



Chapter 6: CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY MESSAGES

Leaving education early: putting vocational education and training centre stage

Volume I: investigating causes and extent



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CHAPTER 6.

Conclusions and policy messages

6.1. Refining the EU indicator on ELET to support targeted decision making at country level

The EU indicator on ELET provides a common measurement of the phenomenon but also hides a great variety of situations. The indicator does not enable to differentiate between:

- (a) people who left education at lower secondary level;
- (b) people who left during the transition from lower secondary to upper secondary;
- (c) those who completed short qualifications at ISCED 3c;
- (d) those who completed the training but did not succeed in passing the examinations.

Nor does the indicator allow identifying the share of early leavers who drop out from vocational pathways as opposed to general education.

This limits the usefulness of the indicator as basis for decision- and policy-making, especially at country level. It does not enable policy-makers to identify in which parts of the education system the problem of early leaving from ET is most prevalent and to develop targeted actions. Some countries address this gap by having different national monitoring systems; others do not yet have such data and only use the EU indicator to measure the rate of early leaving.

The study showed that:

- (a) according to PIAAC data, the share of early leavers who dropped out is relatively high (58%) compared to those who started but did not complete a programme (42%). This suggests that many early leavers are young people who do not make a transition from one level or type of education to another or who complete a programme but fail the examinations. Young people in the latter situation are likely to require different forms of support from those who leave education and training with a low-level qualification or those who drop out from a programme and leave without any qualification;
- (b) none of the international surveys enabled measuring the rate of ELVET at EU level. National data in selected countries (Belgium, France and the Netherlands) show that early leaving is more common among those enrolled in VET pathways than those enrolled in general education tracks. This reflects the selection in the education system whereby students who share

certain characteristics (low education achievement, low socioeconomic background, migration background, disability) are more present in VET tracks than in general education. Having EU data on the scale of ELVET would permit understanding aspects such as the countries in which efforts to reduce ELET should focus on VET or whether some VET systems are better than others in retaining young people.

One of the objectives of this study was to propose a definition of ELVET useful to help understand the scale of ELVET, as well as the specificities of dropping out from this type of education and training.

Based on the review of EU and national definitions, it is suggested that the definition of ELVET should:

- (a) focus on qualification attainment (upper secondary level as in the EU definition);
- (b) make reference to dropping out from a VET programme;
- (c) refer to current status of the person (not enrolled in a training programme).

Consequently the definition combines:

- (a) a measurement of the highest qualification attained;
- (b) a measurement of the type of programme from which the person dropped out.

To understand better the whole education pathway of a person, it would be useful to have information on all dropout events of a respondent, not just the last one. This would enable differentiating between those who dropped out from education and training but still achieved an upper secondary qualification (dropouts but not early leavers). Such information would also enable understanding the role VET has in retaining young people in education and training, and particularly in retaining those who already dropped out from general education or other VET programmes.

The age range could be either the same as for the EU definition or could also cover the wider age group (16 to 24). The fact that the EU definition only captures the population that is older than 18 was seen as a limitation by a number of interviewees who use EU data for decision-making purposes. The definition captures the early leaving phenomenon too late. Policy-makers noted that they needed information on early leaving which would capture information as quickly as possible after exit from the education system. The data collected according to this definition should, if possible, differentiate between different types of VET programmes.

An 'ideal' set of variables and possible related survey questions are presented in Box 7.

Box 7. Ideal set of variables to measure ELVET

1. Highest level of qualification attained (by ISCED levels), as currently measured in the LFS

- Orientation of the ISCED 3 qualification attained (general or vocational).

This would enable measuring the share of those who experienced a dropout event but nevertheless achieved an ISCED 3 VET qualification compared to those who achieved an ISCED 3 general education qualification. It would clarify the role of VET in retaining young people at risk of ELET in education and training.

2. Experience of dropping out, level and orientation of programme from which the person dropped out. The following questions could be asked to get this variable:

- Did you ever start a formal education and training programme that you did not complete? (yes/no)
- Was this before or after you attained the highest qualification that you hold (before/ after)?
- What was the level of this programme (ISCED levels)?
- What was the orientation of this programme (vocational/general)?

Ideally the set of questions would be repeated if the person experienced more than one dropout event.

3. Current status: not attending formal education and/or training.

(*) The assumption is that those who dropped out once are more likely to drop out again and eventually fully disengage from education and training.

