EQAVET
European Quality Assurance
in Vocational Education and Training

Supporting the implementation of the
European Quality Assurance Reference Framework
for Vocational Education and Training

**Background Paper for the EQAVET Peer Learning Activity
REDUCING EARLY LEAVING IN VET – THE ROLE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE**

INTRODUCTION

1. The peer learning activity (PLA) in Helsinki is part of EQAVET's 2013 - 2015 work programme and has been organised in response to requests from National Reference Points. The PLA reflects the growing awareness that vocational education and training (VET) only contributes to reducing early school leaving (ESL) if learners complete their VET programme. In this context it is important to look at the contribution that quality assurance makes to reducing the early leaving rates in VET.

2. The Network of Experts in Social Sciences of Education and Training's 2010 report[1] for the European Commission defined ESL as the percentage of the population aged 18-24 with at most lower secondary education and not in further education or training.[2] This report also comments that individuals who leave school early are more likely to be unemployed; to be in precarious and low-paid jobs; to draw on welfare and other social programmes throughout their lives; and to encounter difficulties in gaining a place in vocational training. They are much less likely to be 'active citizens' and become involved in lifelong learning. ESL generates very large 'social' costs (ESL has been shown to lead to social breakdown, increased demands on the health system and lower social cohesion). ESL is a tremendous waste of potential, for individuals, society and economic development.

3. There is an extensive body of research at a European level on the importance role that VET plays in providing one of the solutions to high levels of ESL. Much of this research is summarised by the European Commission's report from the Thematic Working Group on Early School Leaving[3]. This report identified twelve policy messages to reduce ESL:
   - ensure long-term political and financial commitment to reducing ESL and keep it high on the political agenda;

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[1] Early School Leaving, Lessons from research for policy makers, NESSE, 2010, http://www.nesse.fr/nesse/activities/reports

[2] The Eurydice and Cedefop 2014 research report uses a similar definition, though it distinguishes between early school leavers and 'drop outs' from the formal education system. (*Tackling Early Leaving from Education and Training in Europe: Strategies, Policies and Measures*) http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news-and-press/news/tackling-early-leaving-education-and-training-europe-strategies-policies-and

[3] http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/early-school-leavers_en.htm

- ensure children and young people are at the centre of all policies aimed at reducing ESL. Ensure their voices are taken into account when developing and implementing such policies;
- develop and implement a sustainable national strategy to reduce ESL. This strategy should address all levels of education and training and encompass the right mixture of preventative, intervention and compensation measures;
- invest in the knowledge base of ESL, through regular and timely collection of accurate data and information. Ensure that data and information on ESL is accessible and used effectively in policy development. Ensure that the monitoring and evaluation of ESL measures steers policy development;
- ensure policy development and implementation is based on strong, long-term cooperation between national, regional/ local authorities and stakeholders, as well as between different policies, through for example establishing a coordinating body;
- remove obstacles within the school education system that may hinder young people in completing upper secondary education. Ensure smooth transition between different levels of education. Ensure access to high quality education throughout life (including early childhood education and care), and the provision of high quality VET;
- support schools to develop conducive and supportive learning environments that focus on the needs of individual pupils. Promote a curriculum that is relevant and engaging;
- promote and support multi-professional teams in schools to address ESL;
- support cooperation between schools, local communities, parents and pupils in school development and in initiatives to reduce ESL. Promote strong commitment from all stakeholders in efforts to reduce ESL at local levels, including local businesses;
- promote a better understanding of ESL in initial education and continuous professional development for all school staff, especially teachers. Enable staff to provide differentiated learning support for pupils in an inclusive and individualised way;
- strengthen guidance to ensure young people are aware of the different study options and employment prospects available to them. Ensure counselling systems provide young people with both emotional and practical support;
- reinforce accessibility to second chance schemes for all young people. Make second chance schemes distinctive and ensure they provide a positive learning experience. Support teachers who work in second chance schemes in their specific role.

4. In many countries it is clear that VET is part of the policy solutions for ESL. However VET cannot play its part in providing a solution if learners fail to complete a VET programme. Even though the Thematic Working Group focussed on ESL, their policy messages may be valuable in helping to reduce early VET leaving.

5. VET provides a different type of learning experience to schools and the more practical approach to learning can motivate. However if there is a perception that VET is easier than learning in a more traditional way at school, learners may be surprised at the expectations created by VET programme and decide to leave early. In addition if learners' expectations of VET do not match reality (and consequently they find the

acquisition of VET skills and competences too complicated) they are more likely to leave before completing their programme. Many countries also use VET systems to accommodate large numbers of learners who have either dropped out or decided to change their studies and move from one course, provider or type of learning to another – this capacity to absorb 'dis-satisfied' learners also increases the risk of early leaving from VET programmes.

