



From risk to resilience

Policy guidelines for supporting learners at risk and early leavers from vocational education and training

POLICY BRIEF | 2026

POLICY BACKGROUND

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Why early leaving matters

Early leaving from education and training (ELET) is a test of Europe's capacity to deliver on its skills and competitiveness ambitions. In the context of the [union of skills](#) strategy ([European Commission, 2025a](#)) and the [pathways to school success](#) initiative ([Council of the European Union, 2022](#)), reducing ELET and re-engaging early leavers have become central to ensuring that no talent is lost at a time of growing skills shortages and accelerating labour market transformation. These objectives are also anchored in the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), which reinforces the EU's commitment to equitable access to education and training, as well as to social inclusion ([European Commission, 2021](#)).

While widely recognised as a long-standing challenge, ELET continues to expose structural weaknesses in education and training systems across Europe. It remains strongly associated with a higher risk of unemployment, precarious employment and poverty, and is also linked with a growing mismatch between individuals' skills and labour market needs ([Cedefop, 2026](#)). The labour market consequences are stark. [According to Eurostat](#), in 2025 fewer than half of all early leavers in the EU were in employment (46.2 %), while 30.8 % were not employed but actively wanted to work, and the remaining

23.1 % were not employed and did not want to work. In the majority of EU Member States, early leavers were predominantly not in employment, with the highest shares found in Lithuania (86.4 %), Slovakia (77.9 %), Bulgaria (76.7 %) and Croatia (76.2 %). Additionally, the [Education and Training Monitor 2025](#) ([European Commission, 2025b](#)) highlights that job insecurity is comparatively high even among early leavers who are employed. In this sense, early leaving is not only a social issue, but also a missed opportunity for economic resilience and productivity.

The challenge is further compounded by the EU's renewed focus on [basic skills and key competences](#) as a prerequisite for competitiveness, social inclusion and successful participation in the green and digital transitions ([European Commission, 2025c](#)). Many early leavers lack basic skills in literacy, numeracy and science, and are at risk of being excluded from emerging opportunities that require digital and AI-related competences ([Cedefop, 2026](#); [Psifidou, 2026a](#)). As the demand for higher-level and transversal skills intensifies, individuals who leave education early are disproportionately left behind, reinforcing cycles of disadvantage.

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...**ELET** is no longer solely a question of equity; it is a test of **Europe's capacity to deliver on its skills and competitiveness ambitions...**



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RIISING DEMAND FOR HIGH SKILLS DEEPENS DISADVANTAGE

The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) [skills forecast 2035](#) projects that employment will become more skills-intensive than in the past, with demand for high-skilled occupations showing a drastic increase, driven by the green and digital transitions. In fact, [Cedefop's latest employment projections](#) reveal that the highest levels of job growth are expected in high-skilled roles such as business and administration professionals, teaching professionals and science and engineering professionals. At the same time, Cedefop's AI Skills Survey ([Cedefop, 2025](#)) shows that more than a quarter of the European adult workforce is already using AI at work, and that the demand for AI-related skills is growing rapidly, making upskilling and reskilling crucial. Critically, an emerging 'AI divide' is reinforcing pre-existing digital inequalities, with high-skilled professionals and workers in certain northern European Member States gaining ground while others risk being left behind. For individuals

who leave education before obtaining upper secondary qualifications, these structural shifts compound existing disadvantages and reduce the prospect of meaningful labour market integration. Reducing early leaving and strengthening the acquisition of basic and transversal skills have therefore become closely interconnected policy objectives.

Addressing ELET requires a shift from remedial approaches to systemic strategies that combine prevention, early intervention and flexible reintegration pathways ([Cedefop, 2016a, 2022a](#); [Lifelong Learning Platform LLP & Cedefop, 2019](#); [Psifidou, 2025a, 2025b, 2026b](#); [Psifidou, et al., 2022, 2026](#)). This is essential not only for social inclusion, but also for achieving Europe's broader objectives of a skilled, adaptable and inclusive workforce.

REDUCING
EARLY LEAVING AND
STRENGTHENING
BASIC & TRANSVERSAL
SKILLS
GO HAND IN
HAND



Progress made and the new EU target

Progress in reducing ELET is one of the EU's most notable policy success stories, yet also one of its most persistent challenges. Over the past decade, steady progress has brought the EU close to its headline targets, making ELET reduction one of the most successful strategic objectives in EU cooperation in education and training. In 2025, the EU average rate of ELET stood at 9.1 % among individuals aged 18–24, just above the previous benchmark of less than 9 % set for 2030. At present, 17 Member States have already met this target, demonstrating that it is achievable ([Eurostat, 2025](#)).

Building on this progress, the EU has raised its level of ambition under the European education area framework, setting a revised target of reducing ELET to less than 8 % by 2030 ⁽¹⁾. While the overall trend is positive, reaching this more demanding objective will require sustained and, in many cases, accelerated policy efforts.

At the same time, aggregate progress masks substantial disparities. ELET rates remain uneven across Member States, regions and population groups, including across genders. In 2025, rates

⁽¹⁾ This new target was established by the [Council Resolution on the second cycle of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area \(2026-2030\)](#).

were significantly higher among young men (10.6 %) than young women (7.5 %) in the EU ([Eurostat, 2025](#)). The degree of urbanisation is also a factor related to early leaving; in 2025, the lowest proportion of early leavers in the EU was reported in cities at 8 %, while in towns and suburbs it was 10.1 %, and in rural areas it was 9.6 %. Such differences highlight persistent structural inequalities in education and training systems across the EU.

These patterns point to a dual challenge. In Member States and population groups where early leaving rates remain high, reducing ELET will require targeted and systemic approaches. Conversely, in Member States with already low rates, further reductions are increasingly difficult to achieve, as the remaining early leavers tend to belong to the most disadvantaged and hardest-to-reach groups, requiring more intensive and tailored support.

At the current pace of progress, achieving the new target of less than 8 % by 2030 will require a clear acceleration of reforms, alongside more effective prevention and reintegration measures. Evidence also shows that labour market outcomes for early leavers remain weak, while second-chance pathways are not yet sufficiently effective at scale ([Cedefop, 2026](#)).

