



**EQAVET**

European Quality Assurance  
in Vocational Education and Training

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

# POLICYBRIEF

*This policy brief has been prepared in order to share the results of an EQAVET peer learning activity on 'Actions to reduce early leaving in VET' with a wider audience of policymakers, VET providers and other stakeholders. The EQAVET PLAs enable discussion, sharing and mutual learning on areas of strategic importance for the successful implementation of the Recommendation on establishing a European quality assurance reference framework for VET. The policy brief reflects the opinions of those who participated in the PLA and does not constitute an official European Commission or EQAVET position.*

Peer Learning  
Activity on

## *Actions to reduce early leaving in vocational education and training*

*Participating countries: AT, CY, DK, EE, DE, EL, FI, HU, IT, LU, LV, ME, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, UK  
(Wales) and colleagues from ETF, ETUC, CEEP, EUproVET and the European Commission*

### SUMMARY

This policy note is based on the peer learning activity (PLA) held in Helsinki on 30 September and 1 October 2015. The PLA which is part of the [EQAVET 2013-15 work programme](#) brought together colleagues from European stakeholder organisations, government agencies and those with a national or regional responsibility for VET policy from 18 countries. Some participants represented a Member State's Quality Assurance National Reference Point (NRP). The NRPs were established as part of the EQAVET Recommendation and have a central role in supporting the vocational education and training (VET) quality assurance arrangements in their system.

The PLA methodology used in EQAVET provides opportunities for participants to share knowledge and experiences using examples of practice and/or policy implementation. This provides a starting point to reflect on how to address some of the shared challenges faced by education and training systems across the EU. This PLA aimed to identify the quality assurance approaches which are used to reduce the number of learners who 'drop-out' of their VET programme and highlight ways to increase the VET completion rate. The following comments are based on the participants' reflections which were informed by presentations from Finland, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the European Training Foundation (ETF).

This policy brief is not a verbatim report; instead it is an analysis of the issues that were felt to be important in an EQAVET context. It is intended to inform those who are thinking about how to use quality assurance techniques to manage the early leaving question at a system and provider level. The PLA was informed by a background paper and an analysis of a questionnaire based on participants' experiences of using quality assurance approaches to reduce the number of learners who leave VET early.

More information on this PLA is available on the EQAVET web-site [here](#)

### POLICY CONTEXT

The focus for the PLA was [the role of quality assurance in reducing the early leaving rates in VET](#). There has been a considerable amount of work on reducing early school leaving<sup>1</sup> (partly as a result of the Europe 2020 target to reduce the rate of ESL to below 10% by 2020) but there has been less work at a European level on reducing early leaving rates in VET. While the reasons for learners dropping out of school and VET programmes are similar, it is important to recognise there are differences.

**Drop out** (which can be seen as 'non-completion' or 'early leaving') is a process rather than a single occurrence. It arises from a complex interaction of factors including socio-economic background; experience at school and in a VET centre; and the influence of parents and peers. Effective quality assurance systems and procedures can be part of the solution for reducing the drop-out rates in VET – they are not the only solution but they can play their part in supporting learners; identifying those who are more likely to be at risk of non-completion; and highlighting VET practice which should be changed to reduce the likelihood of early leaving.

In this context [quality assurance can be used to support policies](#) which focus on:

- prevention at the system level,

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Early School Leaving, Lessons from research for policy makers, NESSE, 2010, <http://www.nesse.fr/nesse/activities/reports> and [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/early-school-leavers\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/early-school-leavers_en.htm)





- intervention by the VET provider and
- compensation measures which re-engage and support learners who leave VET and wish to return<sup>2</sup>.

Recent work by Cedefop and Eurydice<sup>3</sup> identifies that the **factors influencing early leaving from VET programmes** can be divided into three categories<sup>5</sup>:

1. those relating to individuals and their family background (e.g. gender, socio-economic background, migrant or minority ethnic background);
2. those relating to the organisation of VET (e.g. students' preferences for non-VET programmes; the mismatch between learners' perceptions and the reality of particular occupations; negative images of VET; the organisation of the training and the content of the VET programmes);
3. 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 discover 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.)

