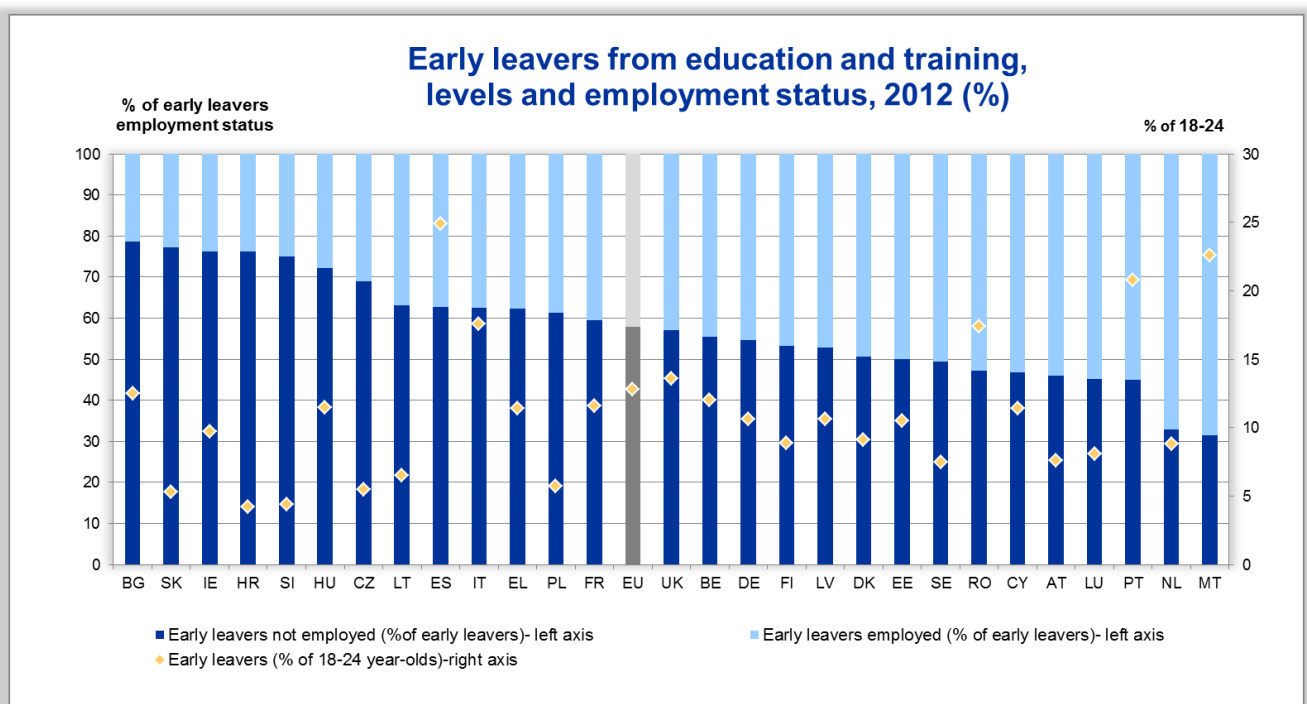


BRIEFING NOTE

Keeping young people in (vocational) education: what works?

Too many young people leave education (including vocational education) too soon. Yet early leavers are at greater risk of long-term unemployment, poverty and crime, and now cost the European economy 1.25% of GDP. Can this flow be staunched?



Source: Eurostat, labour force survey (extracted on 5.11.2013).

Who are the early leavers?

As they stand, early leaving rates across the EU are not strictly comparable.

- Not all countries end compulsory education at the same age; this varies between 15 and 18.
- For international comparisons, national statistics follow the Eurostat definition (18 to 24 year-olds who have completed only ISCED levels 2 and 3C, have no other qualifications, and have not been in education and training within the past four

weeks). But countries' own definitions and concepts of early leaving and dropout vary.

- Inconsistencies can arise even within a country. An apprentice, for instance, may be considered a learner in some contexts and an employee in others.
- In some countries, those who leave a vocational programme may count as dropouts even if they join another programme.

