



Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Leaving education early: putting vocational education and training centre stage

Volume I: investigating causes and extent



You can download the publication at:
<http://bit.ly/2eIGoiI>

Please cite this chapter as:

Cedefop (2016). 'Introduction' in *Leaving education early: putting vocational education and training centre stage. Volume I: investigating causes and extent*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop research paper; No 57. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2801/925693>

© European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), 2016. All rights reserved

CHAPTER 1.

Introduction

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. The EU objective of reducing the share of early leavers to below 10% of young people aged 18 to 24 was first adopted in 2000 as part of the Lisbon strategy and, given that the target has not been met, it was retained as one of the Europe 2020 headline targets a decade later (European Commission, 2010).

This Cedefop research paper looks into the potential of better understanding the relationship between VET and early leaving and measuring early leaving from vocational education and training (ELVET). By improving knowledge and evidence on the issue, it aims to assist national policy-makers and decision-makers at different levels in (further) developing ELET monitoring systems and improving VET policies to tackle ELET.

The following subsections discuss the EU context for ELET, and reflect on the gaps in understanding this issue, particularly in VET, which will be addressed in this study.

1.1. The consequences of leaving education early

Leaving education early is associated with a range of negative consequences for individuals and society as a whole. There is abundant evidence suggesting that, when compared to the population which achieves the minimum threshold qualification, early leavers have ⁽⁴⁾:

- (a) a higher risk of unemployment (incidence and duration), lower income, precarious work conditions, and lower job satisfaction;
- (b) worse health, lower life expectancy, and worse lifetime satisfaction;
- (c) lower participation in democratic institutions and other civil society initiatives and organisations.

As for the costs to societies, leaving education early is connected to lower income and economic growth due to reduced tax revenues, and higher costs of

⁽⁴⁾ Brunello and De Paola, 2014; OECD, 2012; GHK et al., 2011; European Commission and GHK, 2005.

public services such as healthcare, criminal justice and social benefit payments⁽⁵⁾.

These negative effects are broadly recognised. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) underlines that preventing school failure and improving equity helps in securing a productive workforce and economic growth, as well as individual well-being and social cohesion (OECD, 2012). It periodically reports on differences in employment rates by educational attainment, pointing to the fact that more education offers more employment opportunities. For instance, according to the OECD's *Education at a glance 2014* (OECD, 2014a), over 70% of people with an upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education are employed compared to less than 60% of people with below upper secondary education.

The European Commission places the fight against early school leaving (ESL) as a key element of the Europe 2020 Agenda, stressing its positive effects on employability and the fight against social exclusion (European Commission, 2011a). More specifically, in 2015, the Commission refers to the severe effects of the economic crisis on young people's unemployment, and to the fact that the unemployment rate for early school leavers across Europe is 41%, almost double that for general youth unemployment (European Commission, 2015a).

The negative consequences of leaving education early for individuals and society advise that the fight against it is kept in the agenda, even if Europe is approaching its 2020 target (11.1% in 2014). Early leaving will still continue to be a focus for various reasons:

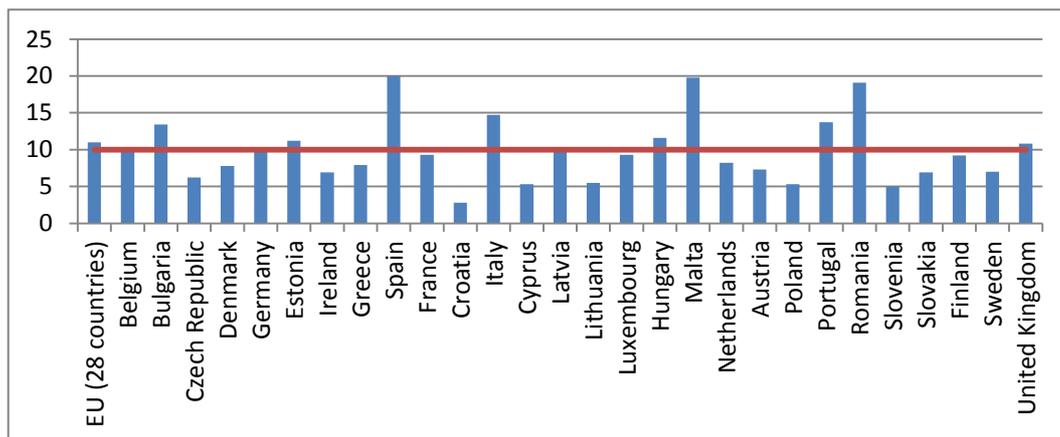
- (a) the reduction of early leaving promotes equity, helping every young person to realise his/her potential, especially for certain groups who are more affected than others: early leaving rate is higher among boys, foreign-born, disabled learners, Roma, and young people in poorly performing regions (European Commission, 2015a);
- (b) reduction in early leaving rates can help reduce costs for societies and economies, countering the associated outcomes: lower tax revenues and higher costs of public services such as social benefit payments, healthcare and criminal justice;
- (c) reducing ELET can help attain other Europe 2020 strategy targets (employment and lifelong learning), and increase EU international economic competitiveness. To achieve high-skilled workforces, Europe must significantly reduce ELET rates and increase lifelong learning.