## THE EQAVET CONTEXT

The **EQAVET Framework** refers to early leaving. It is one of the indicative descriptors in the evaluation stage of the quality assurance cycle. It asks whether early warning systems are implemented at both the system and the VET provider level. In addition some of the indicators imply connections with early leaving rates e.g.

- **indicator number 4** - completion rate in VET programmes;
- **indicator number 5** - placement rate in VET programmes;
- **indicator number 7** - unemployment rate according to individual criteria;
- **indicator number 8** - prevalence of vulnerable groups

However, we should note that the impact of high non-completion rates in VET programmes has either a direct impact on an indicator (e.g. indicator number 4) or an indirect impact (e.g. indicator number 10 – schemes which promote better access to VET). During the PLA, the connections between the indicators increased the need to identify **holistic solutions** which address the many causes of non-completion.

## OBJECTIVES of the EQAVET peer learning activity

The PLA was designed to help participants explore current practice and identify:

- how the quality assurance ideas and principles in the EQAVET Recommendation can be used to reduce early VET leaving;
- how improvements can be measured.

## CASES STUDIES

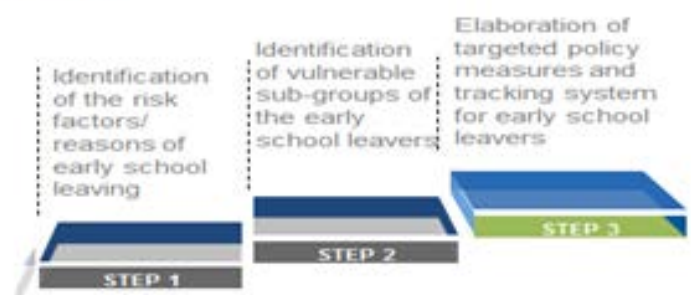
The case studies looked at system and provider level **approaches being used to reduce the non-completion rate in VET**. More information on each case study is available on the EQAVET website [here](#). The approaches highlighted in the case studies include:

- using **early warning systems** to identify which learners are more likely to leave before completing their programme;
- using **data to track individual learners' progress** during their education and training 'careers';
- using **evaluation data to review and revise the VET curriculum** in order to minimise non-completion;
- using a **more personalised approach to student support and counselling** to minimise non-completion and identify those at risk of leaving early.

In addition research from the **ETF identified** the importance of involving learners, their families and community groups to identify the reasons for early school leaving. This information forms an important first step in developing effective policy measures to minimise drop out.



## Steps to elaborate and develop targeted policy measures



<sup>2</sup> Based on [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/doc/esl-group-report\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/doc/esl-group-report_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Tackling early leaving from education and training in Europe: strategies, policies and measures, December 2014,

<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news-and-press/news/tackling-early-leaving-education-and-training-europe-strategies-policies-and>



The initial round of the PLA discussion focused on general topics related to the professional learning of VET teachers/trainers. To this discussion, contributions were made by:

#### The case study from Finland

The Finnish host set out how the four stages of the quality assurance cycle support the providers' use of the national early warning system for VET learners. The system is based on learning outcomes, a unit-based (modular) qualification structure, the identification of learners who need additional support and an expectation that all VET teachers have a counselling role. At the system level, the use of a personal identification number and a funding model which supports successful completion of VET programmes provide the framework within which all VET providers operate. Each VET provider deploys multi-professional teams to support learners. A 2011 - 2015 programme (part of the Guarantee of Employment for Young People) enabled 23 VET providers to test a new approach based on early intervention; personal guidance counselling; monitoring students' performance and intervening early in response to student absence. The findings from the programme highlighted that the risk of students leaving VET is highest (up to 25%) in the 20-24 age group; at the beginning of a learner's study programme; and for students with special needs who leave VET more often if they study in general vocational institutions rather than in vocational special education institutions. Data and experience from the pilot programme is being shared with all VET providers.

