



Chapter 5: FACTORS INFLUENCING EARLY LEAVING FROM VET

Leaving education early: putting vocational education and training centre stage

Volume I: investigating causes and extent



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CHAPTER 5.

Factors influencing early leaving from VET

There is already a wealth of literature that analyses different causes of early leaving and young people's disengagement from education in general (see for example NESSE, 2010; Poncelet and Lafontaine, 2011; Lessard et al., 2013). Based on quantitative and qualitative research, these studies identify the following main factors as associated with early leaving:

- (a) family background:
 - (i) migration or ethnic minority origin;
 - (ii) lower socioeconomic status of parents;
 - (iii) parental attitudes towards education;
- (b) individual characteristics (not education related):
 - (i) gender;
 - (ii) health situation;
 - (iii) low self-esteem;
 - (iv) conflictual relationships with adults;
- (c) individual's education pathway:
 - (i) disengagement from learning;
 - (ii) absenteeism;
 - (iii) class repetition;
 - (iv) low academic achievement;
 - (v) negative perception of school/education;
- (d) school and classroom climate:
 - (i) conflict with teachers;
 - (ii) bullying;
- (e) labour market attraction.

These factors are generally confirmed through the findings presented below but this study aimed at going beyond the well-known issues. The research team paid particular attention to those factors associated specifically with ELVET; they highlighted additional factors in interviews and some of the better-known factors were described in the context of VET.

5.1. Typologies of early leavers or those at risk

Several researchers have asked the question: who are early leavers or who are those at risk of early leaving? There are three broadly cited typologies of this

group of youngsters: two look at early leavers (Kronick and Hargis, 1990 and Janosz et al., 2000) and the third one looks at students at risk of early leaving (Fortin et al., 2006). All describe early leavers as a varied group. They seek explanations for early leaving in a combination of factors related to young people's education experience, their emotional and mental well-being, their behaviours and, in some cases, their family background. All typologies show that not all early leavers have low academic performance; some are average in school and others may have even been strong performers in the past. Similarly, not all have psycho-social difficulties; some are disengaged from education without being depressed or showing antisocial behaviours. For some of the types (in particular the 'quiet' type), the authors note that there is fairly little difference between them and average students who remain in education. For other groups, the difference between those who hang on and those who drop out are quite clear. Kronick and Hargis (1990) also identify a type of students who share characteristics with early leavers (in particular poor performance) but who nevertheless remain in education (called the 'persisters' in their typology). They attribute this to the fact that these students have some compensatory behaviours which are typically extracurricular (sports, arts) or include cheating.

Table 7. Comparison of three typologies of early leaver

| Kronick and Hargis, 1990 | | | |
|--|---|---|---|
| Low achievers | Push-outs | Quiet | Non-curricular |
| Continued failure, truancy, high level of disruptive behaviour | Perceive school as not being for them, frustrated with school and in consequence rebellious | Low achievers with continued failure but don't show disruptive behaviours | Their problems lie outside of school (drugs, alcohol, abuse, poverty, health) |

| Janosz et al. 2000 | | | |
|---|--|--|---|
| Maladjusted | Low achiever | Disengaged | Quiet |
| High level of misbehaviour (many sanctions, high truancy). Poor school performance. Weak commitment to education. | Weak commitment to education. Average to low levels of misbehaviour. Very poor school performance. | Average to low level of school misbehaviour (disciplinary sanctions). Low commitment to school (do not like it, don't care about grades, little aspirations). Average performance (but actually compared to their low personal investment in education their performance is quite good). | No evidence of school misbehaviour. Moderate to high level of commitment to education (positive views about school, no major problems with absenteeism). Average to poor performance. Generally go unnoticed until they decide to leave. |

| Fortin et al., 2006 | | | |
|---|--|---|---|
| School and social adjustment difficulties | Uninterested in school | Depressive | Antisocial covert behaviour |
| Low academic performance. High behaviour problems. Delinquency. High level of depression. Teachers have very negative attitudes towards them. Low level of family cohesion, support, organisation. | Slightly high depression levels. Good academic performance but lack of motivation and experience boredom. Teachers have very positive attitudes towards them. Good social skills. Functional family. | Average grades. Low incidence of behaviour problems. Teachers have positive attitudes towards them. Very high level of depression. Very low level of family cohesion, support, organisation – high level of parental control. | Good academic performance. Teachers have very positive attitudes towards them. Antisocial behaviours (lying, fighting, theft, vandalism). High level of depression. Low level of family cohesion, support, organisation |

Source: Fortin, L.; Marcotte, D.; Potvin, P.; Royer, E.; Joly, J. (2006). Typology of students at risk of dropping out of school: description by personal, family, and school factors. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, Vol. 21, No 4, pp. 363-383.

Those interviewed for this study confirm that early leavers are a heterogeneous group. The interviewees also persistently mentioned factors (such as academic performance, commitment and engagement in education, disruptive behaviours, emotional and mental health issues, family support) that feature in the three typologies above.

These and other factors appear to have very strong effect on young person's engagement in education and their retention (Psifidou, 2016a). Volume II (Cedefop, 2016), using the narratives that interviewees provided about what leads young people to disengage, presents six profiles of early leavers and those at risk. The profiles show different levels of disengagement and different types of challenge. These profiles have the purpose of illustrating how different risk factors can interact and lead to early leaving.

This study explored in greater depth the VET-specific factors related to early leaving. The importance of these factors seems to vary. For those who are most disengaged and have important challenges outside of school, issues around the quality of VET and the opportunities for work-based learning may have only secondary importance. For others, those who are closer to the centre of the spectrum and who are in a more ambiguous situation with regard to engagement in education, these factors can be fully decisive. The contribution of such factors to a decision to leave education and training permanently could be crucial for those in the 'borderline' group of those who could either persist or drop out. One issue frequently mentioned, and discussed below, is mismatch between perceptions of a profession and the reality. While those young people who correspond to the maladjusted or depressive types described above might drop

out either way (often because they don't have education-related aspirations), for those in the quiet or uninterested group this could be the issue which will make them decide to drop out.

Early leaving is accepted to be related to a number of individual characteristics or factors around family background that are independent of the education system or institution; such factors were frequently commented on by interviewees. They were coded by the research team according to whether they were:

- (a) linked to the individual (but independent of his/her education) or his/her family background;
- (b) linked to the education and training system or institution;
- (c) linked to the labour market.

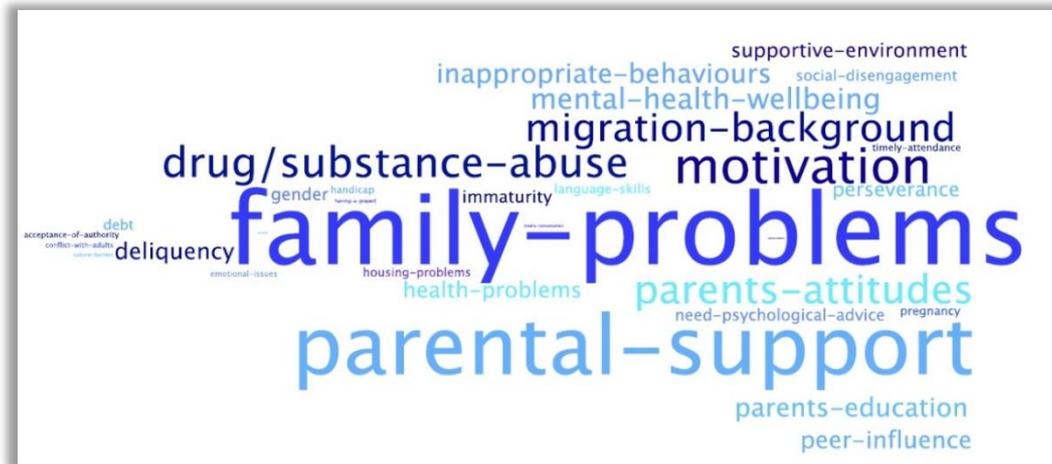
In a second instance, they were subdivided, reflecting as closely as possible the factors stated by the interviewees. The objective of this second coding was to keep a large number of factors, but at the same time to harmonise the wording to enable counting occurrence. As a result each subsection below contains a word cloud image of the different factors mentioned by interviewees. In these images, the font size of words reflects the frequency with which a given factor was mentioned.

