2011-13). The report of this group identified work-based learning as one dimension of measures to address ELET. This dimension has since faded and is hardly identifiable in the work of the second working group on school policy (2014-15).

The study also found that although countries are increasingly developing comprehensive strategies to tackle early leaving, the role of VET in these

strategies is not always clear. Good examples of comprehensive strategies to tackle early leaving that cover the whole education and training sector, including clear actions in VET, can be found in Austria, Belgium-fl and the Netherlands. Other countries have VET reforms and policies that aim to improve the quality of VET and also tackle ELVET (such as Estonia, Denmark or the French Community of Belgium), but these are not necessarily part of broader comprehensive strategies.

Considering the size of the ELVET problem, along with the prevention and remedial potential of VET, much clearer emphasis should be given to related policies. Both the EU and the Member States need to acknowledge VET's role in strategic documents, and reflect this in their policies and programmes. National authorities have an important role in:

- (a) improving VET quality, for instance by ensuring the quality and preparedness of VET teachers and in-company trainers, and by improving the alignment of VET programmes with the skills required in the labour market;
- (b) improving the flexibility of the system, making it easier for learners to change pathways. When changing programme, learners should not have to repeat any learning they have already completed. Repetition can be avoided by breaking down programmes into units or modules and offering opportunities for credit transfer or recognition of prior learning. It is also important to introduce flexible modes of delivery (such as evening classes and online learning) and to ensure that VET pathways can lead to progression into higher education;
- (c) promoting a positive image of VET by providing more and better quality information about VET programmes; by developing promotional campaigns to help to raise awareness of VET; and by providing role models, for instance inviting current and former VET students as ambassadors to share their experience with other learners or early leavers.

EU and international initiatives can also have an important role in raising VET attractiveness. The possibility to participate in student exchanges, through the Erasmus+ programme, can be a strong motivating factor for VET learners to continue and succeed in their studies. Skills competitions at national and international level, such as those organised by WorldSkills initiative, can be equally motivating for many VET students. The European Commission is launching the first European VET skills week in December 2016 to showcase vocational studies as a first class option while raising awareness of the wide range of opportunities that VET provides. By making VET a first choice, the *New skills agenda for Europe* (European Commission, 2016) can boost further

developments to improve the attractiveness and image of VET. This should be seen as an equally good career choice as traditional higher education.

## 6.2. Targeting activities and combining measures for success

The study identified six profiles of young people that vary by level of disengagement and the type of challenges in education and training as well as in other spheres of life. These include:

- (a) learners escaping or confronting the system;
- (b) learners disengaging due to difficulties in transition;
- (c) early leavers facing complex personal, social and/or family issues.

Effective strategies should address the specific cause of the problem and be adapted to the profile of the young person. It is crucial to collect information on his or her characteristics and needs to be able to offer tailored support.

The use of a systematic approach by education and training providers to identifying learners at risk of early leaving is the first step in tackling the problem. Learners at risk of early leaving present different distress characteristics, often a long time before they leave. If these signs are detected promptly, there are more chances of reengaging young people with relatively simple interventions. The study shows that early intervention allows for better results with fewer resources.

Each learner is different and so are his or her ways of showing that something is not going well. Absenteeism, low attainment, and disruptive behaviour in the classroom are often linked to potential early leaving. Other signs, such as emotional distress, can easily go unnoticed. Practitioners are best placed to spot pupils at risk as they track absenteeism and academic attainment in their daily work; being in direct and regular contact with the learners also puts them in the best position to spot distress. However, they often do not have the time or resources to identify and act upon risk signs. Training professionals to be able to detect early these signs, and link learners at risk with the necessary measures tailored to their needs, increases the chances that learners remain engaged in education and training.

It is of utmost importance to have the means to reach out to those who have already left the system as swiftly as possible. To motivate youngsters to return to education and training requires coordination of different services and different education and training providers to offer an adequate response to needs.

### 6.3. Evaluating progress to inform policy-making

Most Member States have a multitude of activities, financed from local, regional, national or European sources that aim to combat ELET. However, evidence about which ones are making the difference and to whom, is often lacking. It is likely that some of the funding is allocated to measures that make little or no improvement, especially in the longer term. Understanding which measures are successful and for which target group is a precondition for improving effectiveness and efficiency of national strategies to combat early leaving.