#### The case study from the Netherlands

This case study looked at early warning systems and how VET providers use data based on an 'Education Number' (in operation since 2005) which underpins the Basic Records Database for Education (BRON). The system level database keeps data on all students throughout their school career. The information includes early school leavers, age, gender, address, ethnic origin, education type, school history, disability etc. This enables every VET provider to track individual learners in their school, monitor unexplained absence, report truancy to attendance officers, and take pre-emptive actions to minimise non-completion. Individual VET providers use a multi-professional approach to support learners who are at risk of dropping out. This approach (based on the 'golden triangle' of cooperation in the Netherlands) ensures responsibility for reducing non-completion in VET is shared between the Ministry, the municipalities and the schools. The challenge for each VET provider is to use the information in BRON to identify those learners who are more likely to drop out. The use of data and the close monitoring of absences helps to ensure a more individualised response to learners at risk. The quality assurance approach is one that starts by evaluating the accuracy of the existing early leaving data and how it is used; and then reviews the approach in order to provide more effective support to learners.

#### The case study from Germany

This case study looked at a pilot project to support learners who were at risk of non-completion. Using evidence from the evaluation of employers' perceptions of VET learners, the project involved changing the curriculum for year 9 students. The new arrangements allocated one day per week to work-based training; reduced the size of the groups, focused on using applied mathematics rather than a theoretical study of the subject; and focused on helping learners acquire the technical language needed for employment. The pilot worked and the drop-out rate fell from 10% to 4% per annum. The evaluation showed that the success of the pilot was due to all the partner organisations working together at the first sign of alarm; offering additional education to learners in school and outside school; and giving more time to students with special needs to complete tasks. The approaches developed during the pilot project have now become standard practice.