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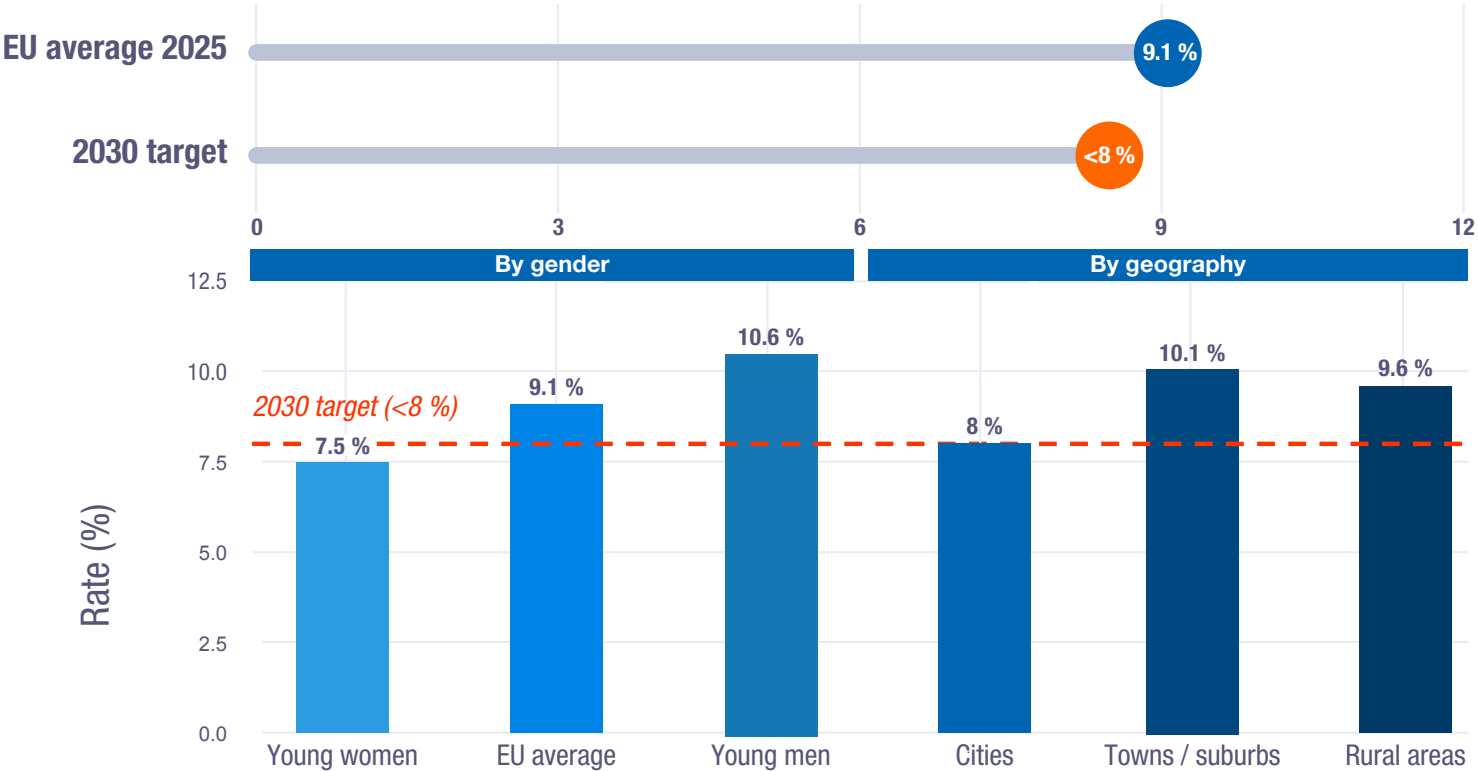


...achieving the new target of **less than 8 % by 2030** will require a **clear acceleration of reforms**, alongside more effective prevention and reintegration measures...

Figure 1. **Overview of ELET rates in the EU-27: progress, gender gaps and urban–rural disparities, 2025**

Figure 1 gives an overview of the most relevant data regarding:

- early leaving rates across Member States,
- including gender and geographical disparities.



Source: Cedefop, based on [Eurostat data](#).

Monitoring data gaps in VET

In vocational education and training (VET), policy debate has advanced faster than the data infrastructure. Many countries collect relevant administrative information, yet lack common definitions for early leaving from VET (ELVET), regular VET-specific analysis, and indicators that allow for meaningful comparison across systems ([Cedefop, 2023](#); [Psifidou, 2020](#)).

This gap is particularly critical given that most existing evidence and comparable international data relate to overall ELET, without distinguishing sufficiently between general and vocational pathways. As a result, it remains difficult to determine how many learners leave VET programmes specifically, at what stage and under what circumstances.

This matters because broad ELET indicators do not capture the specific dynamics of vocational pathways, which often involve more complex and flexible learning trajectories, including work-based learning components ([Cedefop, 2016b, 2023](#)). Without better VET-sensitive monitoring, policymakers cannot identify emerging risk factors in a timely manner, providers cannot effectively target or tailor support measures, and evaluators cannot assess whether interventions are delivering a sustained impact or represent an efficient use of resources.

Strengthening the evidence base on VET participation, progression and early leaving is therefore essential for designing more targeted, responsive and cost-effective policies, in line with the EU's broader objectives on skills development and inclusion.

In this context, 2024 marks an important step forward, as new Labour force survey (LFS) variables relevant to measuring early leaving, following earlier Cedefop recommendations ([Cedefop, 2023](#)), were collected for the first time through the [EU-LFS 8-yearly module 'Young people in the labour market'](#). The module provides data for people aged 15–34 on whether they have abandoned formal education or training, the level and orientation (general or vocational) of the programme abandoned, and the main reason for non-completion.

These data make it possible to distinguish between young people who abandoned vocational programmes from those who abandoned general education programmes. Combined with other individual-level characteristics available in the LFS, they also allow for analysis of the characteristics and current labour-market situation of young people who have abandoned formal education or training. This is an important improvement in the evidence base for understanding early leaving from

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VET, compared with existing EU-level indicators of early leaving from education and training, which do not distinguish between early leaving from VET and from general education.

The value of 2024 LFS data for an ELVET indicator in line with Cedefop's working definition still needs to be assessed. Cedefop's working definition identifies ELVET among 18- to 24-year-olds who started vocational training at ISCED level 3 or 4 but did not obtain an upper secondary VET qualification, and are no longer in education or training. The LFS module provides important elements for measuring ELVET, including the level and orientation (general or vocational) of the formal education or training programme abandoned. However, further methodological work is needed to establish how these data can be used to derive a robust and comparable ELVET indicator.