These have one overall objective: to ensure that more young people achieve upper secondary qualifications and ultimately successfully transit from school to work. To do this, the measures aim at:

- (a) retaining young people in education and training until they qualify;
- (b) reintegrating them into education and training, and retaining them until they qualify.

To understand whether the policies put in place are effective, it is important to measure whether they make any difference; measuring whether there is a change in the evolution of retention rates and in the share of people who qualify through compensation measures.

Most of the measures analysed do not have evaluations that would show the ultimate effect of the policy on retention and qualification attainment. They are evaluated against their output data: numbers of participants or numbers of beneficiaries (32 of the 44 measures analysed had such data). They are sometimes evaluated according to whether the beneficiaries stayed in education and training (27 measures) but more rarely according to whether the beneficiaries ultimately achieved a qualification (15 measures). For almost half of the measures analysed (20) evaluators collected feedback from beneficiaries about their perception of the measure. They rarely collected information about whether their education performance improved (nine cases) or whether their attitude to education and training changed positively (15 cases).

Some of the evaluations analysed the whole spectrum of indicators that should be captured in intervention logic: inputs, outputs and results (possibly different layers). The results observed were not discussed in relation to resources expended to implement the measure. Further, many of the evaluations did not capture intermediate results which are crucial to understanding how the ultimate effect happens:

- (a) the evaluations rarely unpacked the black-box of how an intervention influences young persons' education and training pathway or institutions' capacity to tackle early leaving. The extent to which young people were

- more motivated, more confident, had better well-being, as a result of the activities is rarely measured;
- (b) targets for the interventions are rarely set and this makes judgements on performance more difficult;
  - (c) baseline data are often not available so it is difficult to analyse the change that the intervention brought. Most of the evaluations only give a static picture of results and outputs without discussing the change that these interventions enabled;
  - (d) comparisons with control groups or with other comparable interventions are scarce.

A key evaluator's tool to develop a monitoring and evaluation indicator framework is the programme/policy intervention logic presented in this study. The intervention logic breaks down the programme rationale into:

- (a) inputs: what the programme does;
- (b) process/activities: how the programme does it;
- (c) outputs: what is directly produced/delivered and who takes part;
- (d) intermediary outcomes: what concrete changes can be identified at the level of individuals (learners or practitioners) or institutions;
- (e) ultimate outcomes: to what extent the programme reduces early leaving.

If contextual factors influence programme implementation or its chances of success, these should be also clarified. The discussion of the intervention logic can clarify any assumptions about the context which are considered as necessary for the programme to succeed. Examples of contextual features (not directly linked to the policy/programme) which can affect programme performance are:

- (a) level of unemployment;
- (b) staff turnover;
- (c) relationship between key stakeholder organisations;
- (d) changes in political priorities.

Monitoring and evaluation indicators should be defined for each aspect of the intervention logic. If indicators only capture outputs, the evaluation does not say anything about the real change that can be attributed to the programme. If they only focus on the ultimate outcomes, then it is not clear how concretely the programme made (or failed to make) a difference. If the change in ultimate outcomes is small and no intermediate outcomes are measured, it is not possible to see what aspects of the intervention logic and the programme rationale are failing. This makes it difficult to recommend adjustments.

There is a need to promote an evaluation culture for policies to tackle early leaving in Europe and to build evaluation capacity so that the evaluations focus on those indicators which enable policy-makers to make decisions about future actions.

#### 6.4. Measuring policy impact and setting improvement priorities

Most countries/regions monitor rates of early leaving and their evolution at system level. Some also have systems to monitor the evolution of early leaving rates more locally (regional, local and school/provider level). Local data are important as they enable development of targeted actions. However, evaluations need to go beyond this level of monitoring. If a positive evolution is observed, it is important to understand what triggered it to enable learning and transfer from effective practices.

Developing structural indicators for system supports is already taking place for the United Nations, to the highest attainable standard of health, and can be extended by analogy for social inclusion in education (Downes, 2014a), with indicators pertaining to VET. Structural indicators are generally framed as potentially verifiable yes/no answers; they address whether or not key structures, mechanisms or principles are in place in a system. As relatively enduring features or key conditions of a system, they are, however, potentially malleable. They offer a scrutiny of State or institutional effort (United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2005; 2006; Downes, 2014a).