⁽⁵⁾ Brunello and De Paola, 2014; OECD, 2012; GHK et al., 2011; European Commission and GHK, 2005.

1.2. The size of the problem in Europe

The commonly adopted definition of early leaving from education and training (replacing the earlier term early school leaving) used by Eurostat is the percentage of the population aged 18 to 24 achieving a lower secondary level of education or less (ISCED 0, 1, 2 and 3c short) and declared not having received any education or training in the four weeks preceding the EU labour force survey (LFS). This EU indicator is used for cross-national comparison of reducing the share of early leavers to below 10% of young people aged 18 to 24. Although early leaving decreased from 16% in 2004 to 11% in 2015 (EU-28), the share of those leaving education and training early varies widely between EU Member States, ranging from around 20% in Spain, Malta and Romania to below or around 5% in Croatia, Cyprus, Lithuania, Poland and Slovenia (European Commission, 2015a; European Commission, 2016).

Figure 1. **ELET national rates (2015) and Europe 2020 headline target**



Source: Eurostat, 2015.

Changes in ELET rates in recent years (2011-14), vary across countries (European Commission, 2015b). Some have not only made significant progress but have reached the headline target ⁽⁶⁾; others made progress but have yet to reach this target ⁽⁷⁾. There are also countries that reached the ELET target but

⁽⁶⁾ Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Greece, France, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Austria.

⁽⁷⁾ Spain, Italy, Malta, Portugal and the UK.

showed little progress from 2011 to 2014 ⁽⁸⁾, and those that have ELET rates above 10% and did not see any improvement over that period ⁽⁹⁾.

ELET rates also vary significantly between population groups: the risk of early leaving is 33% higher than average among boys, 26% higher for the foreign-born, 156% higher for disabled learners, between 50 and 90% higher for Roma, and 30% higher in poorly-performing regions (European Commission, 2015a).

ELET is still a concern in several EU countries and can reach dramatic levels in some population groups, hindering equity in education and social inclusion.

1.3. The role of VET

This study aims to address three main gaps in understanding the relationship between early leaving and VET:

- (a) little evidence about existing data collection mechanisms and monitoring systems for early leaving at national level, and about the way this phenomenon is nationally defined and understood;
- (b) lack of (comparable) quantitative data to measure the rate of early leaving from different types of education including VET and on early leavers' trajectories at national level;
- (c) limited research evidence on specific factors associated with early leaving from VET.

1.3.1. Why is monitoring ELET is important?

The need for data collection on ELET is underlined in the Council recommendation of 28 June 2011 on policies to reduce early school leaving which states that 'the development of evidence-based and cost-effective policies to combat early school leaving requires gathering and maintaining data on the phenomenon. This should allow analysis at local, regional and national levels. It may contain information on early school leaving rates, on transitions between educational levels, enrolment rates and completion rates of upper secondary education, as well as on school absenteeism and school-avoiding behaviour'.

Similarly, the Bruges communiqué urges countries to use existing monitoring systems to support the participation of 'at risk groups' in VET with a view to

⁽⁸⁾ Czech Republic, Luxembourg, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia, Finland and Sweden.

⁽⁹⁾ Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary and Romania.

preventing as well as addressing dropping out. This recommendation is based on the understanding that monitoring data is necessary to:

- (a) understand which groups of young people are more likely to drop out;
- (b) identify whether some (types of) programme or fields of study are more affected than others, or whether there are regional discrepancies;
- (c) provide tools to teachers, trainers, guidance counsellors and PES or social workers to prevent and remedy dropping out. Identification of those persons at risk, as well as information on those who left education and training without achieving a qualification, is an important element of targeted measures.

This use of data should enable countries to design targeted policies that respond to the specific problems associated with ELET.