Moreover, as the module is collected only every eight years, it cannot support regular annual monitoring of ELVET or timely identification of emerging trends. The information on reasons for non-completion is limited to the main reason reported and therefore does not capture the potentially multiple and interacting factors underlying early leaving, including academic underachievement and factors specific to school- or work-based learning in VET. Further development of regular national and European data sources, including administrative data and systematic surveys, is therefore needed to complement the LFS and enable more consistent monitoring of ELVET and the factors driving it, providing the detailed evidence required to inform targeted prevention and intervention policies.

Reframing the role of VET

VET has often been positioned as part of the problem, as dropout rates can be more visible in vocational pathways in some countries or regions. However, the existing evidence suggests that VET should not be viewed as an inherent risk factor for early leaving. Rather, early leaving reflects the interaction of individual, institutional and system-level factors, including how VET programmes are designed, delivered, and supported ([Cedefop, 2016b](#)).

This shifts the focus from whether learners participate in VET to the conditions under which VET is provided. The quality of VET provision – including effective learner support, high-quality work-based learning, strong employer engagement, flexible and permeable learning pathways, and clear progression opportunities – can strengthen learner engagement and retention. Conversely, where these conditions are lacking, learners may be more likely to disengage. The policy challenge is therefore not to regard VET as part of the problem, but to strengthen its capacity to become part of the solution.

Cedefop evidence consistently highlights the added value of high-quality VET, including stronger employment outcomes, smoother labour market

transitions and an important role in promoting social inclusion, particularly for vulnerable learners ([Cedefop, 2016b](#); [2022b](#); [2026](#)). Cedefop's analytical work serves as a knowledge hub for inclusive VET pathways, bringing together comparative research, effective intervention approaches, factors that help prevent early leaving, inspiring practices and interactive tools – such as the [VET toolkit for tackling early leaving](#) and the [VET toolkit for empowering NEETs](#) ⁽²⁾ – to support policymakers and VET practitioners. Initiatives that connect evidence generation with practitioner experience, such as Cedefop's [ambassadors' network for tackling early leaving](#), further contribute to validating and disseminating findings, while enhancing policy relevance and peer learning.

Overall, Cedefop is strengthening the evidence base on VET inclusion as a prerequisite for designing more responsive and effective prevention and reintegration strategies across European education and training systems. [Box 1](#) provides an overview of [Cedefop's toolkit for tackling early leaving](#), which collects valuable resources for practitioners and policymakers EU-wide. [Box 2](#) showcases [Cedefop's network of ambassadors tackling early leaving](#), who disseminate and enrich the toolkit.

⁽²⁾ Young people not in employment, education or training.



...VET has often been positioned as part of the problem, as **dropout rates** can be **more visible** in **vocational pathways** in some countries or regions...



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Box 1. VET toolkit for tackling early leaving: from evidence to practice

Cedefop, within its knowledge hub for inclusive VET pathways, provides a structured knowledge and practice toolkit to support the prevention and reduction of ELET. The toolkit consolidates evidence, operational guidance and selected examples of practice, contributing to a more coherent understanding of how early leaving can be addressed across education and training systems.

By bringing together fragmented evidence, it supports more consistent analysis of interventions across prevention, intervention and compensation stages, and strengthens the basis for learning from successful practices across countries.

Key components include:

- (a) a typology of intervention approaches across prevention, intervention and compensation;
- (b) profiles of learners at risk of early leaving and early leavers, supporting analysis of disengagement pathways;
- (c) examples of practice from across Europe, illustrating different national, regional and institutional responses;
- (d) key analytical and policy publications on ELET, summarising evidence on drivers and system responses;
- (e) practical tools supporting planning, reflection and evaluation at the policy and provider levels.

Policy relevance

The toolkit supports more evidence-informed policy design by linking research with implementation. It enables better identification of risk trajectories, supports learning across countries and contributes to more targeted and context-sensitive interventions.

Overall, it strengthens the understanding of drop-out and early leaving as a multi-factor, system-level phenomenon and supports more coherent action across governance levels, bridging the gap between policy objectives and practice in VET schools and work places where training takes place..

Source: [VET toolkit for tackling early leaving](#).

Box 2. Cedefop's network of ambassadors: strengthening action against early leaving

Cedefop has established a network of ambassadors bringing together practitioners, policymakers and stakeholders from across Europe committed to reducing to reducing early leaving and promoting inclusion in VET.

The ambassadors act as knowledge builders and agents of change by:

- (a) sharing effective practices and policy approaches;
- (b) supporting peer learning across education and training systems;
- (c) translating Cedefop evidence and tools into practice;
- (d) raising awareness of early leaving as a systemic and preventable challenge;
- (e) fostering dialogue between policy, research and practice.

Through this work, the network helps translate knowledge into practice across education and training settings in Europe, supporting efforts to tackle early leaving and promote more inclusive VET pathways.

Source: [Ambassadors tackling early leaving from VET](#).



EVIDENCE

In this section

Profiles of learners at risk and early leavers

Protective factors that build resilience

A holistic approach to ELET prevention and re-engagement

Evaluation: building evidence into policy and practice



Profiles of learners at risk and early leavers

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Cedefop's research investigates how and why disengagement occurs.

Cedefop's [VET toolkit for tackling early leaving](#) highlights that early leaving is rarely the result of a single factor and that learners do not disengage in the same way.

Effective policy begins with a practical understanding of risk profiles and warning signals and then matches policy responses. [Figure 2](#) provides an overview of the different profiles of learners aged 18–24 at risk of early leaving, as identified by Cedefop, and selected priority policy responses.