5.2. The individual and family background

The first category of factors discussed concerns characteristics of the individuals and of their family background; interviewees most frequently cited factors related to the family environment. These factors were on one hand linked to the 'dynamics' and 'functioning' of families (dysfunctional relationships were often mentioned and coded as 'family problems') but a second very frequently cited group concerned parental support (meaning their interest, engagement and commitment to young persons' education). These factors were coded as 'parental support' or 'parents' attitudes' when concerning their views of the education system. Another group of factors frequently mentioned by interviewees was young persons' health and well-being, including issues of addiction or substance abuse. A further important group of factors is those around young people's motivation for learning and their behaviours in the education context. Most of these factors are general rather than specifically related to VET but some VET specificities are discussed below.

Interviewees mentioned 32 factors in this category. Figure 24 shows the word cloud image of this analysis.

Figure 24. **Most frequently cited individual and family background factors (based on 720 mentions)**



Source: Cedefop. Word size corresponds to frequency with which a given factor was mentioned. Colours are allocated at random. Processed with Wordle™. Data are available on request.

5.2.1. Family engagement and support

One of the factors that stands out from Figure 24, is the importance of family support for engagement in education. Family environment has diverse effects on educational pathways:

- (a) the extent to which education is valued in the family is reflected in young people's education aspirations or lack thereof. O'Connell and Freeney (2011) found that those young people who perceived that their family did not value school completion were more likely to intend to drop out. Galand and Hospel (2011) also identified parents' aspirations as related to the risk of dropping out;
- (b) lack of parental support in education activities negatively affects education achievement (Traaga and van der Velden, 2011). Beekhoven and Dekkers (2005) also found that parental support with homework was not common among those who dropped out;
- (c) parental involvement in education through communication with schools was also shown to influence level of absenteeism (Paris School of Economics, 2010);
- (d) parents' emotional support (or lack of) and the level of control they exercise over young people has a variety of effects on personality development and self-perception, as well as construction of relationships with adults. These, in turn, influence education engagement.

Parental support and involvement is particularly relevant for VET for the following reasons:

- (a) parents with a negative image of VET are likely to communicate this to their children who, in turn, feel devalued when they enrol in VET. They may guide their children towards general education though this may not be a viable option for them. This issue was emphasised by many interviewees who noted that these young people drop out from general education due to academic performance, then enrol in VET but do not engage in their education positively but rather perceive it as a failure;
- (b) the choice of profession may also be influenced by parents and may push young people towards fields of study which do not correspond to their aspirations;
- (c) interviewees mentioned, and some studies confirm (Alet and Bonnal, 2013), that parents with migrant background may underestimate the added value of VET (or specific pathways) in the country they live in. This was emphasised in interviews in Denmark, Germany and Austria which have strong VET systems which are underrated by migrant parents who prefer to direct their children towards general education or to specific VET fields such as business-related.

5.2.2. Health and well-being

Interviewees mentioned a broad range of physical and mental health-related issues as a reason for leaving education prematurely. The extent to which these reasons are more prominent in VET than elsewhere was rarely discussed by the interviewees but some conclusions can be drawn:

- (a) there are fewer opportunities for vocational training for people with physical handicap. Maladapted working environment can be one cause for dropping out;
- (b) in many EU countries there are at least some types of VET programme which are perceived, and sometimes intentionally designed, as being for learners with special education needs; this is particularly so for those with learning difficulties who have few other learning options.

The fact that health is a factor in early leaving is also confirmed by several studies that asked young people about their decision to leave education ⁽⁵⁵⁾. Stamm et al. (2011) developed several profiles of early leavers among which were the victims of bullying as well as students with problems with alcohol consumption or drug abuse.

⁽⁵⁵⁾ Allinckx et al., 2013; Beicht and Walden, 2013; BMBF, 2009; Bryne et al., 2008; ROA, 2012; ANESPO, 2011.

Though not defined as a health issue, pregnancy is also one of the reasons frequently cited for dropping out of education (⁵⁶).

5.2.3. Gender

Although young men are overall more likely to drop out from education and training than young women, when looking only at VET, it is not necessarily the case that young men leave without a qualification more frequently than young women. Dropping out, particularly in apprenticeships, seems to be related to the extent to which the profession is male or female dominated.

In Germany's dual system, 15% of young women who enrol in training do not achieve a qualification compared to 10% of young men (Beich and Walden, 2013). The authors correlated this information with the likelihood of the person finding a training place in a company of their preference and found that 65% of men get a placement in companies of their choice compared to 52% of women. This may suggest a relationship between the positive choice of a training programme and the likelihood of completing it. One of the reasons given by the authors is mismatch between the profession and their expectations, and the fact that when young women are not satisfied with a job, they change to another one (see Table 8 which shows that women have a higher dropout rate during trial periods). The retention and graduation rate of young women when they find their 'dream job' is higher than that of young men (⁵⁷).

The proportion of female dropouts from Austrian apprenticeships is also higher than for male dropouts at 18.6% compared to 14.2% (Dornmayr and Nowak, 2013). A possible explanation given by one interviewee is that women are much more likely to start those VET programmes that have higher dropout rates, namely in the hospitality and catering sector (due to hard working conditions, see Section 5.4.4), while men opt for the industrial sector where dropout rates are overall much lower than in services.

Given that there are proportionally more young men than women enrolled in VET in both Germany and Austria, the total number of male dropouts is probably higher than the number of female dropouts. However, when compared to the male and female population enrolled in VET only (not the whole age cohort), young women are more likely to drop out from VET in these countries than men.

(⁵⁶) BIBB, 2013; Beicht and Walden, 2013; ROA, 2012; ANESPO, 2011.

(⁵⁷) According to the survey analysis, there were 29% of young women who did not get the qualification but started training in a programme corresponding to their 'dream job' while there were 39% of young men who started a training they liked and yet dropped out (Beich and Walden, 2013).

Other data on German apprenticeship show that women have higher apprenticeship contract-termination rates in male-dominated professions than in other sectors (BIBB, 2013). While apprenticeship contract termination is not equivalent to early leaving, as many continue in a different apprenticeship, the data show that there is a clear gender-bias in apprenticeship retention depending on whether the profession is particularly gendered. While the data show that overall contract termination rates are just slightly higher for women than for men, in sectors such as craft and agriculture, they are significantly higher for women and significantly lower in administration (see Table 8). When looking at specific professions, female contract termination rates are much higher than male when it comes to male-dominated professions like automotive and mechatronics (31.4% for women compared to 22.3% for men), electrician (44% compared to 32%), IT specialist (19.7% compared to 14.2%) or industrial mechanic (9.9% compared to 8.4%). The opposite is the case in female dominated professions like hairdresser (43.1% of women compared to 55.4% of men), medical staff (22.1% compared to 35.9%) or dental medical staff (24.2% compared to 41%).