6. Work by Cedefop and Eurydice in December 2014[4] looked at early leaving in all parts of the education and training system. The report highlighted the high costs for society of students leaving education and training early as well as the consequences for individuals. The report noted that countries implement a variety of measures to address early leaving from VET programmes e.g. education and careers guidance are key measure for supporting reductions in the number of individuals leaving formal systems early in many European countries.

7. Chapter 6 of the report summarises the emerging findings from an on-going Cedefop study looking at early leaving from VET. This chapter notes that the rates of early leaving in VET are often higher than the overall rates of ESL. However, it is important to acknowledge that in several countries students who face academic difficulties or failure are oriented towards VET. Therefore, even when VET programmes show higher drop out rates in comparison to general education this is not necessarily only related to the quality of VET, as it is also related to the selectiveness of education systems which tend to direct those who are at greater risk of early leaving towards VET. This chapter also notes that while many of the fundamental issues in relation to early leaving are similar in general education and VET, the scale of these issues can vary between the two sectors and there are also some challenges that are specific to vocational programmes.

8. It is important to recognise that there is no common European measure for calculating the number of early leavers from VET. The collection, collation and use of data (as set out in the recommendations of the ESL Thematic Group) are particularly important in the VET context. Without accurate, valid and reliable data it is difficult to implement policy measures and solutions to address the VET leaving rates. Cedefop comments that the official EU calculations of the the number of early VET leavers amalgamates three different data sets i.e. those who:
    • never started an upper secondary programme (non-starters);
    • started a programme but failed to complete it (drop outs);
    • completed a programme but failed the final assessment.

9. Cedefop comments that the factors that influence early leaving from VET programmes can be divided into three categories[5]:
    • those relating to individuals and their family background (e.g. gender, socio-economic background, migrant or ethnic minority background);
    • those relating to the organisation of VET (e.g. students' preferences for non-VET programmes; the mismatch between learners' perceptions and the reality of

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[4] http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news-and-press/news/tackling-early-leaving-education-and-training-europe-strategies-policies-and
[5] There are additional factors that Cedefop report as applying solely to apprenticeships. These are: the availability of work-based learning opportunities; learners' readiness to work; and learners' relationships with other employees in the workplace.

particular occupations; negative images of VET; the organisation of the training and the content of the VET programmes);

- those relating to the labour market (e.g. some learners leave when they are offered a job during their training; when an occupation is unregulated and learners find out that they do not need a qualification to take up employment; when the working conditions in some occupations are seen as unattractive; and when the overall economic situation reduces learners' motivation.)

DISCUSSIONS DURING THE PEER LEARNING ACTIVITY

10. The PLA proposes to take the three categories in paragraph 9 as its starting point. This enables participants to examine the underlying reasons for early VET leaving and provides an opportunity to discuss the contribution that quality assurance makes to reducing the number of early VET leavers. The focus of the PLA is quality assurance and therefore the discussions will only refer to the reasons for early school leaving in VET in order to look at how quality assurance systems, particularly those that are aligned with the EQAVET Framework, can be used to address the problem (the further examination and review of these reasons is the focus of Cedefop's on-going work).

11. As the EQAVET Framework makes specific reference to early leaving, the PLA will include discussions on:
    - indicator number 4 - completion rate in VET programmes: the number of persons having successfully completed/abandoned VET programmes, according to the type of programme and the individual criteria;
    - one of the indicative descriptors within the evaluation stage of the quality assurance cycle – namely that early warning systems are implemented at both the system and the VET provider level.

12. When looking at the three categories identified by Cedefop, we see the potential value of strengthening quality assurance arrangements:
    - for factors relating to individuals and their family background, we know that the creation of more individualised programmes can support learners from a range of backgrounds. In addition, there are a range of measures at the system and provider level that appear to help (e.g. financial incentives to train, the deployment of mentors and coaches, the availability of guidance and counselling programmes etc.). From our perspective we need to examine whether this type of measure is part of the quality assurance cycle and how the effectiveness of each measure can be evaluated and reviewed to understand whether it is contributing to improving completion rates as measured by the EQAVET indicator;
    - for factors relating to the organisation of VET there are questions about how best to improve the skills and competences of the trainers/teachers; how to organise 'general studies' (e.g. mathematics, mother tongue language, team skills etc.) which contribute to the VET programmes; careers guidance in order to ensure students select the 'right course' to avoid de-motivation (the evidence shows that learners who make a real choice, rather than being pushed into a VET course, are more likely to complete); and, at the system level, collecting and using data on 'drop out' to design policies to address early VET leaving, and strengthening the perception of VET as a valid and valuable training option. Each action can be monitored as part of a quality assurance process which leads to improvements;