Structural indicators pertain to features of a system where something can be changed (laws, spaces, roles and responsibilities, key guiding principles, potentially malleable dimensions to an education, health and/or community system). They offer a framework for strategic direction as to what issues are addressed at system level, while also offering flexibility at local or national contextual level as to how to address these issues.

An important tension in education, including VET, is between prescriptive top-down models based on centralised direction and bottom-up processes that emphasise local creativity and autonomy for learning. Structural indicators offer a bridge between these two tensions, as an approach to aid both central strategic direction and accountability on the one hand, and local flexibility and creativity on the other. Structural indicators also focus throughout on problems and solutions at system level to scrutinise potential for improvement through proportionate measures for legitimate aims. They offer a distinctive focus on availability of services and supports for strategic purposes at system level. For example, the

question can be framed with regard to a percentage of a practice in a given system, such as whether more than 80% of schools in an area provide a particular feature, so that it can be characterised as the norm within a system; alternatively, a question can be asked as to whether fewer than 30% of schools provide a particular feature (Downes, 2014b) which would highlight its lack of mainstreaming into systemic practice.

The weight of evidence required for a structural indicator may depend on its scope and purpose. A strong burden of proof for aspects to be structural indicators would be met through inferences based on weighted mean effect sizes and correlations between study features and effect sizes, in an international meta-analysis. This is available for example for aspects of structural indicators in the areas of school bullying and also social and emotional learning (Downes and Cefai, 2016).

Considered as an action-guiding policy tool in a specific context or as a self-assessment tool, other standards of evidence can also be encompassed to inform structural indicators. A different possible use for a structural indicators matrix tool is to help policy-makers brainstorm on potential policy options and pathways for system development on a given issue, through identifying structural features of promising practices that could be replicated elsewhere at system levels. Different purposes for clusters of structural indicators bring not only different levels of stringency for being informed by evidence, but also different kinds of review processes for feedback on the presence or absence of these structural features in a given system.

Table 29 presents a few examples of structural indicators that could be used to check and promote reflection on the use of motivational activities to engage at-risk learners.

Table 29. **Examples of structural indicators on motivational activities**

Motivational activities to engage learners at risk of ELET	Opportunity for large majority of VET learners to engage in VET provider related sports activities	Yes/No
	Opportunity for large majority of VET learners to engage in VET-provider-related arts activities	Yes/No
	Opportunity for large majority of VET learners to engage in VET school related active citizenship (local environment, volunteer, service learning) activities	Yes/No

*Source:* Based on draft list of indicators developed by Paul Downes for Cedefop's electronic toolkit (forthcoming).

Structural indicators can be at a national strategic framework level and at an institutional project level, both for external evaluation and self-evaluation. The indicators provide recognition of diverse starting points of some countries relative to others. Structural indicators are tools and, as such, are only as useful as the

purposes and strategies to which they are put. Key issues for concern in developing structural indicators include:

- (a) clarity of purpose regarding what social policy goals the structural indicators are key system conditions to support;
- (b) clarity of terminology for each structural indicator;
- (c) development of adequate review processes and feedback mechanism for the system scrutiny.

## 6.5. Mobilising European funds and programmes

Exploring ways to benefit from EU funding and other EU programmes to address early leaving may support the efforts at national level. The European Social Fund (ESF) and the European regional development fund alone will inject over EUR 30 billion to support skills development during 2014-20; the Erasmus+ programme supports skills development in education and training with nearly EUR 15 billion (European Commission, 2016, p. 3).

Policy impact evaluation is particularly relevant in the context of the ESF conditionalities which emphasise the need for evidence-based policies and the need to monitor and evaluate the extent to which policies implemented lead to expected results (European Commission, 2014). Previous work at EU level focused on issuing guidance on how to address early leaving<sup>(30)</sup>. The next step in this cooperation could be to develop guidance on how to monitor and evaluate measures to address this phenomenon (Psifidou, 2016c). Cedefop is working towards that direction and by 2017 will develop an electronic toolkit to support professionals.