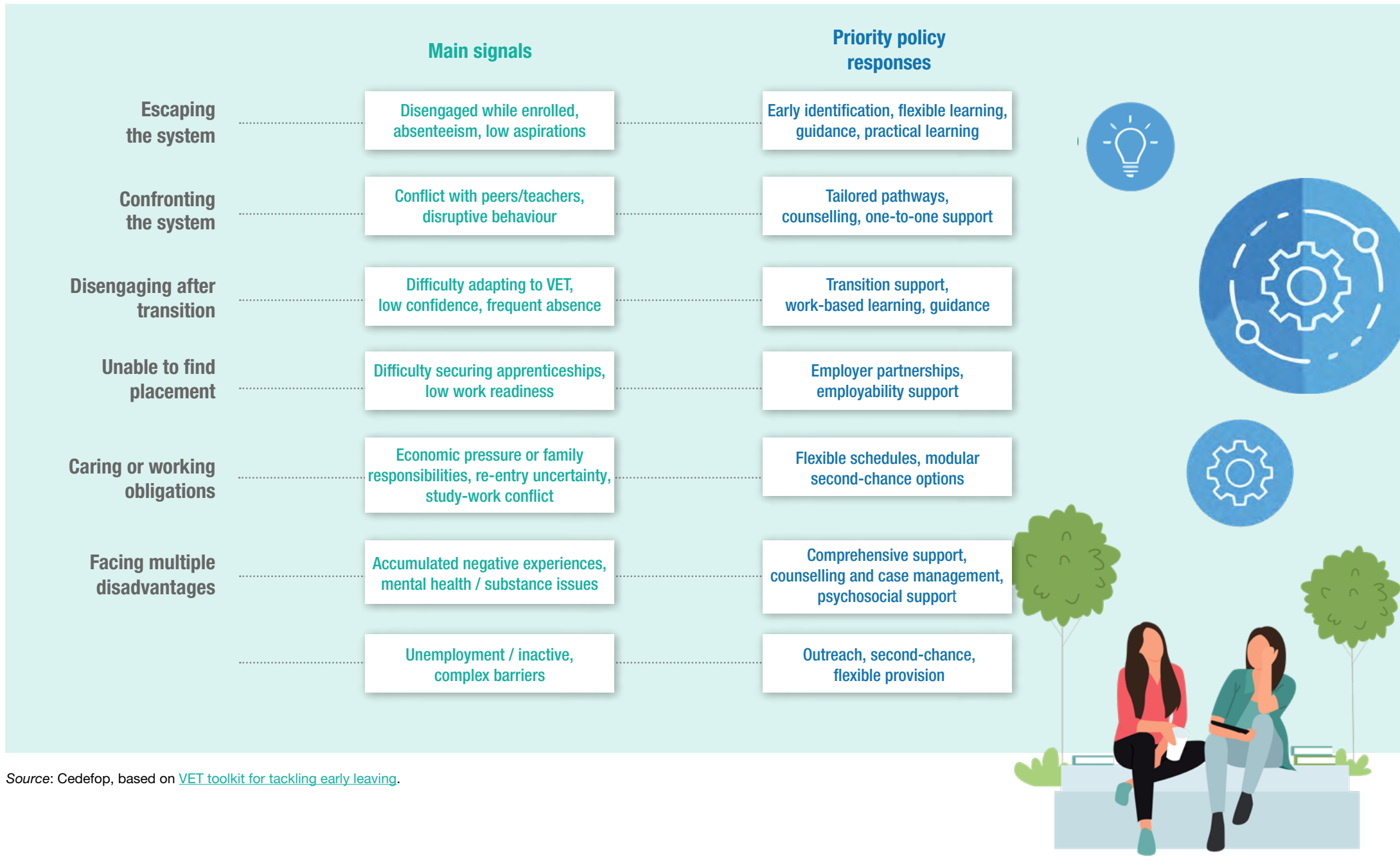
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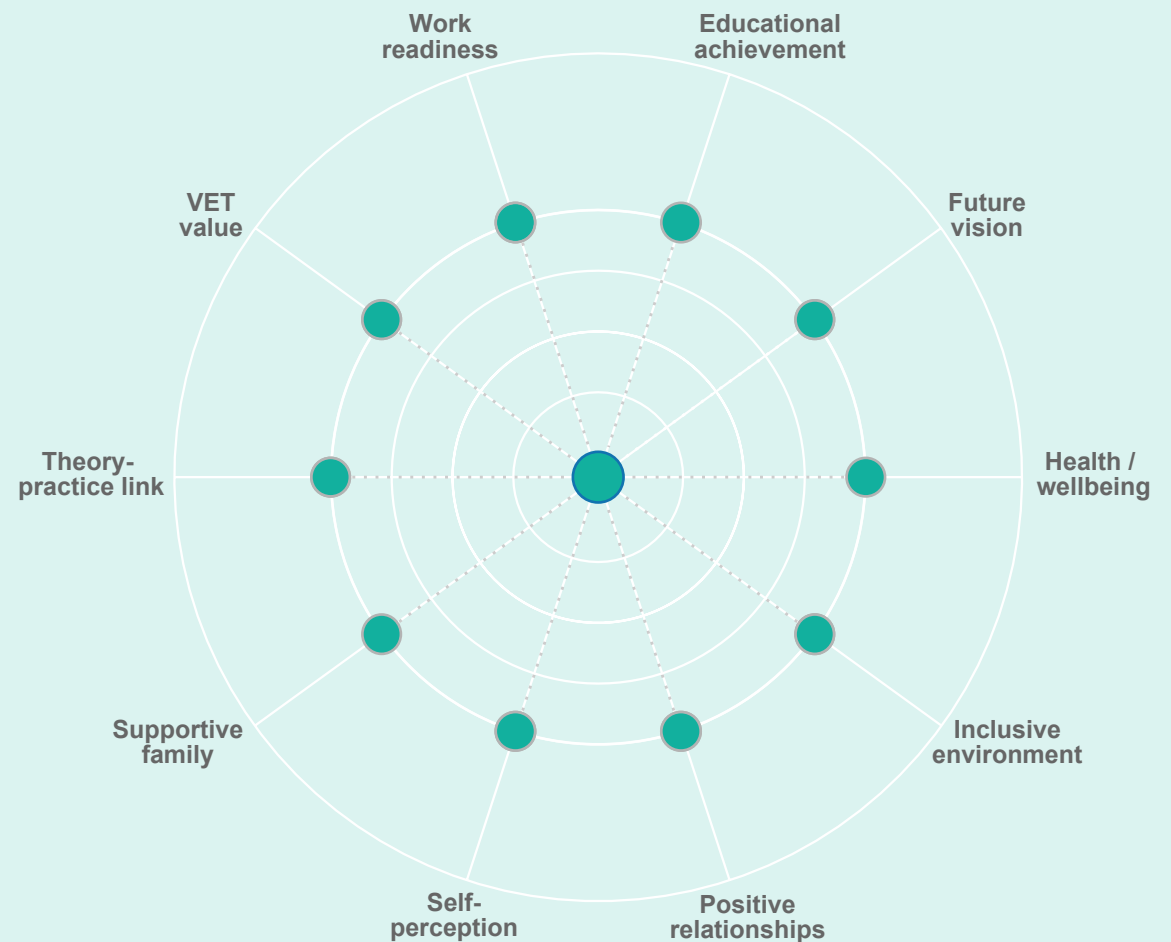
Figure 2. **Profiles of learners at risk of early leaving, the main signals and priority policy responses**Source: Cedefop, based on [VET toolkit for tackling early leaving](#).

