

**BRIEFING NOTE**

# Vocational education and training prevents and counteracts early leaving from the education system

New findings shed light on the role vocational education and training plays in attracting, retaining and reintegrating young people with different abilities and learning backgrounds

It is well known that young people facing learning difficulty or failure, or belonging to vulnerable groups, such as migrants, are often pointed towards vocational education and training (VET) pathways. These include programmes for low performers and for pupils who prefer non-academic learning; they offer many young people a (second) chance to obtain a labour-market-relevant qualification <sup>(1)</sup>.

Much less is known, however, about young leavers' individual trajectories. What type of education/training programme have they left? Why? How many of them return to education? How many chose vocational education and training as a second chance option? And how many graduate eventually? So far, European statistics have only allowed for a quantification of the overall phenomenon, neither distinguishing between early leaving from general and from vocational education, nor breaking early leavers down into categories <sup>(2)</sup>. To close these gaps, Cedefop launched a four-year project in 2013, analysing secondary data from the OECD's programme for the international assessment of adult competences (PIAAC) and Eurostat's labour force and adult education surveys, as well as primary data collected from selected countries <sup>(3)</sup>. The results of the project are expected to

provide a more differentiated basis for policy-making, be it in prevention, intervention or compensation measures to address early leaving from education and training.

**Box 1. Tackling early leaving from education and training in Europe: strategies, policies and measures**



This joint Eurydice/Cedefop report looks at how policies to combat early leaving from education and training and support student learning have been designed and implemented in recent years across the EU. It focuses on the role of vocational education and training, career guidance, governance and cross-sector cooperation, and presents examples of best practice.

## More evidence – New insights

### Vocational education and training programmes accommodate large numbers of returning learners

Learners who make a second education choice, because they have either dropped out of (general or vocational) education or decided to change their learning pathway, often end up in vocational education and training. One third of those who have experienced dropout at upper secondary level subsequently take up a vocational training programme and ultimately obtain an upper or even post-secondary level qualification.

<sup>(1)</sup> *Keeping young people in (vocational) education: what works?* Cedefop briefing note; No 9084, December 2013.

<sup>(2)</sup> Meaningful categories of early leavers could be: non-starters (who have never taken up upper secondary VET), dropouts (who failed to complete a programme), and non-qualified learners (who have completed a programme without obtaining a qualification).

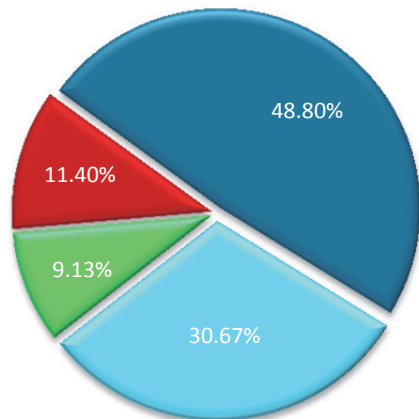
<sup>(3)</sup> The first year of this research was coordinated with Eurydice's work on early leaving from school and led to the publication of a joint report in autumn 2014: *Tackling early leaving from education and training: strategies, policies and measures* (Box 1).

This shows how important it is for vocational education and training programmes to be adapted to returning learners' needs (to ensure they do not drop out again): such programmes must lead to formal qualifications or provide a preparatory path to mainstream tracks. These requirements have been taken on board by countries such as Portugal, which designed new vocational courses for young adults who have abandoned their education or training and now wish to return. In France and Norway, validation of non-formal and informal prior learning is promoted as an individual right to help returning learners find appropriate learning solutions to aid reintegration.

**High participation in (and high graduation rates from) vocational education and training are associated with low numbers of early leavers**

Cedefop's analysis shows that eight of the nine EU Member States with the high enrolment rates in vocational education and training have low early leaving rates (below the EU target). The opposite does not hold, however: the 11 Member States with low enrolment rates in vocational education and training are divided in two halves: six have high early leaving rates, while five have low rates. This can be explained by the fact that a young person's decision to leave education and training is influenced by several individual, labour market and organisational factors and not only by education-related motives.