- Current statistics do not reveal whether early leavers return to education or training later, or as adults.
- The structure of vocational education may affect how dropouts are counted ⁽¹⁾.
- European statistics do not distinguish between those leaving vocational and general streams, though some national statistics do.

What is well-established across Europe is the **social profile** of those most likely to leave education early. Early leavers are more likely to be male, of lower socioeconomic status and belong to vulnerable social groups (such as migrants), or have learning difficulties.

Vocational education offers a very wide range of fields and tends to attract students who prefer non-academic learning. For these reasons, it can help to reintegrate school-leavers into education. Yet this very variety and greater inclusiveness of VET – which, unlike general education, includes programmes open to low performers – is also what makes dropout more likely. Comparisons between largely homogeneous learners in general education and very heterogeneous vocational stream learners are therefore likely to be misleading.

Why do young people leave VET early?

There is no single reason. Young people may start a programme but decide to leave when they realise it was not the right choice – the type/level of programme or the occupation does not suit them – or for other reasons. At this stage, they also need guidance to help them decide their next step. Without good guidance, early leaving can also be triggered by temporary obstacles.

In fact, **labour market features** may affect the rate of early leaving from education and training in several ways. If plentiful jobs are available at a

low qualification level, leaving education early may seem to make economic sense. But such jobs are becoming scarcer ⁽²⁾; moreover, in the current crisis people with low qualifications are more likely to be unemployed ⁽³⁾.

Salaries may not be significantly higher for those holding a qualification ⁽⁴⁾. In the rising service sector, jobs tend to be less regulated and thus offer less incentive to pursue a VET qualification. Employers may offer apprentices jobs before completion of training; or people may simply drop out of a vocational programme and emigrate if an unqualified job abroad has higher economic dividends than a qualified one at home.

What measures are countries taking?

- Cedefop has found there is not enough information on whether countries are succeeding in keeping students in vocational education and training. Some countries, like the Netherlands, register learners and follow them closely; most, however, do not collect such data.
- Several countries have introduced bridge programmes that embrace career management skills as one of their key features. These often give young people the chance to acquire or update key competences. Together with basic skills training, work placements, coaching and mentoring, bridge programmes form 'packages' aimed at reducing early leaving. They may also provide a link between formal and non-formal/informal learning (validation). In addition, they may assess students' skills at the beginning of the programme itself, and validate non-formal or informal learning.
- To help young people choose suitable education and training and career paths, countries have started to integrate work-

⁽²⁾ Skills forecast.

⁽³⁾ Briefing note October 2013.

⁽⁴⁾ The Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia, where salaries are higher for those holding qualifications, also register high employment among those with such qualifications. In Latvia, high demand coexists with high unemployment for the same occupations; this can be attributed to low wages.

⁽¹⁾ In Germany and Austria, finding a work placement precedes joining apprenticeship training, while in Norway placements follow school-based education. As a result, those who fail to find a work placement in Norway are counted as dropouts.

tasters and career management skills in compulsory education curricula and reinforced guidance activities. Most countries have also reinforced guidance, coaching and multiprofessional support (teams of teachers, counsellors, psychologists, social workers, etc.) within VET.

- Alternative routes within mainstream VET provide options for early leavers and those at risk of dropping out. In some cases, options originally designed as exceptional or 'safety' measures are now included in VET legislation or are part of the 'Youth guarantee' (such as Austria).

Box 1 **Examples of measures that help early leavers acquire a qualification**

France: noting the scattered measures taken against early leaving, France's new education legislation of July 2013 makes it obligatory for the State to allow every young person to study until they have achieved an ISCED 3 qualification. Those who leave education and training without a qualification now have the right to get differentiated training.

Lithuania: amendments to legislation make young people under 29 eligible for support through subsidies to employers. These provide jobs and training for the unemployed and tax incentives for employers. Grants are also offered to students as an incentive to stay in VET. Lithuania is also emphasising validation: formal vocational education recognises practical work-based training, and previous learning/experience can lead to a VET qualification.