Protective factors that build resilience

Cedefop has identified a set of protective factors that are proven to increase the likelihood of learners successfully completing at least upper secondary education (Figure 3).

These factors help explain what sustains engagement in education and training beyond simply avoiding risk ([Table 1](#)).

Figure 3. Protective factors associated with stronger engagement with and completion of VET



Source: Cedefop, based on [VET toolkit for tackling early leaving](#).

Table 1. **Overview of protective factors and their relevance**



Educational achievement and attendance

Keeps learners connected to learning and progression.



Health and well-being

Reduces personal barriers that can derail participation.



Inclusive environment

Strengthens trust, safety and persistence.



Positive future vision and career choice

Motivates learners by linking education to opportunity.



Positive relationships in school and work environments

Provides encouragement, role models and practical support.



Positive self-perception as a learner

Builds confidence and resilience after setbacks.



Positive view of education and training

Reinforced perceived value of VET over low-skilled or precarious employment.



Supportive family environment

Provides encouragement, stability and practical.



Link between theoretical knowledge and practical training

Enhances understanding and engagement through more applied and practical contexts.



Work readiness and practical relevance

Makes learning meaningful and supports transitions to employment.

Source: Cedefop, based on [VET toolkit for tackling early leaving: protective factors](#).

A holistic approach to ELET prevention and re-engagement

Effective European systems addressing ELET are characterised by integrated intervention mechanisms operating across the entire learning trajectory, rather than isolated or sequential measures.

Cedefop's [VET toolkit for tackling early leaving](#) lists 20 intervention approaches. For policymaking purposes, these can be organised into five mutually reinforcing action areas ([Figure 4](#)) that follow a functional logic and support a holistic approach to prevention and re-engagement, beginning with system capacity and VET attractiveness, moving onto early detection and culminating in re-engagement pathways ([Figure 5](#)).

1 STRENGTHEN CAPACITY AND VET ATTRACTIVENESS

Reducing early leaving requires systemic investment in the conditions that make education and training worth staying in.

- This begins with [improving VET attractiveness and parity of esteem](#), ensuring that vocational pathways are valued equally alongside academic routes.
- Alongside this, [family and community engagement](#) broadens the support network

around learners, embedding education within social contexts that reinforce participation.

- The quality of the experience depends significantly on [teacher and trainer professional development](#), equipping educators to respond to diverse learner needs and disengagement risks.
- [Guidance and career management interventions](#) help learners navigate their options and build a sense of direction and purpose within their educational journey.
- Underpinning all of these is the need for [robust monitoring and evaluation of interventions](#), which enables systems to learn from what works, adapt over time and ensure that resources are directed where they have the greatest impact.

2 DETECT EARLY

Preventing early leaving depends first on the ability of systems to recognise risk before it becomes dropout.

- [Early warning systems and the identification of early signals of disengagement](#) enable

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VET providers, practitioners and support staff to flag learners who may be at risk, enabling timely and targeted responses.

- Complementing this, **monitoring of attendance, attainment and well-being** ensures that the full picture of a learner's situation is tracked continuously, capturing the social and emotional indicators that often precede disengagement.

3 RESPOND QUICKLY

Once disengagement risks are identified, the speed and quality of the response is critical.

- [Mentoring, coaching and counselling](#) provide learners with trusted relationships and structured guidance, helping them to rebuild motivation and navigate challenges before they escalate.
- Where needs are deeper, [psychosocial and well-being support](#) addresses the personal, emotional and social barriers that underlie disengagement, recognising that educational participation cannot be separated from broader well-being.



- For learners facing the most complex circumstances, **tailored case management** offers a coordinated, holistic response, bringing together multiple forms of support around the specific needs of each person and ensuring that no learner falls through the gaps.

4 MAKE LEARNING MEANINGFUL AND RELEVANT

Sustained engagement depends on learners perceiving education and training as connected to their lives, aspirations and futures.

- [Work-based learning and apprenticeships](#) create direct links between the classroom and the workplace, grounding learning in real environments and making its value tangible.
- [Applied and experiential pedagogy](#) moves teaching and learning away from purely abstract instruction towards approaches that are active, contextualised and responsive to diverse learning styles.
- These are reinforced by a [focus on employability skills and work readiness](#), ensuring that learners develop not only technical knowledge but also the transversal competences needed to transition successfully into further education or the labour market.