In 2006, an audit of the ESF examined the nature of actions aiming to reduce early leaving in six Member States (Court of Auditors, 2006). Conclusions raised concerns that funding was being applied without analysis of the existing situation or targeted results. Further, justifications for both the overall level of funding allocated to ELET, or for which regions received funding, were not sufficient. Crucially, monitoring actions in terms of quantifying outcomes of activities was largely unavailable.

The ex-post evaluation of ESF 2007-13 investment in human capital (ICFI, 2015) reviewed a sample of interventions focusing on early leavers. It found that the effectiveness of interventions supported varied and so did their sustainability.

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<sup>(30)</sup> See the work of the first and the second thematic working groups set up by the European Commission: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/early-school-leavers\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/early-school-leavers_en.htm)



In many cases, the indicators used to measure success of funded activities provide limited or no insight into the effects the activity had on pathways of young people.

In order to ensure investment in policies to tackle early leaving are more effective and efficient, the ESF for the period 2014-20 imposes certain *ex-ante* conditionalities. Countries that wish to use ESF money for policies tackling early leaving have to meet several preconditions; they particularly have to show that there is a strategic policy framework in place. This requirement is directly based on the findings of the 2009 audit and criteria for such a policy framework are further specified in the guidance on ESF conditionalities (European Commission, 2014), emphasising:

- (a) availability of data to make policies and measures targeted;
- (b) evidence-based approach;
- (c) a comprehensive approach to tackling the issue of ELET.

This framework creates strong momentum for common work at EU level on monitoring and evaluation of measures to address ELET.

The Erasmus+ programme for 2014-20 defines early leaving as one of the priorities for strategic partnerships among institutions. The programme funds international exchanges of students and school staff as well as partnership projects to support cooperation and innovation at national and local level. It aims to contribute to the objectives of the ET 2020 strategy, particularly the education targets which include reducing early leaving.

However, the interim evaluation of the predecessor programme (Public Policy and Management Institute, 2011) found that the participation of disadvantaged groups in the programme was low. It also found that most project beneficiaries considered that the issue of early leaving was not relevant to their project. Early leavers were most frequently addressed by the Grundtvig strand of the programme which concerned non-vocational adult learning, meaning that people benefitting from these measures were not in programmes leading to a recognised qualification. VET projects rarely addressed the issue of early leaving despite the strong need in this sector.

The study identified the importance of motivational and confidence-building activities for the reengagement of young people into education and training. Short-term mobility and joint transnational projects may have such positive effect. Mobility opportunities for initial VET (IVET) apprentices and learners are supported under Erasmus+. However, mobility opportunities for IVET learners are largely insufficient to meet current demand. Only a few countries include such mobility opportunities in their national education, training and youth schemes. The [VET mobility scoreboard](#) developed by Cedefop in cooperation with the

European Commission gives a picture of the measures in place to support IVET mobility across the EU and provide a good basis for identifying areas where more needs to be done. Further, the Erasmus+ mobility actions could develop a specific focus on disadvantaged groups who are likely to see important benefit from participating in such activities.

The study acknowledges the contribution of VET-specific pedagogies and particularly of work-based learning to making VET more attractive and engaging learners. But it also pointed to the lack of apprenticeship placements, which may cause dropping out from particular VET programmes. Currently, just a quarter of students in upper secondary vocational education attend work-based programmes, while general and higher education programmes rarely include any work-based experience. Business-education partnerships, involving all sectors and levels of education and training, can unlock this potential. Some successful initiatives are showing the way, engaging labour market actors in education and training and helping young people get a foot on the jobs ladder. The European Alliance for apprenticeships has so far mobilised 250 000 in-company training and job opportunities for young people. Through the European pact for youth, one million young people will be trained in digital skills, and a 'smart classroom' programme will reach 100 000 students. Through the Grand coalition for digital jobs, companies and other organisations have offered millions of additional training opportunities <sup>(31)</sup> (European Commission, 2016, p. 13). Developing a set of support services to facilitate knowledge-sharing, networking and cooperation on apprenticeships at national level can provide valuable information to learners on how to find such opportunities and reach their expectations.

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<sup>(31)</sup> European Commission: *Pledge tracker*. <http://www.linkedpolicies.eu/pledge/>