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EARLY LEAVING FROM VET: PUTTING THE ROLE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES CENTRE STAGE

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Lauren and Martin from Ireland, Darius from Romania and Nicole from Austria have all something in common: they left school before completing upper secondary education. While million other young Europeans who experienced a drop out event in their lives remained early leavers¹, these youngsters continued their studies and found a job thanks to local support. The role of local authorities is tremendously important for identifying early leavers, guiding them back to education and training and helping them to graduate. The same is true for preventing learners to abandon their studies.

Thanks to the policy initiatives undertaken over the last decades across Europe and the collaboration of national, regional and local governments, the number of young people leaving education and training too early had fallen from 6 million in 2010 to 4.4 million in 2014. This is significant progress towards the Europe 2020 target. Actually, the latest data shows

¹ The European commission defines as early leavers 'those young people who leave education and training with only lower secondary education or less, and who are no longer in education and training'

that the fight against early leaving is one of the most successful areas of interventions of the strategic framework 2020. However, the severity of this problem differs greatly among countries with Spain, Malta and Portugal suffering the most.

But why leaving education early matters?

Let me present some facts.

The largest falls in employment rates since the beginning of the economic crisis in 2008 affected persons with at most a lower secondary education. More than half of the 12 million long-term unemployed today are low-educated. Moreover, employees with a low level of education are almost five times more likely to be low-wage earners than those with a high level of education.

So the question remains, how can we make further progress?

Further progress can be achieved only through a better understanding of the phenomenon and more active and tailored policies targeted on those most at risk of early leaving. It is well known, for instance, that migrants and disadvantaged people with low socioeconomic status are at greater risk to leave education early. But also learners who may not find an apprenticeship placement to continue their VET programme, or they don't find interesting their studies and don't see any job prospects may decide to drop out.

Cedefop within its broader mission to promote lifelong learning through vocational education and training in Europe in its 4-year research project examines the role of VET for breaking the

vicious cycle of early leaving, unemployment and social exclusion. In other words, it seeks to analyse how VET may prevent learners to drop out and how can re-engage to education and training those who have already left.

Let me outline some **findings of the project**.

On the one hand, VET is part of the problem as increases dropout rates. Data available in some countries shows that early leaving is more common in VET programmes rather than general education. On the other hand, VET is a solution to the problem. Cedefop research shows that one third of early leavers eventually return to education, and the majority of them acquire a VET qualification. In other words, clearly VET programmes may attract early leavers back to education and training increasing educational completion. Also, many learners at risk of dropping out continue their studies, as they are given the option to shift from a non-engaging academic track to a more practical and relevant VET programme. So VET may also prevent early leaving.

It is true that so far the problem of early leaving attracted much attention in general education rather than VET. Cedefop seeks to answer many questions that had remained unanswered.

Today, I will talk about two of them:

1. What are the key features of effective measures to tackle early leaving?

2. What are the conditions for mainstreaming successfully local projects and initiatives to national policies and programmes?

To both questions, the role of local authorities has been proved key to success of an intervention.

What role local authorities assume to tackle early leaving?

I would like to highlight in particular 3 different but complementary roles of local authorities:

- 1. Contributing to developing comprehensive data collection and monitoring systems**

Detecting early the distress signs of learners at risk of dropping out is vital to prevent early leaving. If these signs are identified timely, there are more chances of reengaging young people with relatively simple interventions and, therefore, it is possible to get better results with fewer resources. Once learners drop out, the longer they stay outside education and training, the more difficult it will be to go back, and the higher the chances to be involved in other activities, such as low-wage employment. This explains why 60% of early leavers are inactive or unemployed.

Identifying timely learners at risk of dropping out and reaching out to those who have already left requires well developed data collection and monitoring systems and the synchronisation of efforts made at all levels.

To give you an example of good practice:

- **In France**, one of the challenges in the fight against early leaving was the number of measures coexisting locally with little or no connection between them. The solution was a new monitoring system of early leavers comprising regional platforms responsible for following and supporting young people who left general education or VET without a qualification. These platforms not only allow the authorities to coordinate measures regionally and make sure they complement each other; they also offer an opportunity to exchange experiences. The monitoring activities proved to play a pivotal role both in raising awareness for the problems linked to early leaving and in mobilising all actors.

2. Acting as agents of change and boosting policy learning and communities of practice

Change agents are people who have the capacity to introduce change locally; these may be local authorities, education and training providers, NGOs, guidance centres or other actors.

To give you an example of good practice:

- **In Germany**, QuABB a project aiming for capacity building to students, companies and vocational schools involved in apprenticeship-training was originally introduced in December 2008 in 4 regions (administrative districts) and mainstreamed in Hessen since mid-2015. It covers 116 VET schools including all fields of dual vocational training. The overarching goal is to reduce the number of contract dissolutions for apprenticeship-based VET, which lead to early leaving from education and training. One of the key features for its success has been the cooperation of various stakeholders and the support of local authorities. Local authorities have contributed to financing part of the project (co-financed by ESF and national funds) as well as developing and implementing it

locally. Thanks to the collaboration of local authorities, QuABB has managed to provide more tailored and faster services, and become a successful initiative with a high reputation across Germany.

3. Ensuring policy commitment over time

A high level of commitment by policy makers both at national and local levels is crucial to ensuring sustainability of good practices over time. One of the lessons learned from Cedefop's project is that it takes time for local innovative initiatives to be evaluated, upscaled and eventually turned into larger scale programmes. Long-term support secures the commitment of staff working on the ground and allows them to develop their working methods as they gather experience.

Nevertheless, as of today, many successful initiatives have neither aroused attention nor found a market beyond their local context. What prevented practitioners in other places reaping their benefits is often the lack of policy commitment to transfer successful practices and make them work in different settings. Contrary, where policy commitment is strong, the success is reassured. The example of the country hosting this event today, is the most appropriate to illustrate here.

- **In the Netherlands**, under *the* “The drive to reduce drop-out (since 2012, ‘ELET-approach’), the Ministry of culture, education and science gives data on dropout rates via yearly and monthly reports to schools and municipalities. This has increased awareness among schools and municipalities on the need to reduce early leaving. Regional cooperation (both municipalities and schools) based on the ‘covenant’ agreement has contributed to the sense of

urgency and responsibility to jointly tackle this problem. The Ministry has a total annual budget of approximate 110 million euros secured until the end of 2020 including provision of regional resources and a performance incentive for both general secondary education and VET.

What are the remaining challenges?

1. To obtain conclusive evaluations on what works and why

A persistent challenge in Europe remains the absence of policy impact evaluation. From the 350 measures examined by Cedefop only 44 had some evidence of success. Often evaluations do not measure the ultimate effect of a policy on retention and qualification attainment, which can serve to inform policy making. In other cases, the indicators used are not understandable by local authorities or the conclusions reached are not communicated to them. Evidence on success is crucial to informing policies, putting in place funding arrangements, and helping build the necessary capacities.

This is where we could see a stronger role of local authorities on one hand to contribute to the collection of data, and on the other hand, to its analysis and follow up actions.

2. To empower the role of local authorities

National policies provide the framework, but the regional and local levels are where strong partnerships between the

education and training sector, social partners, employment services, youth and social workers can support learners, vocational schools and companies to help more young people acquire not only a qualification but the right qualification for them to be employable.

Cedefop will continue supporting Member States in this field and will launch in 2017 an electronic toolkit populated by guidelines, good examples of practice and tools to address early leaving for policy-makers, professionals at provider level and policy evaluators.

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