In the **Czech Republic**, some companies form partnerships with schools and offer financial support to learners. The latter can get a job at their level of qualification provided they enter a contract with the company for a certain period. This may be offered on condition that learners successfully complete their training.

- Many countries pay special attention to learners from migrant backgrounds in VET, by emphasising language learning alongside other key competences and vocational skills.
- Almost all countries have taken steps to modularise VET so that learners can acquire a qualification more flexibly. But the value of partial qualifications on the labour market is not always clear.
- Work-based learning or apprenticeships have been either introduced or amended to attract young people who may otherwise discontinue their education (such as Spain and Cyprus). Also, services are offered to 'match' companies and learners (such as the UK).
- For fields with skills shortages, some countries offer financial incentives to learners to stay in VET or link such incentives to learners' presence and performance (such as Hungary and Lithuania).

Considerations for policy-makers

Keeping people in (vocational) education is not an issue only for VET itself. It also depends on wider labour market and social welfare issues: initial salary policy, employer participation, access to professions, perceived value of qualifications, and the range of guidance services available to students.

Getting enterprises on board

One way to make VET attractive to young people is to make sure graduates have a job prospect. For this reason, many countries offer employers financial incentives to provide training places. These may include subsidies to cover apprentice wages, part of employers' social security contributions, and tax incentives, or a combination thereof.

Policy-makers can also encourage partnerships between vocational schools and companies. Local and regional authorities should closely follow up both financial measures and partnerships to make sure they are effective. But all such measures should be easy to implement: in providing training, employers cite 'bureaucracy' as a bigger disincentive than money.

Vocational teachers and apprenticeship trainers also need support structures to allow them to work effectively with young people in need of individual assistance.

Value of qualifications

To be of value to learners, qualifications acquired in alternative measures or youth guarantee schemes must have value for employers and (other) education and training institutions. Apprenticeships and similar work-based learning schemes should lead to qualifications included in **the national qualifications framework** – whether they are part of active labour market measures or formal vocational education and training.

Ensuring quality

While the VET system cannot guarantee a job, it must at least guarantee that qualifications issued are trusted by the labour market. This largely hinges on whether a qualification is seen as ensuring quality of learning outcomes. School-based VET and apprenticeship schemes should therefore adopt a comprehensive quality approach and **include clear performance indicators**, with cooperation of social partners. In Finland, for example, a certain share of financial support to schools depends on the rate of successful completion of programmes. Some countries also provide bonuses to companies for successful training.

Validation

Validation of non-formal and informal learning can help people acquire VET qualifications. This will not only help them get a job but also offer new educational prospects. Portugal has been very successful in lowering its high early-leaving rate considerably thanks to its use of validation.

Evidence shows that VET, employment and social policies need to complement one another. 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 the right qualifications.

Cedefop monitors progress towards the goals of the Bruges communiqué on enhanced European cooperation on VET. The next report is due in 2014. This information is based on ReferNet articles on Early leaving from vocational education and training (forthcoming) and their contributions to the Bruges communiqué.



CEDEFOP

European Centre for the Development
of Vocational Training

Briefing note – 9084 EN
Cat. No: TI-BB-13-010-EN-N
ISBN 978-92-896-1426-9, doi: 10.2801/53534
Copyright © European Centre for the Development of Vocational
Training (Cedefop), 2013
All rights reserved.

Briefing notes are published in English, French, German, Greek, Italian
Polish, Portuguese and Spanish, and the EU Presidency country's
language. To receive them regularly e-mail us at:
briefingnotes@cedefop.europa.eu

Other briefing notes and Cedefop publications are at:
<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications.aspx>

P.O. Box 22427, 55102 Thessaloniki, Greece
Europe 123, Thessaloniki, Greece
Tel. +30 2310490111, Fax +30 2310490020
E-mail: info@cedefop.europa.eu

visit our portal www.cedefop.europa.eu