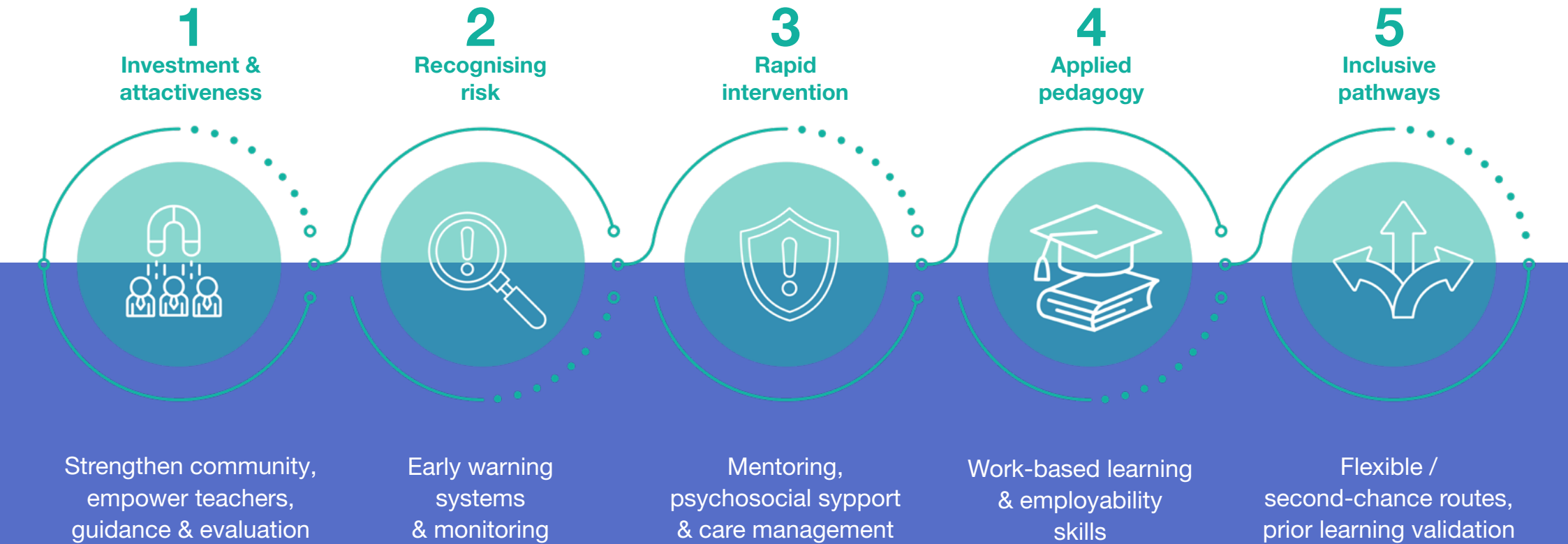
5 RE-ENGAGE PATHWAYS

For learners who have already disengaged or left education and training, the priority is creating credible and accessible routes back in.

- [Flexible and modular learning routes](#) lower the barriers to re-entry by allowing learners to progress at their own pace and build qualifications incrementally, rather than requiring full-time commitment from the outset.
- [Second-chance and re-entry programmes](#) provide dedicated spaces where early leavers can resume their educational journey in environments designed around their specific circumstances and needs.
- Ensuring that these pathways are genuinely accessible also requires attention to [digital inclusion and learner well-being support systems](#), which address the practical and personal obstacles that can prevent re-engagement even when formal opportunities exist.
- Finally, [recognition of prior learning](#), whether acquired formally, non-formally or informally, ensures that what learners already know and can do is acknowledged and validated, making re-entry faster and fairer, and increasing learners' motivation.

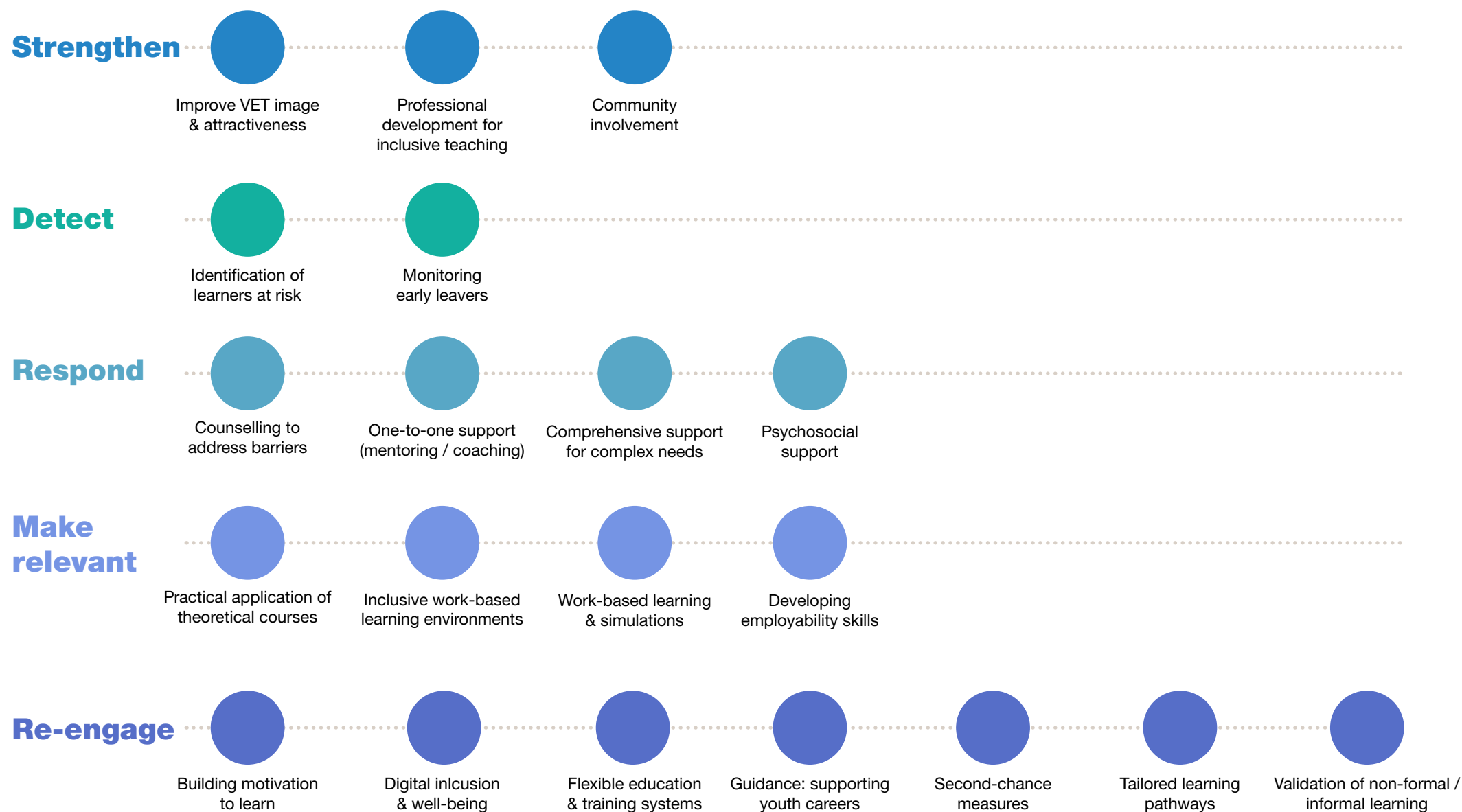
Taken together, these five action areas demonstrate that effective responses to early leaving are not defined by individual measures, but by how interventions are combined, sequenced and embedded within broader education and training systems.