Source: Cedefop.

Therefore, to develop an indicator on ELVET, the analysis suggests that:

- (a) the data set should contain a variable about VET orientation of upper secondary education for all respondents who have at least ISCED3 qualifications: all respondents who completed at least ISCED3 qualification would be asked whether the 'upper secondary education' programme they attended was vocational. This would provide a basis for a denominator about all VET participants (independent of their later progression in education). It would also enable the development of a dependent variable for statistical analysis of the probability of dropping out from VET (or becoming an early leaver from VET) ⁽⁶⁷⁾;
- (b) the data set should contain a variable about a dropout event that would be constructed as follows:

⁽⁶⁷⁾ The dependent variable could be defined as: dropout from VET= 1; participant in VET who did not drop out= 0.

- (i) the person dropped out;
- (ii) the dropout event was before or after s/he achieved the highest qualification held;
- (iii) the level of the programme from which the person dropped out;
- (iv) the vocational orientation of the programme from which the person dropped out.

Unlike the AES, the questions should be compulsory, to obtain data for all EU countries. In the PIAAC questionnaire, for example, the questions were compulsory.

Of the three surveys reviewed, the LFS has the largest sample size. As the indicator on ELVET would combine a relatively large number of variables (age range, current education status, highest level of qualification, dropout event, level and orientation of the programme from which the person dropped out), it would need to be based on a survey with a large sample size, like an ad hoc module of the LFS.

The 2016 ad hoc module of LFS on young people on the labour market will collect information on dropout events and the level and orientation of the programme the person dropped out from. Information will be collected on:

- (a) whether after completing the studies corresponding to the highest educational level attained, the person started other studies;
- (b) what was the level and orientation of this study (in case of several, the person is asked about the last one);
- (c) whether the person completed it;
- (d) if not, the reasons for dropping out;
- (e) date of completion (or dropping out).

Where the person did not pursue any further studies after attaining the current education level, s/he should be asked the reasons.

The LFS should use the ISCED 2011 classification which enables to differentiate programme orientation (general or vocational) at upper secondary level.

This module will undoubtedly provide valuable data to analyse ELVET. Compared to the 'ideal' set of variables proposed above, one aspect would still not be covered: incomplete studies done before the attainment of the current education level. This means that it would not be possible to analyse the pathways of young people who dropped out of a programme but ended up by attaining an ISCED 3 qualification, and whether VET or general programmes were more commonly chosen after dropping out. The ad hoc module focuses only on the last episode of dropout, so it will not be possible to analyse whether people who completed an education and training programme also experienced a dropout

event but were ultimately retained in education and training and reached a qualification.

6.2. Developing more extensive national systems to be able to monitor ELVET

Data collection and monitoring of ELVET by Member States is crucial to:

- (a) identify early leavers and learners at risk of early leaving as soon as possible, to offer them solutions and increase the chances that they attain a qualification;
- (b) improve understanding of the phenomenon in each country to target measures better to prevent and address early leaving;
- (c) assess the effectiveness of measures to address early leaving.

This implies that monitoring systems need to:

- (a) identify nominally persons at risk or who already left the education and training system. This includes information on contact details which can be used by responsible services to reach out to the individual;
- (b) contain data on individuals' characteristics as well as their pathways in order to use this information to analyse the problem of early leaving in the country;
- (c) be accompanied by process in which it is clear which organisation (and within it which person) is responsible for reaching out to the individual. This should also contain clear methodology on how such follow-up is made.

Countries can monitor early leaving from administrative data gathered by education and training providers on student enrolment. However, solely regional or school-level systems offer limited possibilities as they can erroneously capture those who are mobile (change education provider/region) as early leavers. Connecting different data sources (such as apprenticeships and school-based education governed by different authorities) is often a challenge for authorities when setting up such monitoring systems.

The study identified only a few countries that have monitoring systems on early leaving that are systematically deployed across the whole country and used to offer support to young people. Most countries have statistics on early leaving but lack systems to enable them to identify those who should be reached out to with an offer for a solution. Such systems are typically based on interconnected databases into which education providers enter data on student participation in education and training. These monitoring systems allow identifying (nearly) every young person who exits prematurely and follow-up to offer him/her an alternative programme or support. Quick reaction is important to maintain contact with the

young person and to maximise the chances that s/he will return to education and training.