Table 8. **Apprenticeship contract termination rates per gender in Germany (% , 2012)**

| | Male | Female |
|-----------------------------|------|--------|
| Total | 24.0 | 24.9 |
| Trade and industry | 21.0 | 22.7 |
| Craft | 29.8 | 36.3 |
| Administration | 8.7 | 5.4 |
| Agriculture | 21.9 | 26.9 |
| Liberal professions | 28.9 | 24.2 |
| Construction | 27.5 | 26.5 |
| During the probation period | 7.6 | 9.4 |
| After the probation period | 16.4 | 15.4 |

Source: BIBB, 2013.

UK data on apprenticeships show that completion rates are higher for females in apprenticeships that correspond to EQF level 2 while gender is no longer a significant factor for apprenticeships leading to qualifications at higher level (Hogarth et al., 2009).

All the studies analysed focus on apprenticeship programmes. Though there is clear a gender-issue in school-based VET as well (see for example the French data on education participation per field of study and gender – Moisan et al., 2013), there is lack of data about whether this has any impact on student dropout rates.

The interviews conducted for this study do not indicate any clear gender pattern of dropout. This seems to suggest that dropout rates per gender vary depending on the type of VET programme and field of study. However, several interviewees observed differences in the reasons for dropping out between male and female. Dropping out due to family responsibilities, as the care of siblings or own children, is more frequent among females, and particularly acute for single mothers (Germany, Portugal). Some interviewees noted the need for additional measures such as financial support and childcare provision, as well as the availability of part-time programmes (Germany).

5.2.4. Migrant or ethnic minority background

In general, migrants tend to be over-represented in the group of early leavers, as shown by earlier analysis of LFS data (European Commission, 2009). Across the EU, the share of ELET is much higher among young people of migrant background compared to natives (26.8% versus 13.6%). The situation of students with migrant or ethnic minority background and VET is complex. There are countries where students with migrant background tend to prefer non-vocational programmes, such as Denmark or Germany. These are countries with good transition rates from VET to the labour market and medium participation rates in VET; the preference of migrant families for general education can be seen as an obstacle to labour market insertion. These countries have largely apprenticeship-based VET which may create difficulties in finding a training place if there is discrimination at entry to the workplace (Alet and Bonnal, 2013). In contrast, there are countries where those with migrant or ethnic minority background are more likely to face difficulties in academic education and tend to be oriented towards less academically challenging VET programmes. They are over-represented in VET programmes at low levels in countries like the Czech Republic or the Netherlands (see Table 9) which focuses on non-western migrants, as no data have been found on western migrants and non-western migrants are more likely to have different cultural attitudes to VET. However, even the group of 'non-western' migrants can be quite heterogeneous. There are likely to be migrant communities from certain countries which have stronger participation in VET than others. Such detailed data are not available.

In nearly all the countries reviewed below, drop-out rates in VET are higher for the group with migrant or ethnic minority (Roma) background than for other students.

Table 9. **Participation of (non-western) migrant (and ethnic minority) students in VET in selected countries and their chances to drop out**

| Country | Migrant participation in VET | Status of VET | Migrant dropouts from VET |
|-----------------------|--|--|--|
| Austria | Under-represented In particular in VET colleges | Good – both when it comes to apprenticeships and school-based VET | Higher than natives |
| Belgium | Over-represented (both French and Dutch Communities) (school-based) | Low – often a second choice pathway | In the French Community migrants have better success than nationals, contrary to BE-fl |
| Czech Republic (Roma) | Over-represented in VET programmes at lowest level (school-based) | The lower level programmes have low status and do not lead to upper secondary exam | Higher than non-Roma |
| Denmark | Under-represented (apprenticeships) | Good | Higher than those of Danish origins |
| Germany | Under-represented (apprenticeships but also VET in general) | Good | Higher than those of German origin |
| France | Apprenticeships – under-represented School-based VET – over-represented | Varies between social groups | Higher dropout rates from school-based VET than those of French origin |
| Hungary (Roma) | Over-represented (school-based VET) | Low – low participation overall | Likely to be higher (VET where Roma are over-represented has highest dropout rates) |
| Netherlands | Over-represented in VET programmes at lower levels Under-represented in apprenticeships | Varies between social groups | Higher |

Source: For the following countries: Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Netherlands, Austria, adapted from Tjaden (2013), for France, Brinbaum and Guégnard, 2011, for Hungary, Open Society Institute, 2007, for Czech Republic GAC, 2010.

The reasons why young people with migrant or ethnic minority background are more likely to drop out from VET are numerous and complex. The issues of prior academic achievement or failure, often linked to the level of language skills as early as basic education, are some of the factors. In Germany, for example, young people with migrant background are much more likely to hold only lower secondary completion certificates and not certificates to enter higher education, which makes their transition to VET more complicated. Migrant transition from schools to VET takes typically longer than for natives (BMBF, 2014).

Other issues associated with migrants' higher ELET rates include family poverty. In addition to these accepted factors, interviewees also pointed towards more specific issues:

- (a) family expectations that the young person will work in the family small business. Some migrant communities have strong cultures of family-owned

- microenterprises. The fact that the children are expected to work there creates little incentive for completion of studies;
- (b) in some communities, there is a strong feeling of identification with a territory: a specific suburb or part of the city. Other areas of the city or the town may carry negative connotations in these communities. However, the preferred territory may have no VET training centre or VET school, let alone one that would correspond to the aspirations of each young person. Hence young people prefer to go to a nearby education institution, irrespective of programmes offered, rather than reflecting on a choice of a pathway. Members of such communities may be reluctant to move out of localities and this may be even more the case for young women in male-dominated communities;
 - (c) lack of parental engagement in their children's education due to parents' poor understanding of the education system and the opportunities available. Inadequate knowledge of the system may cause parents to push children towards certain programmes in which they have low chances of success or which provide few employment opportunities. This supports the findings that in certain countries with strong VET programmes, children with migrant background are under-represented in VET, particularly in apprenticeships.

However, interviewees do not universally confirm a relationship between dropping out and migration background. One interviewee noted that in cases where young people's parents are supportive, they see many strongly motivated youngsters of migration background who have a clearer idea of their future pathway than natives. Others indicated that it depends on other immigrant population characteristics in the local area, with parents' education background, language skills, employment situation and risk of poverty all featuring. In each country and city there are communities and sub-communities that have different levels of integration and inclusion. Where migrant background is strongly related with dropping out, it is likely to result from other characteristics of the local migrant community.

5.3. Education and training organisation factors

During the research carried out for this study, interviewees emphasised issues inherent in education and training systems and institutions relating to ELVET. In France, for example, many early leaving prevention and remedial measures emphasise the responsibility of education and training institutions in retaining young people in education (not necessarily in the same programme, but allowing

Differentiation and track selection was rarely mentioned by interviewees, though it has received considerable attention from research in recent years.

5.3.1. Overall education achievement

Prior educational performance and earlier failure or low grades appear as a strong factor predicting the probability of dropping out. Several studies that controlled for this variable saw that the influence of other variables was weaker when controls were carried out. For example, Markussen et al. (2011) found that while parents' level of education influences likelihood of dropping out, when controlled for previous education performance and student engagement the influence is weaker. They suggest that family background is mainly related to student engagement and performance, influencing the probability of non-completing education and training.

Prior studies ⁽⁵⁸⁾ see education performance, attitude to education and level of engagement as key variables influencing chances of dropping out.