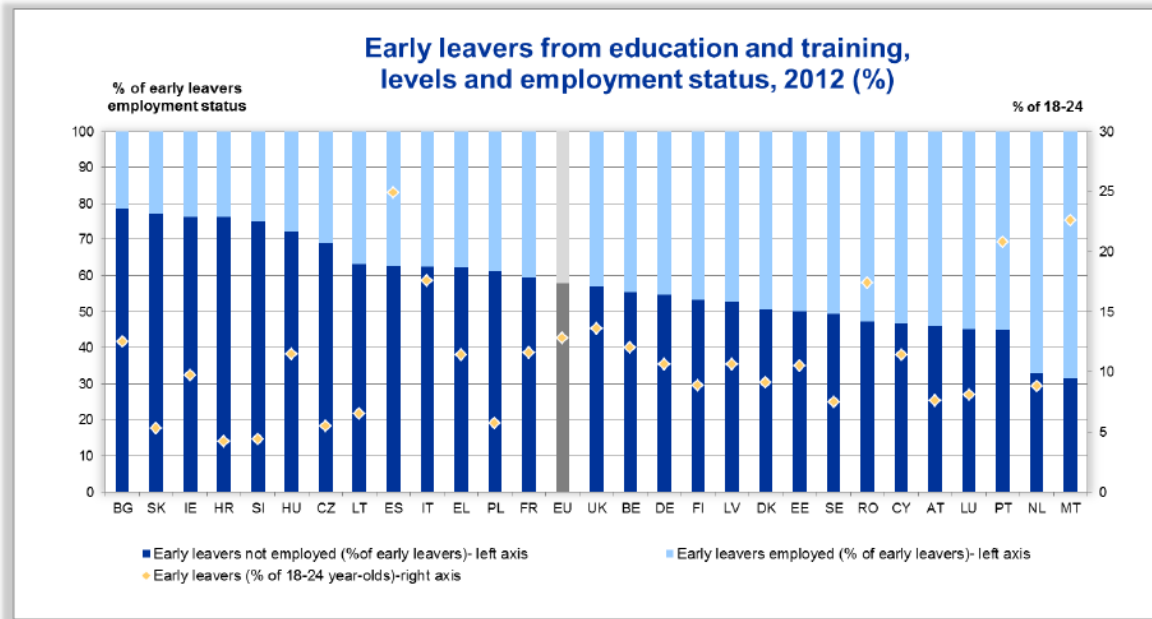
#### The case study from Luxembourg

This case study focused on a pilot project (PAS) to re-engage young learners in their first year of VET. The objectives were to increase learners' success at the personnel and educational level; and to implement a system which reduces early leaving in VET providers. The project places learners at the heart of the system and uses a standardised questionnaire to collect data and information in order to highlight those who are more likely to drop out of their VET programme. Each learner is assigned to one of four groups: severe; moderate; low; no significant risk of dropping out early. Depending on this categorisation, learners receive different types of support from a multi-professional team in their VET provider and from external agencies. The VET providers received advice from the central PAS team on how to organise the additional support. The pilot was trialled with 288 learners, and following the evaluation it was expanded to cover additional secondary schools in 2015.

## DISCUSSION and REFLECTIONS

Each case study highlighted the importance of creating and **maintaining clear links between the policy decisions at the system level and the work that is completed by the VET providers**. These connections were a central part of the success of the four case studies that were considered during the PLA. In addition each case study, and the research from ETF, identified the social and personal costs associated with non-completion of VET programmes. The following discussion is set within a context that recognises those who leave early are more at risk of long-term unemployment, poverty and crime. Cedefop's 2014 report<sup>4</sup> highlighted this risk of unemployment as shown below:

<sup>4</sup> [http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:pY0YS3iS1yQJ:www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/9084\\_en.pdf+&cd=2&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=uk](http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:pY0YS3iS1yQJ:www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/9084_en.pdf+&cd=2&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=uk)



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

There was agreement that a [quality assurance system can help to reduce the number of learners dropping out of VET](#). Systems which are based on the EQAVET Recommendation use the four stages of the quality assurance cycle to manage the risk of non-completion. One advantage of the quality assurance cycle is the ability to apply the model to many different aspects of VET provision: non-completion; early warning systems; the analysis of those learners most at risk; responding to individuals' learning needs; and the provision of careers guidance etc. Applying the methodology of the quality assurance cycle to many different aspects of VET provision helps to strengthen a culture of quality.

The discussions in the PLA covered the following main issues:

- using an **early warning system** to identify the extent to which each learner is at risk of non-completion;
- how to **manage the use of individualised data** in order to identify those at risk of non-completion while respecting the confidentiality of personal information;
- the role of **multi-professional teams** who are able to respond quickly;
- the role of **employers and other stakeholders** in ensuring learners know what to expect from work;
- using data to measure the **impact of quality assurance measures and to review and modify practice**.

#### EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS

In many countries VET is one policy solution for reducing early leaving from the upper secondary school system. VET offers a different type of experience and the more practical approach to learning can motivate learners. Despite the potential for increased motivation, many learners do not fully engage with their VET programme. In many systems VET accommodates a large number of learners who have dropped out of school 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 increases the risk of early leaving from VET programmes.

Identifying those at risk of non-completion is only part of an early warning system. While data helps, it has to be accompanied by good listening skills; targeted interventions; the ability to respond quickly to absences and other signs of disengagement; strong, stable and supportive relationships between learners and teachers/trainers; and the creation of a leadership and learning environment which encourages a culture where everyone can succeed.

To avoid labelling individual learners or creating an environment which is self-fulfilling, it is helpful to look at every learner's risk of non-completion. A learner centred approach minimises the danger of some students becoming recipients of unnecessary interventions which can be counter-productive; and it enables tailor made pedagogic solutions to be identified for everyone who needs additional support.

Having an early warning system in place is part of a quality assurance system – it helps to promote and develop a culture of quality; it improves each VET provider's performance as measured by completion rates; and it leads to more bespoke monitoring and support of learners. As with all systems it needs to be evaluated in order to identify those arrangements which have the greatest impact on reducing drop out – the subsequent reviews help to refine individual VET provider's systems and respond to the local or regional needs.