Once an early leaver is identified, there should be a system to contact him/her as soon as possible. This could be the responsibility of a specialised service (such as youth guidance services) or be done through coordination of different services. The aim of this initial contact is to:

- (a) verify that the young person is an early leaver (to exclude, for instance, those who changed residence to another country);
- (b) check if the young person is already receiving support and, if not, offer it;
- (c) collect information on the characteristics of the young person and his or her needs to be able to offer tailored support;
- (d) coordinate the different services and education and training providers to offer an adequate response to each young person.

Monitoring systems on early leaving can also provide data to help understand the issue in the country.

Good comprehension requires collecting data to establish when learners leave the system (whether they leave before they enter upper secondary, drop out from upper secondary (and from which year), leave after completing a short upper secondary programme, or drop out after finalising an upper secondary programme but failing the final exam), and where are they dropping out from (general programmes or VET, type of programme, and field of study). Information on the sociodemographic characteristics of the learners (age, gender, and migrant or ethnic minority background) is useful to understand better who is leaving the system early (see Table 11).

Table 11. **Aspects to be covered by monitoring systems on early leaving at national level**

| |
|---|
| <p>When are early leavers leaving the system</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Early leavers who do not make the transition to upper secondary education• Dropouts from upper secondary (per year of the programme)• Early leavers who completed a short upper secondary programme (ISCED 3c)• Dropouts who complete an upper secondary programme but fail the final exam |
| <p>Where are early leavers dropping out from</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• General programme / VET• Type of programme (e.g. school-based VET/apprenticeships)• Field of study |
| <p>Who is leaving the system</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Age• Gender• Migrant or ethnic minority background• Other (e.g. disability) |

Source: Cedefop.

Although availability of such monitoring systems has clear benefits in tackling ELET, system implementation and improvement can present technical challenges, mainly the need to combine data from different subsystems. For instance, combining data on apprenticeships with data on other forms of education can be complex, since early leaving in apprenticeships is typically calculated according to numbers of contracts and their terminations. This can be eased by the use of unique student registers or unique identification numbers.

Unique student registers or identification numbers not only aid more accurate data on early leaving, but also enable the tracking of individuals' educational pathways, which can help understand the issue better. Although data protection regulations may pose challenges to such systems, a few countries are now successfully using them and others are working towards their creation. Sharing experience about the nature and advantages of these systems could provide useful guidance for other countries.

Monitoring systems can also help identify those at risk of dropping out: several of those analysed collect data on absenteeism, acknowledged as a risk factor for early leaving. There are other indicators that can be used to improve the identification of learners at risk: low performance (low grades), grade repetition, disruptive behaviour, issues related to health and well-being, or family background. Early leavers are a varied group and not all exhibit clear signs of disengagement (high absenteeism or disruptive behaviour) and such signs may be preceded by less evident ones (emotional distress). Early warning systems that collect data on a variety of risk factors can help authorities and practitioners to detect the first signs of risk of dropping out and to notice the less obvious learners at risk, supporting timely interventions.

Even the monitoring of one risk indicator such as absenteeism, or a small set of indicators such as absenteeism and low performance, is already a powerful tool to identify learners at risk. Often education and training providers collect this information regularly. Authorities can have an important role in providing guidance to providers on how to analyse such data, and how to link the analysis to the development of measures for at-risk learners.

Currently, where monitoring data exist, they are being used to identify individuals at risk of or who have left education and training, and to provide overviews of performance of education institutions and possibly municipalities or regions. However, data appear to be rarely used to assess the effectiveness of measures to address ELET. This means that even if data allow identifying early leavers, they do not support evaluation of the measures in place. Unique student registers or identification numbers that allow following the learner through different education and training programmes and support measures, help collect

useful data for the evaluation of measures. For instance, such systems make it possible to analyse whether participants in different support measures have ultimately completed upper secondary education.

If monitoring systems to identify at-risk learners are to be useful in evaluation of measures they need to combine periodic data on risk indicators, information on the programmes attended by learners, and support measures applied. This would allow assessing if a particular measure has had the expected impact on risk factors, such as whether a measure focused on career guidance has led to better understanding of education options.

Volume II (Cedefop, 2016) analyses what indicators can be used to evaluate policies and measures to tackle early leaving to provide the right information to support policy decisions.