- for factors relating to the labour market there is much less that can be done from a quality assurance process. These are external factors that affect the environment in which students are trained – the economy; working conditions; salaries etc. However there are improvements relating to information and communication that can contribute to reducing VET 'drop out' rates. At the system and provider level it is possible to reduce learners' mismatch between what they think work will be like and the reality – this can be done through strong work-provider partnerships; the involvement of stakeholders and realistic and effective communications about the nature of training e.g. what should learners expect when they complete an apprenticeship scheme.
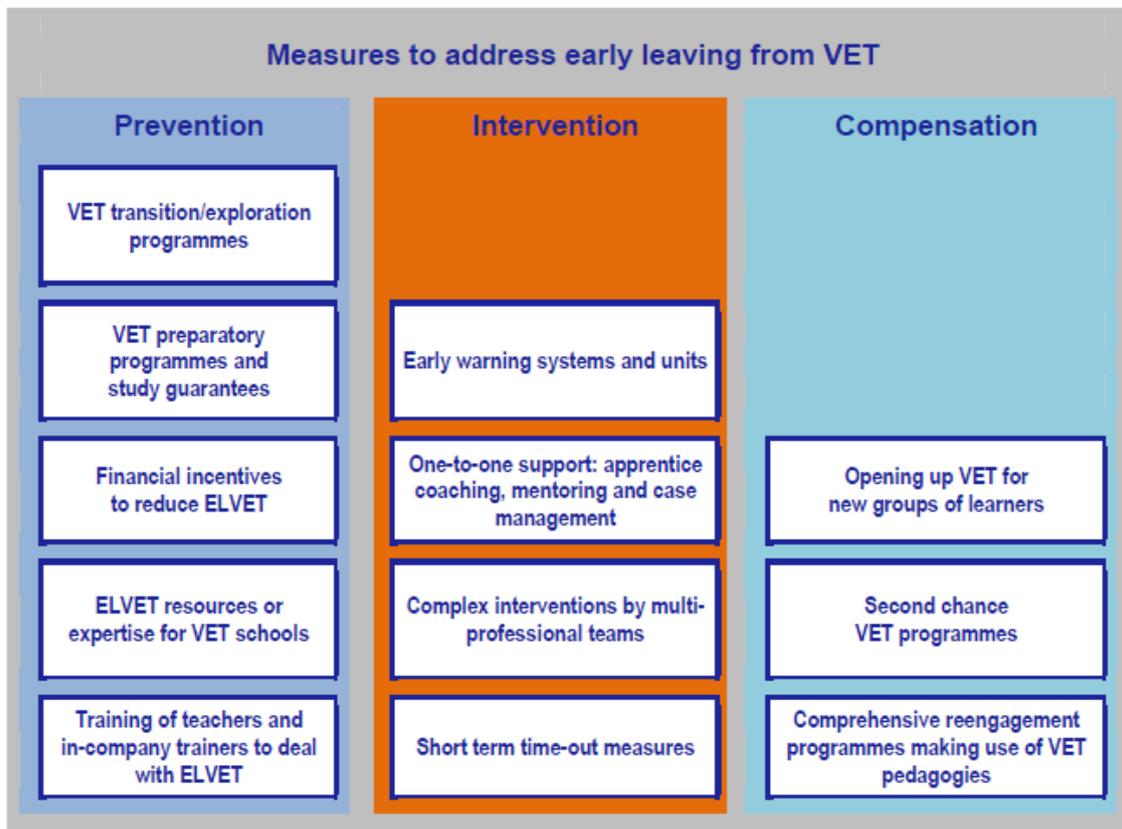
13. The PLA will look at these ideas, and others, in more detail in order to explore how the quality assurance ideas and principles in the EQAVET Recommendation can be used to reduce early VET leaving – and how such improvements can be measured. A summary of the policy measures currently being used to reduce early VET leaving are included in annexe A – each measure could be used alongside a quality assurance process which is aligned to EQAVET.

AFTER THE PEER LEARNING ACTIVITY

14. The PLA aims to identify new insights to inform the production of a short policy brief from EQAVET. A draft of this policy brief will be prepared in partnership with the presenters and hosts – and will be published on the EQAVET website.

Figure 6.8: Map of measures to address early leaving from VET

Measures to address early leaving from VET

Prevention	Intervention	Compensation
VET transition/exploration programmes		
VET preparatory programmes and study guarantees	Early warning systems and units	
Financial incentives to reduce ELVET	One-to-one support: apprentice coaching, mentoring and case management	Opening up VET for new groups of learners
ELVET resources or expertise for VET schools	Complex interventions by multi-professional teams	Second chance VET programmes
Training of teachers and in-company trainers to deal with ELVET	Short term time-out measures	Comprehensive reengagement programmes making use of VET pedagogies

Source: Cedefop.