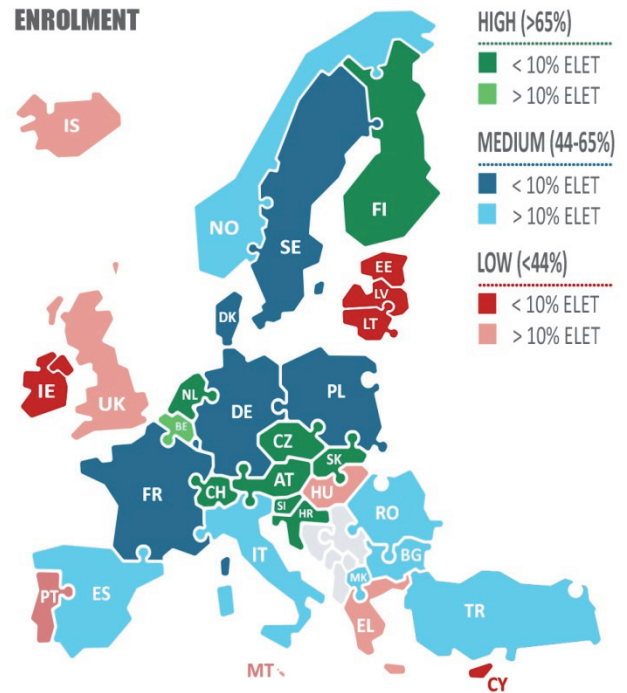
Figure 1. Share of young people (16 to 34) who have dropped out of secondary education and subsequently attained an upper secondary level qualification through VET



- Early leaver and dropout at ISCED 3
- Dropout from ISCED 3 and achieved ISCED 3 or 4 through VET
- Dropout from ISCED 3 and achieved ISCED 3 or 4 through general education
- Dropout from ISCED 3 and achieved ISCED 5 or above (\*)

(\*) The question about VET orientation was not asked.  
Source: Cedefop calculations based on PIAAC.

Figure 2. Comparing early leaving rates (labour force survey, 2013) and enrolment in VET at upper secondary level (2011)



NB: ELET: early leaving from education and training.  
Source: Cedefop calculations based on UOE data and LFS.

**One third of early leavers eventually completes a vocational education or training programme**

Cedefop's analysis shows that more than half of the young people who drop out of school (51.2%)<sup>(4)</sup> eventually complete education at upper secondary level or above. Out of these, two thirds do so through vocational education and training. It allows them to acquire a qualification while gaining valuable workplace skills and experience. This is particularly attractive for young people who prefer a swift transition from learning to 'earning', and for returning learners who do not want or cannot afford to lose income while in formal learning.

**Apprenticeships may have a positive effect on reducing early leaving**

Cedefop's analysis suggests that countries with a high incidence of apprenticeships tend to have lower numbers of early leavers. The opposite is not necessarily true, however. Apprenticeships have strong motivational potential to retain young people, as they engage them in a real working process, enabling them to construct a meaningful vision of their

(4) This comprises early leavers from both general and vocational education.

learning and future. Those who prefer less theoretical forms of learning benefit from the more ‘hands-on’ approach. For learners from disadvantaged groups who may not be able to afford learning without earning, apprenticeships offer a way to combine both. Positive working relationships and the valorisation of their work by other employees can contribute fundamentally to young people’s self-esteem.

### Pedagogies specific to vocational education and training are particularly attractive to returners

Work-based learning and other learner-centred pedagogies, such as company visits and practical learning in workshops, often appeal to non-academic learners who may be especially motivated by practical assignments. These pedagogies are a key feature of many policies designed to tackle early leaving and are frequently applied in reintegration and time-out programmes <sup>(5)</sup>. Examples include a Dutch VET

programme in ICT, which relies on a comprehensive learner motivation and support system, and the ‘waterhole pedagogy’ used in Denmark, which has reportedly resulted in a dropout rate (21%) well below the average rate (28%) for basic courses. These examples show that both the quality of teaching and close follow-up of participants are paramount for keeping learners aboard.

### More comprehensive and comparable data to inform future policy design

Both European and national datasets on early leavers from and returners to vocational education and training are being enriched. The aim is to obtain more quantitative and qualitative data on leaver and returner numbers, their individual motives and their trajectories.

#### Collecting data on individuals’ trajectories

Several countries (including DK, FR, NL) have developed approaches that enable them to monitor individuals’ trajectories from one educational track to another. This gives policy-makers a tool to differentiate between those leaving education and training altogether and those who simply switch programmes (such as from general education to vocational education and training).