6.3. Collecting and analysing qualitative data on the causes of ELVET to inform policies and measures

Early leaving results from a variety of interacting factors. Many of these result from the way education and training is delivered within institutions, how programmes are structured and how the systems are set up. Others are linked to difficulties young people are facing outside education but which influence their engagement in learning. Understanding and addressing these factors should be at the core of policy responses to address early leaving.

This study provides an overview of factors leading to early leaving with an emphasis on those specifically associated with ELVET. However, the importance of each factor varies from one country to another and from one education provider context to another. National and regional authorities should further explore such factors in their territories.

Table 12 presents the type of information that can be collected to understand better the factors behind early leaving (the list is not exhaustive). Some of the aspects listed (level 1 in Table 12) have already been discussed as part of monitoring systems in general (see Table 11). These are often gathered in administrative data sets and include:

- (a) data on the sociodemographic characteristics of the learners such as gender and socioeconomic status of parents;
- (b) data related to the education and training system, on absenteeism, class repetition and education achievement.

There is also need for information on the reasons for dropping out. VET providers can record the reasons for dropout given by the learners themselves

through brief discussions or simple questionnaires (self-reported). These can be coded into relatively simple categories such as 'health condition', 'family responsibilities', or 'found a job' (see categories proposed in Table 12, level 2). However, some learners drop out without warning schools. Other services working with young people can help collecting data on the reasons for dropping out.

Deeper analysis of the factors linked to early leaving requires a step further in data collection. If a learner is dropping out because she or he does not like the programme, this can be a consequence of many different issues, such as a mismatch between the learner's expectations and the reality of the profession, a lack of family interest and support, or difficulties coping with tough working conditions (see categories proposed in Table 12, level 3).

Reaching the third level of detail in regular data collection is technically complex and costly at regional or national level (Psifidou, 2016b). The list of factors would be long and it would be difficult to ensure that the coding is done in the same way by different professionals. However, such an analysis at individual level is essential to understanding why a specific individual dropped out and what type of measures could help him or her come back to education and training. Designated persons at provider level, youth services (youth guidance centres), or specific services in charge of identifying and contacting early leavers, are best positioned for this.

Information on the reasons for dropout and the factors that lead to early leaving should feed into the design of policies and measures to tackle this phenomenon at different levels: to choose the type of support for an individual; to design and implement relevant measures at provider level; and to fund, design, implement measures at local, regional or national level.

Early leavers are a heterogeneous group and there is no one-size-fits-all solution. If policy-makers and measure designers and implementers have good knowledge of the characteristics of early leavers and the most common reasons for dropping out, they can use this to underpin the design of the measures. Volume II of the current research (Cedefop, 2016) shows that policies are more likely to succeed if they acknowledge the different factors that can influence early leaving, and are tailored to the different needs of people who have dropped out or are at risk of early leaving.

Table 12. Data for better understanding of early leaving

| | LEVEL 1 Information on factors often available in administrative data sets | LEVEL 2 Information on self-reported reasons for dropout | LEVEL 3 Detailed information on factors linked to early leaving |
|--|---|--|---|
| Factors related to the individual and his/her family background | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Gender ■ Socioeconomic status of parents ■ Migrant or ethnic minority background ⁽¹⁾ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Health and well-being issues or conditions ⁽²⁾ ■ Family responsibilities (e.g. taking care of siblings) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Family engagement and support |
| Factors related to the organisation of (vocational) education and training | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Absenteeism ■ Class repetition ■ Education achievement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Non-availability of work-based learning opportunities or apprenticeship placements ■ Disliked programme, VET provider, staff, or colleagues | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Student orientation (e.g. negative choice of VET programme) ■ Perception of the profession (mismatch of expectations on a profession and reality) ■ Negative self-perception of students linked to the negative image of VET ■ Programme content and organisation ■ Readiness to work ■ Relationships at workplace |
| Factors related to the labour market | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Attraction of the labour market (the learner found a job) ■ Overall economic context: financial problems in the family (the learner needed to earn money even if in a precarious job) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Working conditions |
| Other reasons for dropping out from a programme (not necessarily leading to early leaving) | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Change of country/region/city of residence ■ Change of education and training provider or programme | |

⁽¹⁾ In some countries there are restrictions on collecting data on migrant or ethnic minority background. In this case, there is a need for studies focused on certain populations.

⁽²⁾ Data on health issues or conditions are sensitive and need to be handled in full respect of data protection legislation. Also, learners may not feel comfortable sharing some of the information.

Source: Cedefop.