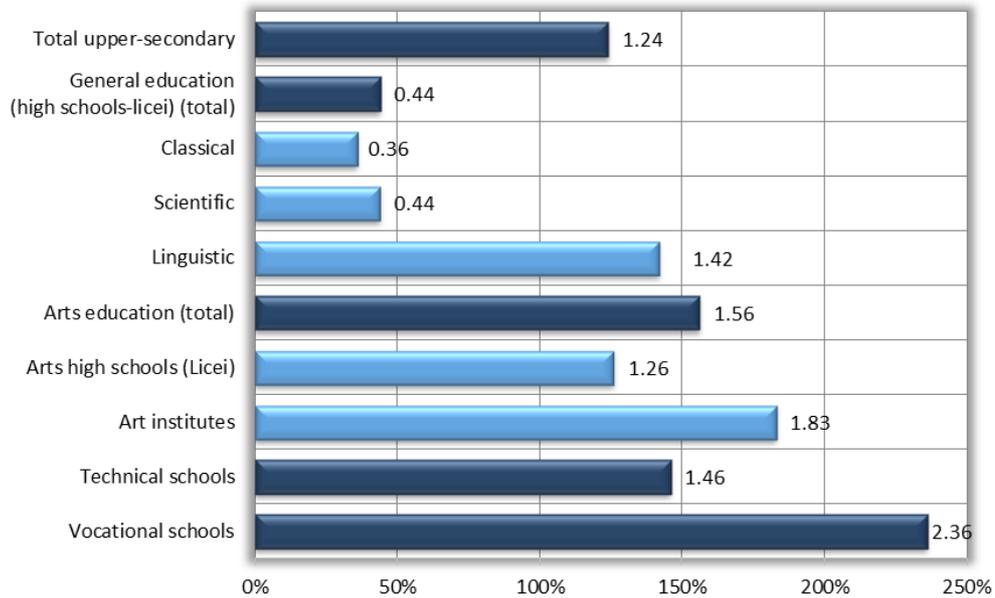
Some interviewees commented on a vicious circle whereby the students performing less well academically are more likely to be oriented towards VET and to drop out from education all together (as in Belgium-fr, Belgium-fl, and Portugal). Consequently, this concentration of students who have lower academic levels and negative experience with education in VET contributes to creating higher early leaving rates.

It is possible to see exploratory patterns from data publicly available in Italy why ELET is higher in VET tracks: the issue of selectivity. Italian data measures the numbers of young people at risk of early leaving based on failure to complete the grade in which they were enrolled at the beginning of a given academic year. Figure 26 shows that this is 0.44% of students in general education and 2.36% in vocational schools. Class repetition is an important factor associated with early leaving.

⁽⁵⁸⁾ The studies use different proxies for this variable, all shown to relate to early leaving:

- (a) education attainment prior to enrolling in the programme: Alet and Bonnal (2013) found that the lower the achievement in year nine of schooling, the higher the chances of dropping out, IVIE (2011) found that those who completed compulsory education were less likely to drop out later; EVA (2009) found that those who completed previous studies have significantly lower risk of dropping out;
- (b) academic performance (grades): O'Connell and Freaney, 2012; Traaga and van der Velden, 2011; Hall, 2009;
- (c) grade repetition or past education failures: Galand and Hospel, 2011; Guerreiro et al., 2009; Fernandez-Enguita et al., 2010.

Figure 26. **Students at risk of early leaving in Italy (students enrolled in a given year who did not complete the grade), 2011-12**



Source: MIUR, 2013.

Interviewees also highlighted the difficulties young people in certain VET programmes have with basic literacy or numeracy (in Belgium-fr, Germany, Croatia, Austria, and Portugal). The gaps they have accumulated earlier create difficulties for them to follow the VET programmes towards which they are oriented. Several interviewees in charge of measures to address early leaving noted the need to put in place remedial measures for these basic skills: in Denmark, students with a low academic level in Danish and maths follow courses in these subjects to improve their performance before starting a VET programme or as part of it ⁽⁵⁹⁾.

5.3.2. Differentiation and track selection

Countries differ in the age at which students are selected into different types of education. In some countries, particularly Scandinavia, the education system is broadly comprehensive while in others, such as Germany and Austria, students are sorted for instruction into different types of schools as early as age 10. Most other European countries fall between these two approaches. In addition to the

⁽⁵⁹⁾ More information on related policies undertaken in European countries is available in Volume II (Cedefop, 2016).

timing of selection, there is also variation in the number of available pathways across countries.

Much previous research has explored the negative effects of selection age on student achievement, primarily through the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) data. This has mainly been to explore the relationship between socioeconomic background, track placement and student outcomes (Hanushek and Woessmann, 2005).

Early tracking can negatively affect student achievement, which may drive students to leave school due to academic failure. However, a place in a vocational track may offer students more flexible curricula and more hands-on learning experiences. It is possible that early tracking involving a vocational track and practical experience may retain students in schools longer than those in a more comprehensive education system. This was suggested by national stakeholders consulted during this study in Germany as being one of the key factors positively contributing to the potential of VET to reduce ELET.

Analysing data from PISA 2012, this study finds that there is no association between first age of selection of students in the education system and ELET⁽⁶⁰⁾.

It is expected that countries with a relatively small VET system (smaller choice of VET programmes) are likely to have a higher rate of early leaving due to lack of non-academic programme choice. National stakeholders highlighted that having various programmes that include VET provision offers more individualised solutions and responds to student motivations.

This suggests that correlation between the number of national VET programmes and ELET should be negative: the more programmes offered at national level, the lower the ELET rate. However, based on the number of national VET programmes in 2009 collected from the OECD study, the international data do not support this hypothesis (OECD, 2009). The correlation is weak and positive, rather than negative⁽⁶¹⁾.

This indicator does not capture the intricacies of pathway permeability and flexibility of VET policy measures: it simply identifies the number of pathways. It could be the case that it is the flexibility of the system, rather than the range on offer, that is related to tackling ELET. German national level interviewees identified a flexible and permeable VET system which allows for changes, and 'add-ons' from general education, without 'losing' classes already taken and having these recognised when recommencing training later on, as a major factor

⁽⁶⁰⁾ Correlation coefficient is 0.05. Data available on request.

⁽⁶¹⁾ Data available on request.

in preventing ELET. In Norway, there is also increased focus on making the education system more flexible, with easier pathways to change from one programme to another and from general education to VET.

While options to pursue a variety of academic and vocational programmes may exist, systemic difficulties in changing programmes without suffering penalties (such as losing years) impacts the potential of VET to tackle ELET. Where pathways are more flexible and permeable those who are at-risk or have dropped out can more easily transfer to another programme and experience success, rather than finding themselves ELET or remaining ELET. Any lack of flexibility and permeability impacts on the perception of VET; for example, inability to access higher education directly via vocational options and inability to move between programmes make efforts to fight ELET difficult.

The motivation of learners, and especially of those who are at risk of dropping out, is affected if learners are constantly moving horizontally rather than vertically, engaging in the same themes during each programme and/or having to begin each level again instead of building knowledge and moving upwards.

Another consideration is that the above indicator only captures the established learning pathways in terms of the number of programmes offered. Some countries may have alternative pathways offered specifically to those who at risk or who have dropped out.

5.3.3. Student orientation

Numerous interviewees discussed issues related to students' inadequate orientation as one of the reasons for dropping out. This issue is not exclusive to VET but is an issue as there are many more choices of type of programme. Several aspects are further explored below. The underlying issue is often the lack of a deliberate and reflected choice by the youngster. This is not a question of matching the young person to a programme that 'fits' their profile, implying an understanding of orientation and guidance not much applied today. The element lacking is self-reflection on aspirations and projection of oneself into the future. This approach is seen as creating engagement and motivating the young person to succeed.