Figure 4. **The VET intervention architecture: function logic from system capacity to re-engagement pathways**



Source: Cedefop, based on [VET toolkit for tackling early leaving: intervention approaches](#).

Figure 5. **Cedefop's 20 intervention approaches for tackling early leaving in functional clusters**



Evaluation: building evidence into policy and practice

While many initiatives addressing ELET exist across Europe, only a limited share has been evaluated rigorously ([Cedefop, 2016a](#); [2016c](#); [2023](#)). As a result, valuable lessons on what works, for whom and under what conditions often remain underused. To address this evidence gap, evaluation should be embedded from the design phase of policies and measures, rather than treated as a final or administrative step ([Figure 6](#)). This ensures that evidence generation becomes an integral part of policy learning and continuous improvement. [Box 3](#) presents an overview of [Cedefop's evaluation tools](#) for VET providers and policymakers, also available in the [toolkit for tackling early leaving](#).

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Figure 6. **Steps for effective evaluation of early leaving prevention and intervention approaches**



1 Decide what to monitor and evaluate

Define the intervention, clarify the logic model, identify intended and unintended outcomes, and formulate usable evaluation questions.



2 Choose relevant indicators

Combine input, output, result and impact indicators.

Combine quantitative and qualitative indicators to measure meaningful change.



3 Assess whether the programme or policy makes a difference

Compare outcomes over time and use mixed methods to understand both measurable change and user experience.



4 Assess whether the programme or policy is effective

Judge value for money, scalability and suitability for wider adoption through benchmarking and cost-benefit thinking.

Box 3. Cedefop evaluation tools

To support evidence-informed policy and practice, Cedefop provides a set of practical tools designed to embed evaluation in both policy design and implementation. These tools are relevant for national authorities and VET providers and practitioners, particularly in the context of interventions targeting ELET.

The tools cover complementary functions across the policy cycle:

- (a) **policy reflection tools** support authorities in reviewing policy coherence, identifying gaps and aligning measures with objectives across education, training and social policy areas;
- (b) **institutional self-assessment tools** enable VET providers to review practices related to prevention, intervention and compensation, and to identify areas for improvement in supporting learners at risk;
- (c) **evaluation planning tools** guide both policymakers and providers in defining objectives, selecting indicators, structuring data collection and designing proportionate evaluation approaches.

Together, these tools strengthen the capacity to design, implement and assess interventions more systematically, supporting comparability, mutual learning and improved targeting of measures that address early leaving.

By embedding these tools into the policy cycle, stakeholders can move from fragmented evaluation practices towards more coherent and evidence-based approaches that improve outcomes for people at risk.



POLICY ACTION

In this section

System logic:
from risk to impact

Conclusion



System logic: from risk to impact

Early leaving is best understood not as a single event, but as the outcome of cumulative structural and individual processes. Structural conditions such as inequality, weak educational transitions, limited pathway permeability, low perceived relevance of learning, labour market insecurity, well-being challenges and digital exclusion increase learners' vulnerability to disengagement.

These conditions translate into observable risk mechanisms, including declining participation, weak progression, reduced sense of belonging, misalignment between aspirations and learning pathways, and accumulated personal or social pressures, which together drive progressive withdrawal from education and training.

Effective systems interrupt this trajectory through interconnected layers of intervention: strengthened institutional capacity and continuous evaluation; early identification of disengagement signals; rapid and personalised support; and flexible re-engagement pathways offering meaningful, work-relevant learning opportunities. Lifelong guidance and learner well-being operate across all stages as enabling conditions for sustained participation.

When these mechanisms function coherently, systems can achieve improved engagement and retention, faster identification of at-risk learners, increased re-entry into education and training, and more continuous learning trajectories. Over time, this contributes to higher completion rates, improved transitions to employment or further education and stronger inclusion of disadvantaged learners.

[Figure 7](#) summarises Cedefop's 'theory of change' to conceptualise the prevention and tackling of ELET. It starts with the identification of the structural drivers of the phenomenon, integrates the risk factors and learners' profiles, presents the intervention approaches as functional clusters, and then analyses both the immediate and long-term outcomes, and the overall impact on the system. The figure illustrates that reducing early leaving requires a shift from reactive dropout management towards proactive, continuous engagement ecosystems that support learners throughout their educational journey.

