



Digital gap during COVID-19 for VET learners at risk in Europe

Summary of the Synthesis report based on preliminary information on seven countries provided by Cedefop’s Network of Ambassadors tackling early leaving from VET



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The COVID-19 pandemic has presented unique challenges to all types and levels of learning including vocational education and training (VET). An entire generation of VET learners could suffer severe disruption of their learning if continuity of distance learning is not ensured. This [Cedefop’s report](#), based on preliminary information collected from its network of ambassadors tackling early leaving from VET ([Ambassadors tackling early leaving from VET](#)), calls for a response that puts the needs of each VET student, during the global recovery of COVID-19, front and centre, specially of those who are at risk, such as students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, refugees, migrants and those from ethnic minorities, learners with disabilities and special educational needs.

Preliminary information collected from fourteen Ambassadors tackling early leaving from VET¹ contributed to the understanding of the challenges faced by learners at risk and their teachers and trainers during school closures and of the initiatives carried out to support them to respond to these challenges in seven countries (five EU countries: Germany, Greece, Portugal, Romania, Spain and two non-EU countries: United Kingdom and Turkey²). Some of these initiatives arise from the national context, while others focus on a VET institution, as valuable examples of how the education community is addressing this enormous challenge that equally affects learners, teachers and trainers Europe-wide.

All mentioned countries are aiming, to a different extent, to ensure learning continuity for all VET learners and apprentices by carrying out certain initiatives to support them, presented in Box 1.

1 Acknowledgements to the following Cedefop’s ambassadors for tackling early leaving from VET: Schiffers Reinhold (Germany), Sofia Arvanitidou (Greece), Terpsi Danavassi (Greece), Theodora Gkeniou (Greece), Maria Manuel Casal Ribeiro (Portugal), Hélia Moura (Portugal), Ana Ribeiro (Portugal), Gabriela Neagu (Romania), Juan Bosco Camón Herrero (Spain), Fernando Marhuenda (Spain), José María Usón Claver (Spain), Abdi Kurt (Turkey), Stavroula Bibila (United Kingdom) and Russell Hogarth (United Kingdom).

2 The information provided on Turkey is a joint work with the European Training Foundation (ETF). For more information on this country see ETF report: *Coping with Covid-19. Mapping education and training responses to the health crisis in ETF partner countries*. Available here: https://www.etf.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2020-05/mapping_covid_180520.pdf



Box 1. Initiatives to support learners at risk.

What activities are carried out to support learners at risk?

Ensuring access to distance education with the free provision of the necessary equipment and free unlimited internet connection



Translating material into different languages spoken by ethnic minorities and refugees, including sign language for hearing impaired students



Offering training opportunities to learners on digital skills and competences



Monitoring learners' engagement in online classes



Providing individualised distance support to learners at risk and their parents, in both academic and mental health aspects

Source: *Cedefop*.

Equal access to distance learning is important for all VET learners, but especially for those most vulnerable that either belong to socioeconomic disadvantaged groups or are students with disabilities. Additionally, translating material is crucial for learners at risk, especially for ethnic minorities and those with disabilities, when guidelines on how to protect themselves and how to access distance education are often not in a language that they can understand. Training on digital skills and competences must be considered, since unfortunately not all students have equal skills, resources or opportunities to participate in distance and e-learning. Finally, monitoring learners' engagement and providing individualised and psychological support are key during this global crisis that has amplified and reinforced the digital, social, emotional, cultural and economic inequalities that many VET students and their families were already facing.

With the current global crisis caused by COVID-19 and the school closure, learning continuity may only be ensured thanks to teachers and trainers' digital skills, flexibility and creativity to develop and use creative solutions with online resources. Unfortunately, not all VET teachers and trainers are equally prepared. In a profession exercised predominantly in its traditional format, where personal interactivity and proximity are essential, social distancing certainly poses new roles and challenges for VET teachers and trainers. The online learning environments require them to demonstrate high quality digital delivery skills and confidence in using web conferencing solutions. They also need to be vigilant for increased cyberbullying and protect their students from disconnecting from the "real world" paying attention to their time spent online. VET trainers also need to engage with employers and social partners to share their material online or to produce new digital learning tools.



Cedefop's ambassadors tackling early leaving from VET referred to some of the challenges that VET teachers and trainers are facing while converting physical classrooms into digital learning environments overnight presented in Box 2.

Box 2. Challenges faced by VET teachers and trainers.

What challenges are VET teachers and trainers facing?



Absence of access to equipment and internet connection required to offer distance learning



Lack of digital skills and competences to make efficient use of the platforms



Poor experience in creating digital teaching content



Lack of experience on e-learning and other distance learning effective pedagogies in VET, especially for teaching practical components



Concerns over privacy issues, copyright and data protection

Source: *Cedefop*.

During the pandemic, digital delivery, which allows offering professional learning opportunities online for teachers and trainers, has become the norm. Although this approach offers flexibility in terms of time and place, and during the health crisis, it has been the only possibility, it is still a novelty with unknown effects. In the current circumstances, online modules for equipping VET teachers and trainers with digital skills are necessary, as well with the necessary digital devices. Cedefop's ambassadors tackling early leaving from VET shared a variety of initiatives carried out to support VET teachers and trainers to face the challenges previously mentioned (see Box 3).



Box 3. Initiatives to support VET teachers and trainers.

What activities are carried out to support VET teachers and trainers?

Online training modules on digital skills and e-learning pedagogies



Equipping VET schools with the necessary digital devices



Caring for VET teachers and trainers' wellbeing.

Source: *Cedefop*.

Key messages

1. Further support is needed to address the needs of learners at risk ensuring their equal access to quality distance learning. The current crisis has shown that there is no digital inclusion without social inclusion. Marginalised and vulnerable learners are less likely to be involved in distance learning procedures. The report also points out that learners at risk disconnect for a longer period and may eventually drop out of their VET programme. These preliminary conclusions raise awareness on the need to develop further the digital competences of teachers and trainers, promoting their participation in continuous professional development, facilitating their mobility, involving them in future policy design and fostering their wellbeing. Prior to the pandemic, the majority of the European countries had made an impressive progress in lowering the rates of early leaving from education and training. This progress should be sustained in the post COVID-19 era.
2. Teachers and trainers are struggling to meet the new demands imposed on them and to overcome the new challenges that they now must face, and they need more than ever empathy, support, and greater investment and opportunities for their continuous professional development. While COVID-19 is pressuring our society to change, creating new challenges and roles for VET teachers and trainers pressures their wellbeing, which is crucial as an outcome itself and to other vital outcomes, such as students' learning and wellbeing. VET leaders - both school leaders and in-company immediate supervisors - may have an important role to play caring for VET teachers and trainers' wellbeing.
3. The toolkit for talking early leaving of Cedefop ([VET toolkit for tackling early leaving](#)) has never been so important in supporting policy makers and VET practitioners to prevent this from happening. The toolkit provides intervention approaches helping VET schools to develop inclusive learning environments and effective pedagogies, including through technology that meets the needs of learners at risk, as well as investing in counselling and support for learners at risk and their families.



4. Cedefop will continue work in this field to support the European Commission, Member States and social partners to implement the newly adopted Council Conclusions on European teachers and trainers for the future ([European Council, 25 May 2020](#)) recognising teachers and trainers as an indispensable driving force of education and training and acknowledging their commitment during the present COVID-19 crisis.
5. Cedefop's forthcoming [survey on VET principals, teachers, trainers and learners](#) will bring more insights in all these areas to support evidence-based policy making in Europe.

You may access the full report in English [here](#).



VET toolkit for
tackling early
leaving



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