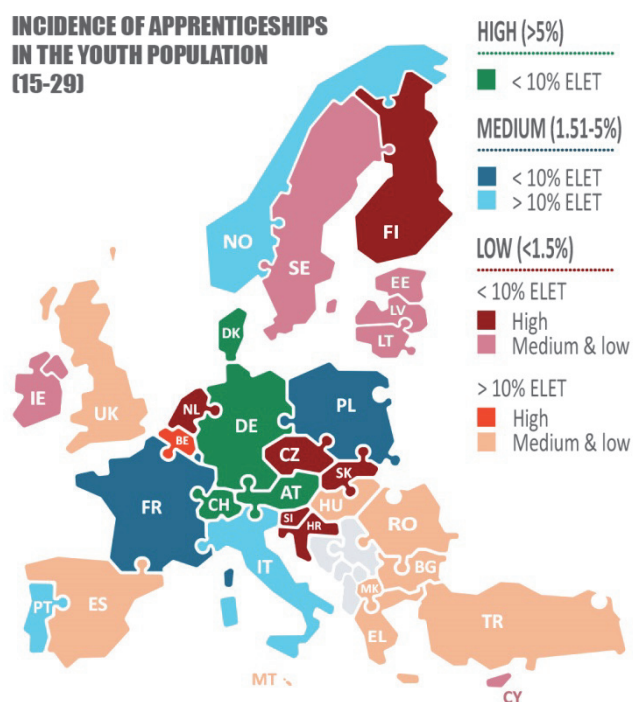
Some countries (including BE (Wallonia), DK, FR) have established systems to collect data from training providers, providers of remedial measures, and local or regional authorities. These datasets on individuals’ learning careers are used to reach out to them personally if needed and to help them to alternative education or training solutions.

It falls to the European Commission and Cedefop to disseminate promising practices and to foster peer learning across Europe.

#### Tapping the potential of vocational education and training at European level

Recognising the benefits of vocational education and training, the European Union set itself the goal, in its Europe 2020 strategy, to lower the rate of early leaving from education and training to less than 10% by 2020. According to Eurostat data, the mid-term results are encouraging; the European average decreased from 17% in 2002 to 11.1% in 2014 <sup>(6)</sup>. At

Figure 3 . Comparison between rate of early leaving (labour force survey, 2013) and incidence of apprenticeships



The reference study did not contain data on participation in apprenticeships for EE, CZ, LT, SL, SK, and for CH and NO. Instead, the rating value was based on ReferNet description of national VET systems and, for the latter two, on national data.

Source: Ecorys, IES and IRS (2014).

<sup>(5)</sup> A new Cedefop study looks into how learner-centred pedagogies can contribute to reducing dropout numbers: *Vocational pedagogies and benefits for learners: practices and challenges in Europe*: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/5547>

<sup>(6)</sup> Following the Bruges communiqué, countries have devised a range of measures to prevent and tackle early leaving through VET.

**Box 2. Obtaining comparable data across the EU – a conundrum**

European national and regional approaches to data collection and monitoring differ considerably: 15 of the 36 European countries participating in the European education and training 2020 strategy use administrative data sets (school-reported cohort data or student registers) to develop indicators on early leaving from education and training. These national data, however, are not comparable across countries as they differ in several ways, including coverage of different programmes, fields of education, regions and attainment levels. Further, while the EU indicator limits early leavers to a particular age group (18 to 24), national definitions are typically not limited by age; instead, age coverage reflects the national context with respect to participation in upper secondary education. Some countries (such as DE and NL) also measure apprenticeship completion through student registers. However, in several countries (including AT, BE, DE) data on apprenticeships are collected through channels other than for school-based education and training data. These do not capture early leaving but contract dissolution rates. These differences in measurement impede comparison between school-level data and data from the apprenticeship system.

the same time, the EU has recognised the remedial potential of vocational education and training in its youth employment Initiative <sup>(7)</sup>: it encourages Member States to set up youth guarantee schemes <sup>(8)</sup>, which help young people who are not in education, training or employment (NEET) to take on a training programme (including apprenticeship) or a traineeship, or to call on support for finding a job matching their skills.

**Improving the quality of vocational education and training**

Most national policies adopted across Europe for tackling early leaving from education and training aim to improve the quality of VET to make it relevant and attractive to individuals with very different learning biographies. Cedefop has identified 20 countries which have put in place specific vocational education and training measures to tackle the problem of early leaving; another 11 countries apply measures bearing some vocational/practical features to broader target groups (such as within general education).

<sup>(7)</sup> <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:52013DC0144>

<sup>(8)</sup> Council recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a youth guarantee, *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 120, 26.4.2013.

**Evaluating the impact of policies**

Few countries in Europe have yet evaluated the impact of implemented policies. Cedefop will continue its research in this field to develop indicators measuring the success of implemented policies and to identify conditions for policy transfer across countries and systems. Such indicators will aim at strengthening the coherence and compatibility of national data collection mechanisms in education and training, and at developing student registers allowing follow-up of student trajectories.

**The way forward**

Collecting and analysing more information on young people's individual motives, choices and trajectories will be a priority for the coming years. It will be essential to designing targeted and effective work-related training policies to prevent and tackle early leaving from education and training and to mitigate the huge human and social cost this incurs.

For more information please see project website:

<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/early-leaving-education-and-training>


**CEDEFOP**

 European Centre for the Development  
of Vocational Training

**Briefing note – 9101 EN**

Cat. No: TI-BB-15-005-EN-N

ISBN 978-92-896-1778-9, doi: 10.2801/135703

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