Issues cited by interviewees include:

- (a) students and their families prefer to try to complete a general education programme first. If learners encounter difficulties, they drop out from general education and enrol in VET. This transition does not necessarily mean that they will again drop out from VET and finish as early leavers: Chapter 4 shows that many dropouts complete a VET qualification later. However, their chances of leaving the education system for good are higher if they already

- dropped out once. Negative self-perception, disengagement and stigmatisation that result from the first premature termination of a programme may have negative consequences for the rest of their development. In Belgium (French Community), interviewees referred to a 'relegation system' where students who fail in general and technical tracks go to VET schools and those who fail in the latter go to the 'alternance system';
- (b) VET as a negative choice. Many interviewees note that telling a young person follow a certain programme because they are 'not good enough' for others is detrimental to their future continuation. These young people often already have a negative self-image, specifically around education due to their previous difficulties. The rhetoric around their orientation is deficit rather than real opportunities and motivation, and further contributes to the existing negative spiral. Certain programmes are often chosen by default, as interviewees from Germany, Croatia and Austria mention in relation to catering;
 - (c) in the more extreme cases, some students enrol in VET programmes just to pass time until they reach the age for leaving compulsory education (mentioned by interviewees from Belgium-fr and Portugal). Many young people in Denmark enrol in education or training to receive associated financial support, and do not really care about the programme;
 - (d) those students who make a positive choice are rarely the ones who drop out. However, some interviewees noted that the fact that a young person does not have a clearly articulated wish to pursue a specific programme and choose one by default does not necessarily equate to this negative experience. It is also the role of training providers to ensure that young people build up a positive image of the profession and associated training programme and institution;
 - (e) lack of any future vision of their pathway. It is understandable that most young people at the age of 15 or 16 do not have a specific professional development plan. However, what they often lack is any reflection on their future pathway or self-reflection on their aspirations. This passive and disengaged attitude to education (and possibly learning more broadly) is a key difficulty faced by many students in VET who are told to follow a certain path rather than being engaged in a choice. They are not actor but subject in the process of choice and orientation which negatively affects their motivation. As an example, a counsellor from a town in Belgium (Flemish Community) mentioned that many students make a decision based on ease

(as in choose a course in a school located close to their home), on what their peers do, on their parents' preferences or a suggestion given by a teacher.

Several interviewees noted the possible positive role of prevocational training or initiatives where young people can try out professional activities before they choose a specific programme. The fact that such programmes are being downscaled (in France), less popular (Austria) or that the entry year to VET is no longer organised in this 'exploratory manner' (Belgium-fr) was also seen by some as being associated with early leaving. German interviewees mentioned the important role of internships in promoting good vocational decisions, and commented on the benefits of having a probation period in apprenticeships.

In Italy, lack of recognition of the school counsellor profession and correspondent training is considered by interviewees to result in inadequate guidance. In Portugal, guidance is considered to be insufficient in the case of the apprenticeships system; however, some interviewees mentioned that this may be related to a shortage of candidates and a lack of a real selection.

Beyond guidance itself, choice is also often conditioned by availability of placements in certain programmes and other organisational aspects of VET. Enrolment conditions and registration deadlines seem particularly relevant. A pedagogical coordinator from a VET school in Brussels mentions as a problem that many VET tracks are closed for registration at the end of the school year, a point where many students realise that, because of their grades, they will not be able to continue in the more academic-oriented programme.

These insights are confirmed by academic research that shows that students who are in tracks that they have not positively chosen but which they rather chose 'by default' are more likely to drop out (RAKE et al., 2012; Arponen-Aaltonen, 2012). Alet and Bonnal (2013) also found that those students who were pushed towards a track rather than making their own choice were more likely to drop out.

5.3.4. Perception of the profession

Another point linked to student orientation is the mismatch between perception of the profession they study for and its reality; several interviewees with hands-on experience of working with young people in specific VET programmes commented on this. It appears to be more common in some programmes or fields of study than others. Mismatch in perceptions does not mean that the young person will end up as early leaver; s/he may enrol in another programme that better matches his/her needs. However, it is important that this reorientation takes place rapidly, before the young person becomes disengaged.

Misperceptions can be linked to several issues:

- (a) lack of awareness of the working conditions and low readiness for them;
- (b) underestimation of the level of technical complexity of certain professions which require solid knowledge in areas such as mathematics, physics or science;
- (c) lack of understanding of what kind of jobs a given programme leads to.

During interviews, people mentioned the following as examples; these quotes correspond to one-off examples, not necessarily to statements made by several people:

- (a) in the catering sector, students often have very little idea about the hours worked and the shifts;
- (b) in the administration section, students 'want to work in the office' without knowing what the job of an assistant entails. A similar example was given for students of a programme that concerned biological analysis and for which most students had very little concrete idea about what they could do on completion of the programme;
- (c) in the beauty sector, students tend to have a 'glamorous' idea of the profession, and are not aware that they will have to perform such tasks as foot care, waxing or cleaning treatment rooms;
- (d) in car maintenance, students, particularly young men, are interested in the object – the car – but do not expect that the profession these days requires quite high level of skills in fields such as physics (electricity);
- (e) those preparing for electronic technician posts sometimes expect to find a job in a laboratory but often they have to be outside on sites doing installation work;
- (f) in a programme related to photography and film production, students had a 'glamorous' idea of the programme, looking for artistic expression. In reality, the programme prepared technicians and required a high level of technical knowledge and skills;
- (g) in programmes related to multimedia or digital design, students find that content is more difficult than they had expected since it includes programming or the use of technical software and knowledge.

5.3.5. Student self-perception linked to VET image

For some young people, enrolment in a VET programme is seen as failure and is associated with negative self-perception. The everyday language of parents or teachers may carry negative judgements and expressions about VET (young people being told with disdain 'if you do not study well-enough, you will have to go to a VET school'). When they then enrol in VET they accept the idea that they

are 'not good enough', and such negative self-perception is one of the causes of disengagement from education.

This issue was mentioned in most of the countries where interviews have been carried out, including Denmark, Germany and Austria which are internationally considered as having high quality and attractive VET.

In all countries there appear to be programmes or qualifications that are less well-regarded and recognised socially than others. In France, the VET qualification corresponding to EQF level 3 (*Certificat d'Aptitude Professionnel*) particularly suffers from bad image: interviewees confirm that there is more dropping out at this level than at the higher level. In Belgium (both the Flemish and the French Communities) and Portugal, interviewees state that apprenticeships are considered as the last resort, after other VET programmes. In Austria, interviews suggest that this is, on the contrary, the case for VET schools, while VET colleges and apprenticeships are well perceived. In Italy, significant stigma is attached to professional institutes, considered the last option for those who failed in all the others.

This creates a vicious circle: low prior education attainment (failure, repetition, bad grades) is associated with higher chances of dropping out. Students who face more substantial academic difficulties are often in higher concentration in certain VET programmes or fields of study (those that have low attractiveness). They know that they are in a programme/field of study that is not attractive. Unless there is real willingness and work to help them develop a positive relationship with the programme and profession, they are likely to disengage (or continue disengaging).

This issue was been further investigated in the present study by building a composite indicator on the perception of VET based on several 2011 Eurobarometer questions, and checking its correlation with ELET rates. However, the results were inconclusive ⁽⁶²⁾.

5.3.6. Programme content and organisation

When VET programmes are too general, not sufficiently focused on vocational skills and competences, but giving a lot of emphasis to more academic subjects and knowledge, students can be discouraged. Interviewees note that when young people choose a vocational programme they wish to pursue learning that is more practical and concrete. Instead, many VET programmes are structured to engage students in a substantial amount of theory before getting to experience

⁽⁶²⁾ More detailed information is available on request.

the practice. A study by Hall (2009) in Sweden found that the introduction of more academic content into VET increased dropout rates.

However, interviewees often mentioned the need to reinforce the basic skills of VET students, since these are necessary tools to access more theoretical content. Theoretical content cannot be excluded from programmes and changes in the nature of work, often a consequence of new technologies, may imply the introduction of more complex curricula. This is the case in the automotive sector, where computer-based work is increasingly required and manual work less so. Although this can be an obstacle, especially for students with learning difficulties, the key to engaging students seems to be integration of theoretical content with the more practical parts of training.