Availability and use of data on ELET is also important in the context of the future ESF. To ensure that EU funding is used effectively, new funding programmes are accompanied by a set of so-called 'conditionalities'. These concern conditions that countries eligible for funding have to meet to be granted it. One of the 'ex-ante conditionalities' (to be met before the funding is accepted) relates to ELET. Those countries that expect to use ESF or ERDF funding for measures to prevent or address ELET have to demonstrate that they meet the relevant criteria defined in the EU guidelines. One of the criteria for fulfilment of this conditionality is the existence of a system for collecting and analysing data and information on ELET at relevant levels, providing a sufficient evidence base to develop targeted policies and monitor developments (European Commission, 2014).

The rationale for including monitoring data as one of the aspects for this ESF conditionality is twofold:

- (a) the availability and use of such data is considered necessary to design targeted measures. The populations affected by ELET differ from one country to another and so do the reasons for early leaving. Some schools are likely to be more affected than others, for example because they have a higher share of population that is at greater risk. This can be the case even for schools that are geographically very close. To ensure that funding is used where most needed, it is necessary to have quite specific monitoring data on ELET;
- (b) these data should also be used to evaluate interventions to prevent/tackle ELET, necessary to ensure measures are effective. This rationale is in line with the willingness to channel EU funding into measures with existing performance frameworks. Monitoring and evaluation systems are generally underlined as part of conditionalities.

This study also adopts this double perspective: it looks into ELET monitoring systems and corresponding definitions used at EU and national level; and it analyses the use of data to follow up and evaluate VET policies to prevent or remedy ELET.

1.3.2. What to monitor?

The EU indicator on ELET offers no insight as to whether the 11% of young early leavers are dropouts from VET or general education, or whether they are non-starters. There is currently no picture of learners' trajectories. This study will show that early leaving can be a result of a sequence of dropout events; knowing only the last place where the young person studied before dropping out does not give an accurate picture of this chain of disengagement.

The lack of data on the role of VET in learners' pathways is one of the reasons for Cedefop to commission this study aiming to provide greater clarity on the extent to which the scale and patterns of ELET differ between VET and general education.

The potential of VET to tackle unemployment and ease school-to-work transitions is backed by supporting evidence. Quintini and Manfredi (2009) study the patterns of school-to-work transitions in Europe and the United States, confirming that the most successful European countries in terms of school-to-work transitions are those where apprenticeships are widespread.

Cedefop (2013) has investigated the relationship between VET and school-to-work transition using the individual anonymised microdata from the core and ad hoc modules of the 2009 EU-LFS, which provide detailed information on the transition of young individuals from education to work. The results indicate that VET is able to speed up this transition. Relative to graduates with medium-level academic education, VET graduates enjoy a faster transition to work, are more likely to have a permanent first job, and are less likely to find a first job with a qualification mismatch.

Using PIAAC data, Brunello and Rocco (2015) find that, at ISCED 3 and 4, VET performs about as well as academic education for earnings and a bit better for employment outcomes. VET at ISCED 3-4 is also associated with higher training incidence.

VET can also contribute to better employment prospects, as well as other individual and social benefits, by helping to prevent early leaving and reengaging those who have dropped out from education and training before obtaining a qualification. Brunello and Rocco (2015) confirm that, when compared with lower secondary education or less, upper secondary VET pays off in terms of earnings, employability and skills, and that the estimated gap in these outcomes is

sizeable. Therefore, upper secondary VET is seen as a good option in terms of labour market outcomes for individuals who might otherwise not finish upper secondary, (those with stronger practical skills compared to academic skills). Based on this, the authors conclude that the availability of VET pathways may reduce ELET by keeping more practically oriented individuals in school.

Goux et al. (2013) evaluated a programme implemented in 2010-11 in 37 schools in Paris involving 4 300 students in 181 classes. The intervention was randomised at class level within each school. The principals of the schools involved identified students at risk of dropping out. They held two meetings with the families of these students to give them better information about the choices available within the French education system and explain the merits of vocational education. As a result, enrolment in vocational tracks increased, and dropout rates and grade repetition fell by a third, which is a very large effect on this cohort. The evaluation also found the effect persisted two years after the intervention.

The previous studies seem to suggest that VET can help retain in education and training learners who would otherwise drop out. However, overall, the existing evidence of the role that VET plays (especially from a comparative perspective) in tackling ELET is limited. Much of the discussion around causes of early leaving has focused on general factors, while it is expected that there are some issues that are specific to VET which can also explain why dropout rates vary greatly between programmes or fields of study/professions.

Understanding factors associated with abandoning VET is also needed to develop effective policy measures. There are different push and pull factors that can be expected to influence this decision, with some more likely to increase chances of dropping out for some specific target groups than others. Developing better understanding of specific factors associated with early leaving from VET and of measures that are effective at tackling this issue, was another motivation for this research.