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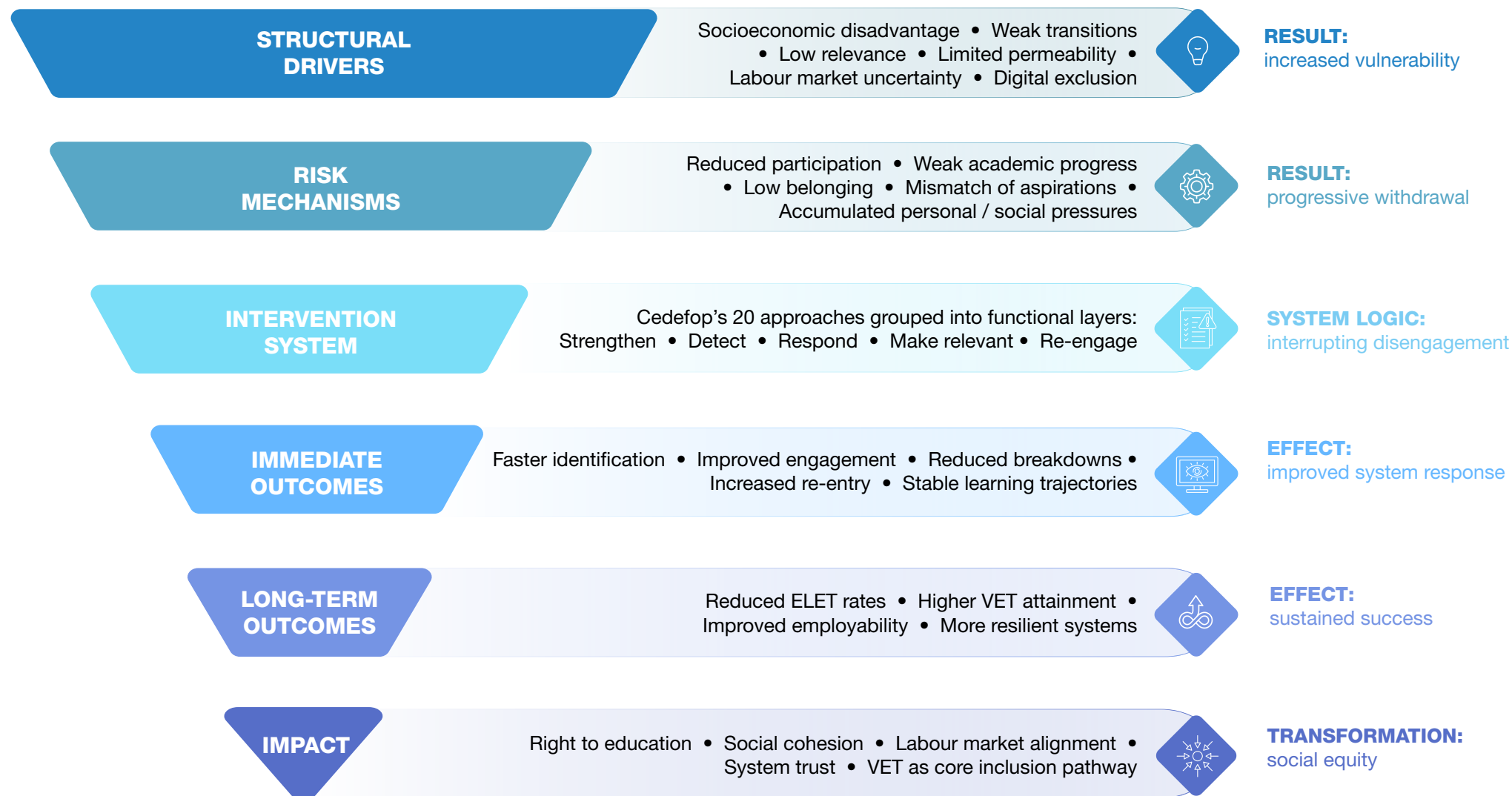
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Figure 7. **Theory of change: preventing ELET through a holistic and systemic approach**



Conclusion



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Early leaving does not represent an individual failure but a systemic challenge shaped by structural inequalities, difficult transition pathways, poor well-being, ineffective pedagogical approaches and limited labour market relevance of learning. It reflects the interplay between education systems, labour markets and wider social conditions, and therefore requires coordinated, cross-sectoral policy responses, rather than isolated interventions. In this context, VET plays both a preventive and a compensatory role, serving as a central pillar of policy responses through its capacity to support retention, re-engagement and successful learning and career pathways.

Early leaving as a social and rights-based challenge

Early leaving should be understood not only as a challenge for education policy but also as a reflection of how effectively education and social systems enable all learners to exercise their right to education. It signals weakened engagement between learners and education systems and may reveal broader social and institutional barriers to participation. When learners disengage because education is no longer perceived as meaningful,

relevant, or supportive, this points to a disconnect between education systems and young people's lived realities.

Viewed from this perspective, the prevalence of early leaving becomes an important indicator of whether education and social systems are fulfilling their broader functions of promoting inclusion, creating opportunities, and fostering trust. Reducing early leaving is therefore not simply a policy objective; it is also evidence that systems are becoming more responsive to learners' needs and better able to support their participation and success.

VET as a lever for early leaving prevention and reintegration

Against this background, VET can play an important role in both preventing early leaving and supporting the reintegration of learners who have already disengaged from education or training. Its contribution depends on the quality of provision and on its ability to respond to diverse learner needs through effective learner support, high-quality work-based learning, flexible learning pathways, strong links with employers and clear progression opportunities.



...**ELET** does not represent an individual failure but a **systemic challenge**...



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BUILDING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION AND TRAINING SYSTEMS

These features can strengthen learner engagement, social inclusion and employability, particularly for those at risk of disengagement. When VET is attractive, flexible, permeable and perceived as an equal-status pathway, it is better placed to support learner retention, successful transitions and re-entry into education or training.

However, VET-specific monitoring of early leaving remains limited and is not yet sufficiently comparable across countries, constraining the ability to design targeted interventions and assess what works in different contexts. Improving VET quality, attractiveness, flexibility and responsiveness to social

and economic needs is therefore essential to help reduce early leaving and strengthen inclusion.

Towards evidence-based and coherent policy responses

Effective responses require system coherence and permeability, including flexible learning pathways, strengthened links between education and work, and accessible re-entry opportunities for early leavers. Although progress towards the EU-level target on early leaving is evident, the remaining gap cannot be closed through generic measures alone. It requires earlier identification of risk, stronger prevention strategies and tailored support throughout the learner journey.

Evidence suggests that effective prevention strategies combine timely identification, tailored support, flexible pathways, strong guidance, labour market relevance, family and community engagement, and robust second-chance opportunities. Evaluation must be embedded in programme design from the outset, enabling policymakers and practitioners to understand what works, for whom, under which conditions and at what cost.

The challenge is not simply to prevent learners from leaving education, but to ensure that education systems do not leave learners behind. Addressing early leaving fundamentally depends on building education and training systems that are not only capable of retaining learners, but also worthy of their trust, aspirations and futures.



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POLICY BRIEF

From risk to resilience

Policy guidelines for supporting learners at risk and early leavers from vocational education and training

Early leaving from education and training does not represent an individual failure but reflects how effectively education and social systems engage, support, and retain diverse learners. In 2025, nearly 1 in 10 young people across the EU left education and training prematurely, limiting opportunities for employment, social inclusion and life-long learning. Although the EU average has fallen to 9.1 %, significant disparities persist across countries, regions, and population groups.

Drawing on Cedefop's research and its vocational education and training (VET) toolkit for tackling early leaving, this policy brief reframes early leaving as a multifactorial phenomenon requiring coordinated, evidence-based and cross-sectoral responses. It identifies learner risk profiles and disengagement factors and presents 20 intervention approaches covering system capacity, early identification, targeted support and re-engagement pathways.

The brief also highlights the role of VET in preventing disengagement and supporting the reintegration of early leavers, and concludes with policy recommendations promoting inclusion, opportunity and the right to education for all learners.

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