Learners may not see the links between theoretical courses and practical training. It was said that, in many cases, it is the learner who has to make the link between what they are learning in mathematics and the rest. Making such links is a complex process and most do not really reflect on this on their own.

The place of theoretical knowledge in VET was commented on by some interviewees. They suggested the need to make sure that this is integrated into the vocational context and meaningful for young people in the context of the profession they are preparing for.

An interviewee from a training centre in Denmark commented that by learning how to cook sauce *béarnaise* it is possible to learn about chemical reactions and why the sauce should not boil. An interviewee from a VET school in Portugal mentioned that they try to include scientific and sociocultural contents in a transversal way, for instance by asking students to translate their final projects into English and present them orally in this language. An apprenticeship supervisor from a hotel in Croatia mentioned that it is important that the hotel is involved in the creation of the school programme so that there is a congruency with the practical training.

Directly or indirectly, the interviewees called for more competence-based training. This is seen as having two main benefits:

- (a) such an approach is motivating, as it encourages recognising achievements also seen as meaningful by the young person (rather than purely academic achievements that they consider unimportant);
- (b) it encourages combining the teaching of knowledge, skills and competence in coordination.

The fact that such competence-based learning, teaching and assessment is at the heart of contemporary VET pedagogies (Cedefop, 2015) was seen by some as an added value of VET. There is an expectation that VET can more easily adopt this approach (or is already doing so) while the reality on the ground

is often lags behind this ideal. Some interviewees mentioned that assessment is often too theoretical compared to the content of the programme (Belgium-fr).

Besides competence-based training, interviewees also mentioned the existence of support measures to make sure that students improve basic skills and acquire the necessary theoretical knowledge. For instance, a 'production school' in Denmark offers academic workshops on basic skills where classes are individual and intensive.

5.3.7. Professional identity

Development of a professional identity through VET requires an engaging and motivating process which enables young people to perceive the training as meaningful. Through trainer or VET teacher role models', young people gain an idea of the profession and incorporate its codes. They get to practise, ideally in a workplace; this helps create professional identity. If VET fails to develop professional identity at an early stage of the programme, learners may progressively disengage, increasing the risk to finally drop out.

As an example, an interviewee from Austria explained the difference between two types of programmes leading to the same profession in the catering sector as follows: 'In a regular apprenticeship, students serve real customers in a restaurant or café. In the other programme, they serve other students in the workshop. In the second case, they are frustrated as they doubt the sense of these activities'.

Other interviewees also commented on aspects that illustrate the relevance developing a professional identity:

- (a) three months after the start of the apprenticeship, young people start to perceive themselves as workers (as in 'I am a house painter') and not as students. When this shift does not happen, young people are at risk of dropping out (opinion of head teacher from a training centre in Belgium);
- (b) if a teacher is not proud of his or her professional identity, they might risk transferring this to the students. It is important that the teachers express that they are proud of their profession. This can also help change the image of the school (opinion of guidance counsellor in a training centre in Denmark).
- (c) if there is a family tradition in the profession (such as sailing) the student will be motivated and will already have a picture of the profession (opinion of guidance counsellor in VET school in Croatia).

In line with these remarks of interviewees, Host et al. (2013) who studied a sample of VET students and programmes found that the following appear to have a relationship with non-completion:

- (a) development of strong professional identity in the first year of the programme. If this is absent, the choice of the second year (which is a year of specialisation in Norway, country of study) is challenging for the student;
- (b) completion is higher in sectors with a longer tradition of receiving and training apprentices;
- (c) when there is a weak link with the job this has negative effect on retention.

Regarding 'sector-specific culture', a counsellor from a training centre in Portugal mentioned that in less 'specific' programmes (for example installation of solar systems, sales employer and logistics, as opposed to kitchen and bakery or mechatronics), the main objective of students is to obtain their upper secondary education certificate, reflecting a negative choice of programme.

5.3.8. Apprenticeship and other in-company training

Despite the motivational effect of work-based learning and its contribution to development of a professional identity based on the authentic relationships on the workplace (Section 4.4.2), interviewees also mentioned a number of issues contributing to early leaving that were more specifically related to apprenticeships or programmes which required substantial periods of work-based learning. These are:

- (a) availability of work-based learning opportunities;
- (b) readiness to work;
- (c) relationships in the workplace.

5.3.8.1. Availability of work-based learning opportunities

In many systems, the lack of apprenticeship places is not considered a reason for dropping out as such but it is still frequently mentioned. In some countries, the apprentice cannot enrol in an apprenticeship without having a contract with an employer (such as Belgium-fr, France, Austria). However, interviewees in these countries commented on the difficulty of finding a placement for young people. They highlighted the fact that lack of apprenticeship places diminishes the opportunities for those who wish to pursue this form of learning and, due to insufficient supply of placements, they are rejected. They end up in a programme that is not their first choice.

In Denmark, the first year of VET studies consists of a foundation course in which students are not yet enrolled in an apprenticeship. They need to find a placement as from the second year. This transition is where a significant number of young people drop out, because they cannot find a placement. Some interviewees commented on the fact that this is sometimes discouraging young people from enrolling in VET, as they fear not finding an employer. They carry on

in general education when their future development needs might have been better served in VET.

The literature also confirms this trend. Steiner (2009) reports a lack of apprenticeship placements related to early leaving in Austria. In Denmark, Koudahl (2005) found that the mismatch between apprenticeship placement demand and supply (surplus in some sectors and shortage in others) is also related to dropping out. Also in Denmark, EVA (2012) notes the shortage of placements as a cause for dropping out. In Sweden, Vastmanlands County (2005) also considers that shortage of placements affects dropping out.

In Germany and Austria, the situation is the reverse, with a shortage of apprentices instead of placements in several companies and sectors. This is due to demographic evolution and student preferences for other pathways. Small and medium-sized enterprises face more difficulties, since trainees prefer bigger companies and change to these when they have the opportunity. Also, small firms often stop training apprentices in response to increasing formal training-related requirements (Austria).

5.3.8.2. *Readiness to work*

Interviewees noted the need in an apprenticeship or traineeship for young people to become – from one day to another – adults at the age of 15 to 16. They have to adopt the rules of the workplace and comply with basic norms related to behaviours and skills: punctuality, discipline, communication, and compliance with rules and requests. For many young people with discipline or absenteeism difficulties in school-based education, this change is radical and they are often not prepared for it.

Many interviewees commented on the lack of readiness to work as a key reason for not finding an apprenticeship or dropping out in early months. Employers expect apprentices to demonstrate motivation and commitment: when this is lacking they terminate the contract. They may also be in client-facing situations and expected to be capable of handling different types of contact; this may require a degree of maturity and self-control that they often do not possess at entry. These are some relevant comments:

- (a) a head teacher from a VET school in Austria mentioned that students feel more comfortable in their schools than in working places, because it is not compulsory to stay at school for eight hours. The pressure on the students is not as hard as it is when working for a company;
- (b) a counsellor in a training centre in Belgium-fr explained that it is often the case that breaches of contract happen because an apprentice frequently arrives late at the workplace. Also, apprentices often find the tasks too

- boring or too basic/not diversified; they do not understand that an employer has to start by giving them basic tasks;
- (c) a representative of a training centre in Portugal stated that some young people find it difficult to adapt to social and institutional rules (such as punctuality) and to the hierarchy (doing things like they are told to and not how they think it is better).

Research has arrived at similar findings. In Austria, for example, Dornmayr and Nowak (2013) found that dropping out from apprenticeships is most likely during the first three trial months (39% of those who drop out, leave at this time). Insufficient readiness to work is one of the reasons for early apprentice contract termination.

Because of this, many programmes that work with dropouts begin with short periods of work-based learning and accompany young people through the process to acculturate them.

5.3.8.3. *Relationships in the workplace*

Finding a welcoming and supportive environment in the workplace is essential to retaining young people. Conflictual relationships in the workplace are cited as one of the reasons for dropping out. Beicht and Walden (2013) found that 46% of apprentices who drop out cite problems with trainers, educators, other students or the company. According to data from the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, BMBF), 2009), a conflict with a supervisor in the company is quoted in 70% of interrupted apprenticeships and complaints about teaching skills of supervisors are cited in 46% cases.

This issue was also clearly noted in the interviews. When the relationship with the mentor or the trainer is not good, young people are much more likely not to complete the programme. This may be linked to work-readiness but it was also mentioned that in some cases companies 'abuse' of the situation of trainees, do not make enough effort to provide adequate training, or the working conditions and atmosphere are 'rough':

- (a) a coach from a training centre in Belgium-fr mentioned that sometimes apprentices would leave their first apprenticeship because they did not like the colleagues or the working atmosphere;
- (b) according to a counsellor from a chamber of crafts in Germany, trainees often complain three main factors: low training quality (lack of learning opportunities and professional input), a feeling of exploitation (working time, lack of intervals) and bad working atmosphere and communication, sometimes connected to bullying;

- (c) according to an apprenticeship supervisor in Belgium-fr, employers are not trained to be student hosts and tutors during apprenticeship. They expect too much from an apprentice in the sense that they expect them to be workers while they are still young learners. Many employers lack patience to teach the apprentice how to perform tasks. They often consider young people as cheap labour and not as apprentices. Similar comments were made by teachers from apprenticeships in France;
- (d) an educator from an NGO in Belgium-fl and others in France mentioned a lack of appropriate apprenticeship placements for youngsters who still need to work on their employability skills. At first, they need to be in an environment where they are allowed to make mistakes, to learn, receive trust from colleagues and superiors. However, the business ethic 'time is money' means employers prefer workers who can do the job immediately without extra support;
- (e) as an opposite example, a director from a company receiving apprentices in Denmark mentioned that they have introduced, with a touch of humour, the 'duty to make a mistake' at least three times a day, to try to keep the focus away from difficulties and create a good work environment.

5.4. Labour market factors

Not all the reasons for dropping out from VET can be linked to the young person himself/herself or to the nature of the education system or the institution. There are a number of external push or pull factors; those related to the labour market are discussed below and those most frequently mentioned by interviewees are shown in Figure 27. Labour market factors were mentioned less frequently than those related to the education system and VET but 18 were discussed by the interviewees.

The most frequently cited factor was insufficient availability of apprenticeship placements as discussed earlier (see Section 5.3.8.1). Young people who are interested in pursuing VET but do not secure an apprenticeship are more likely to be oriented towards a type of VET which does not correspond to their aspirations. In some systems, the inability to find an apprenticeship means that they cannot pursue the training. Another group of factors focus on the attraction of the labour market and the opportunity to earn one's living; working conditions and working hours are another frequently cited factor.

Figure 27. **Most frequently cited labour market related factors (based on 294 mentions)**



Source: Cedefop. Data are available on request.

5.4.1. Attraction of the labour market

Attractiveness of the labour market is one of the external factors linked to early leaving, with several studies quoting finding a job as a reason for dropping out:

- (a) in Germany, Beicht and Walden (2013) found that 16% of apprentices who terminated their contracts found employment before completing the certificate;
- (b) in Italy, Colombo (2013) found 18.4% of students state having left education and training for work reasons. She also found this is twice as common for men as for women;
- (c) in the Netherlands (ROA, 2012), 13% of leavers state labour market-related reasons for dropping out, most quoting preference for work but some that they need an income. The percentage of dropouts who say they leave for work-related reasons is higher among those who dropped out from secondary VET in the first two years (18% cite these reasons). The survey also found that male dropouts are more likely to leave for a job than female;
- (d) in Portugal, ANESPO (2011) found that the need to find a job was the most commonly cited reason for dropping out (18.4%);
- (e) in Spain, the pull factor of finding a job was also identified as a key reason for dropping out (IVIE, 2011; Fernandez-Enguita et al., 2010, Muñoz et al., 2009).

Some interviewees noted that young people in their final year of study are particularly attractive for employers (Austria). They are relatively well qualified already (though they do not have the formal certificate) and they are cheaper than qualified workers as they are employed as unqualified labour. The possibility for these young people to still pass the final certification even if they do not finalise the whole training programme was emphasised by a few interviewees as an option for these young people.

Several interviewees from Italy and Portugal mentioned that the financial crisis has reduced the pull effect of the labour market.

5.4.2. Employment outcomes of VET graduates

A low probability of finding a job after the completion of VET could be demotivating for students to enrol in VET, complete their studies or follow retention measures. This is known as the 'discouraged student effect'.

The idea that poor employment prospects is related to higher ELET rates was tested by assessing the relationship between employment outcomes of VET graduates and ELET at national level. It was expected that the employment outcomes of VET and ELET would be negatively correlated.

Seven different indicators were used to assess the relationship, including employment rates of VET graduates, unemployment rates of VET graduates, the difference in employment rates of VET graduates and general education graduates, and the difference in employment rates of VET graduates and lower level graduates (those below upper secondary education). Data are available for all seven indicators for only one year (2009 or 2012) ⁽⁶³⁾.

If comparing the data against ELET rates, three out of seven indicators show a moderate correlation with ELET:

- (a) difference in employment between 20 to 34 year-old initial vocational education and training (IVET) graduates ⁽⁶⁴⁾ and low-educated;
- (b) employment rate of 25 to 34 year-olds with vocational education based on 2012 OECD data;
- (c) employment rates for 20 to 34 year-olds IVET graduates based on 2009 Cedefop data.

The difference between employment rates of 20 to 34 year-old IVET graduates and low educated in 2009 was found to have the strongest negative relationship with ELET.

A linear relationship was also found to be moderately negative between employment rates of VET graduates and ELET. Based on 2012 OECD data, countries with high employment rates of VET graduates (a rate higher than 84%) have ELET lower or equal to 10%. However, based on the 2009 Cedefop employment rates of 20 to 34-year-old IVET graduates, this does not hold. Countries with high employment rates of IVET graduates (a rate higher than 84%) had ELET levels ranging from 5% to 31%.

Bivariate analyses seem to indicate that there might indeed be a relationship between employment outcomes of VET graduates and ELET. The relationship

⁽⁶³⁾ A full list of indicators assessed, together with data sources, years, correlation coefficients and scatterplots, are provided on request.

⁽⁶⁴⁾ IVET defined as education and training carried out in the initial education system.

was found to be particularly strong when comparing the ELET rates with the difference in employment between 20 to 34 year-old IVET graduates and low-educated.

5.4.3. Labour market regulations

When jobs require certification, it is expected that students will be encouraged to graduate from VET. This ‘encouraged student effect’ was tested by assessing the relationship between the number of regulated occupations in the EU-27 ⁽⁶⁵⁾ and ELET. The assumption is made that the total number of professions in each EU Member State is similar and hence that the total number of regulated professions, as opposed to the relative number of regulated professions, can be used as an indicator.

A weak negative correlation was found. Based on the results, there is weak evidence that would support the presence of the ‘encourage student effect’ caused by regulation ⁽⁶⁶⁾.

- Few interviewees commented on the level of regulation of the labour market:
- (a) in those labour markets where a qualification is a requirement to enter a profession, it was mentioned as a motivation for young people to complete training. In the same context, it was said that the wages of unskilled workers are nowadays so low (for example in Austria) that they are no longer attractive;
 - (b) in it was also noted these countries that, in some sectors where the work can be quite quickly mastered and companies do not always require all the skills certified by a qualification (such as work as waiters or in hotels), there is a tendency to use apprentices extensively to avoid hiring personnel. These are also sectors that have high levels of dropout from apprenticeships;
 - (c) in countries and sectors where having a formal qualification is not a requirement for entering a profession, young people may be less inclined to complete a training programme. For instance, in Croatia, it is not necessary to have a formal qualification to be able to work as waiter. If students find a

⁽⁶⁵⁾ Based on Koumenta et al., 2014. Prevalence and labour market impacts based on the definition of regulated profession used by the EU single market regulated professions database and Directive 2005/36/EC, including licensing, accreditation, and certification. Based on the EU single market regulated professions database (accessed in spring 2012).

⁽⁶⁶⁾ Data are available on request.

job before completion there is little difference for them than if they had a qualification.

5.4.4. Working conditions

The working conditions in certain sectors were mentioned as a potential push factor for dropping out. Young people realise that in certain sectors (confectionery, chefs, waiters, retail, masonry), they have to work long hours, often weekends and the physical conditions or levels of pressure and stress are important. In tourism, many jobs have seasonal variation. These issues discourage young people from pursuing training, illustrates by the following comments:

- (a) an interviewee from Austria believes that the higher dropout rates in retail trade are due to unpleasant working conditions. Workers and trainees have to start early and finish late and often have to work on Saturdays;
- (b) interviewees from a training centre in Belgium-fr perceive that higher rates of early leaving in masonry are due to the arduous work. Apprentices encounter difficult working conditions, waking up at dawn and carrying heavy materials all day long. Also, they are confronted with an adult atmosphere at the work place which can be intimidating for some;
- (c) several interviewees from Germany observe that working time (weekend shifts) and other structural aspects in catering business that seriously conflict with interests of young people are obstacles to the completion of an apprenticeship;
- (d) a VET school in Portugal noted that due to school hours, many students had to develop their placements in the evening or weekends. Working in the evenings poses problems of transport and in some cases there is no work at these times (following the financial crisis, many restaurants have almost no work at dinner time). The school has tried to modify their class hours to facilitate placements during day time, such as leaving one day a week free of school classes or using school holidays for the placements.

These explanations were often cited by interviewees in the context of specific professions or sectors: Table 10 gives examples and shows that there were interesting differences in how interviewees perceived the trends in a given profession (low or high rate of ELET). Such differences were found within countries and are expected between countries. Employment opportunities in a given sector vary within a country as well as at EU level. However, some trends were generally observed across the countries, such as working hours, stress and working conditions in catering and hospitality. Two contrasting examples are found in the same sector (catering):

- (a) dropout rates for waiters and other support staff in catering were reported to be high due to working hours and stressful working environment. It was also noted that many people end up in this field of study by default without having chosen to study it. This is noted despite the fact that several interviewees noted an important demand for labour force in this field;
- (b) the dropout rates for chefs were reported to be low by several interviewees. Several noted that the students who choose this profession tend to be motivated and driven. The profession also has a good image. This trend was observed despite the fact that, similar to waiters, working as a chef implies long and non-standard working hours and stressful situations.

Table 10. **Factors cited in the context of different professions**

| Profession | Dropout rate cited by the interviewee | Explanation given |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| Bakery | Low | Very good job prospects in the region (Croatia) |
| | High | Low attractiveness of the profession (Germany) |
| Beautician | High | Seasonal variations in the demand for apprentices (followed by breaches of contracts) (Belgium-fr) |
| | High | As above: after the holidays season there is less demand for apprentices (Belgium-fr) |
| Car mechanics | High | It has become a complex profession (Belgium-fr) |
| | High | Attracts many young people (boys) who are interested in the object (the car) but their real motivation for studies is less clear (Belgium-fr) |
| Carpentry | Low | Attracts young people who are really motivated to work in this sector (Belgium-fr) |
| | High | Low attractiveness of the profession (Croatia) |
| | High | Health problems due to working conditions (Austria) |
| Catering | High | Working hours: evenings and weekend (Austria, Portugal) |
| | High | It is easy to find unskilled workers in this sector. People do not need to be fully qualified to be waiters (Austria, Croatia) |
| | High | High levels of stress (Denmark) |
| Chef | Low | Attractive profession (Austria) |
| Cleaning | High | Last resort option for most young people, unattractive profession (Germany) |
| Construction | High | Economic crisis: low number of vacancies in the sector (Germany) |
| | Low | There is a post-crisis growth in the sector which created a growth in the supply of placements (Denmark) |
| Graphic design/multimedia | Low | Attractive occupation (Croatia) |
| | High | Though the programme is very attractive, it has high dropout rates because of the complete mismatch between the image and the reality. It is a very technical job but it attracts people with more 'artistic' aspirations (Portugal) |
| Hairdressing | High | Mismatch between perceptions of the job and the reality on the ground: working conditions in many saloons (Germany) |
| | High | Low wages (Germany) |
| Insurance-bank | Low | Office-based apprenticeships tend to have low dropout rates (Germany) |

| Profession | Dropout rate cited by the interviewee | Explanation given |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| Office management | Low | Attractive profession and good working conditions (Germany) |
| | High | Mismatch between image and reality. Students choose this programme because they want to work in an office but have no idea about the job profile (Belgium-fl) |
| Retail | High | Working hours: weekends (Austria) |
| | High | Low pay (Germany) |
| Wall painting | High | The apprenticeships often do not provide sufficient learning opportunities. People do not need to be qualified to do the jobs so there is little difference between those who are qualified and those who are not (Austria) |
| | High | Low supply of apprenticeship/work-based placements and low employment in the sector (Belgium-fr) |

Source: Interviews.

Good matching between young person's aspirations and the reality of the profession is a positive factor. One interviewee mentioned the example of a highly specialised programme in the field of photography. The programme is very attractive and even selective because of the high numbers of applicants. However many young people drop out. The actual training is technical, as is the job it prepares for, but the programme attracts young people who have 'artistic' aspirations and are not interested in and ready to deal with the technical aspects.

5.4.5. Overall economic context

Several interviewees noted that the depressed economic context was demotivating for young people to complete their studies. One VET headmaster in a highly disadvantaged neighbourhood noted that, while a decade ago it was possible to motivate young people to finish their studies as they could see a qualification as a possible 'way out', this does not work anymore. Young people see the difficulties of their older peers or parents in finding employment, despite having a qualification, and they do not believe that studies will deliver them a desirable future: this aspect was mentioned by interviewees from different countries, including Belgium-fl and Portugal.

Unemployment and financial problems in the family can also prompt students to drop out, even for a precarious job opportunity, or to help in a family business. This was mentioned by interviewees in Portugal, a country where the emigration of the family – due to financial difficulties – was also often mentioned as a reason for ELVET.

An Austrian interviewee noted that the career opportunities of VET school graduates have decreased dramatically during recent decades. Many graduates are restricted to low-skilled jobs, which negatively affects their motivation and encourages dropping out.

A counsellor working for a local public authority in Belgium-fl mentions that in the 1990s and early 2000s it was easier for schools to conclude agreements with businesses about jobs for their student population. Currently this is much more difficult.

The economic context is also negatively affecting the take-up of young people into apprenticeships in a number of countries. Taking on apprentices is a commitment of three to four years to a workplace and, especially in microenterprises, employers are hesitant to make such commitments. The crisis has led to business closure and this is also affecting the availability of placements for work-based learning. In Croatia, the number of trades and crafts with licences for providing apprenticeships is decreasing because of closure due to the financial crisis; new businesses do not usually obtain a licence as soon as they open. Many companies do not have sufficient workload to share with apprentices (Croatia, Portugal).