#### THE USE OF DATA

Three of the four case studies presented during the PLA used systems to predict which learners were most at risk of not completing their VET

programme. In each situation the system captured personal data on all learners in order to avoid making assumptions and to avoid the risk of labelling individuals as potential drop-outs. Once the data was collected, VET providers used the information to monitor learners and provide support using a risk-based model. The support, based on a more individualised approach, covered both personal advice and guidance on professional/vocational study. In each of the case studies there was a system-wide model of data collection which identified 'risk factors' and this gave VET providers confidence when using predictive profiles. However, the system-wide model was always seen as just the first step: VET providers needed local data; information from their teachers and trainers; feedback from employers, parents and other stakeholders in order to complete their profile of those most at risk of non-completion. In this context information provided by learners was a central feature in ensuring a tailored and responsive approach to the needs of individuals.

As with any quality assurance system, the effectiveness of the profiling approach needs to be monitored and evaluated in order to identify the extent to which the data provides a good basis for organising individualised support. There was agreement that the 'review' stage of the quality assurance cycle was essential to ensure the effectiveness of using a data system to reduce the likelihood of non-completion.

One of the challenges of using a data system is the need to respect personal and confidential data. In this context, the case studies highlighted the importance of collecting data on all learners and ensuring individual members of staff (and VET providers) only had access to the data they needed.

#### MULTI-PROFESSIONAL TEAMS

Teachers/trainers often have the most contact with individual learners, but they are not always best placed to provide the additional support required by those more at risk of non-completion. Teachers/trainers need to be effective listeners, and they need support from multi-agency and multi-professional teams who can work with individual learners. One factor that enables success is the ability to respond quickly to signals that indicate an individual's risk of non-completion has risen. In two of the case studies, there were examples of daily monitoring of attendance and the work of an 'attendance' team which could follow up unexplained absences. There was agreement that the role of the VET teachers was 'to press the alarm button' rather than being the only person in the response team.

#### MANAGING EXPECTATIONS OF WORK

Most VET learners are motivated by their training and experiences at work during their programme. The opportunity to combine training with work is often the reason for learners deciding to complete a VET programme. However this is not the reality for every learner. When VET is not the first choice, or when VET is seen as an unattractive option, more needs to be done to build learners' confidence about what they can expect at work. If time at work does not meet learners' expectations (for whatever reason) the risk of drop out rises. In the case studies for this PLA there were examples of working closely with employers, changing the VET provider's curriculum to ensure a closer match with the world of work, improving guidance with individualised support focusing on care and careers, and opportunities to learn at the pace which met individuals' needs. In each case study the focus was on putting the learner at the centre of the process in order to give them the best opportunity to succeed.

#### MODIFYING PRACTICE

Identifying when there is an increased risk of non-completion is only the first step in addressing a potential problem. As in the case study from Germany it is actions which change practice and lead to reductions in the drop-out rate. An evaluation of the current arrangements is the basis for review and change. A number of different approaches are helping to reduce drop-out rates in VET – revised curricula to make things more vocationally relevant, individualised learning pathways, more opportunities to experience employment during the training programme, smaller groups, additional training for VET teachers to enable them to identify early signs of potential drop-out, and more bespoke learning support. The quality assurance approach helps to identify the changes that can support reductions in non-completion and provide a set of indicators to measure the impact of any change. As with all VET provision, new arrangements need to be supported by the leadership team and designed in partnership with employers and other stakeholders (including the learners).

Changing the training arrangements requires resources and time. These costs often fall on VET providers, even though the benefits to society and individuals are considerable higher than the costs of supporting those at risk of non-completion<sup>5</sup>. In some of the case studies financial incentives are part of the system-based approach which encourages VET providers to focus on supporting those learners who are more at risk of non-completion.

## EMERGING POLICY ISSUES

VET is one of the solutions to addressing early school leaving. Cedefop reports that one third of those who drop-out at upper secondary level subsequently take a vocational training programme and ultimately obtain an upper or even post-secondary level qualification.<sup>6</sup> This is a positive message and shows that the VET system can, and does, find ways to motivate learners and enable them to succeed.

However this implies that two thirds of those who drop-out of upper secondary schooling either do not enter VET (and are at risk of becoming NEETs – not in education, employment or training) or start a VET programme and fail to complete. It is important to build on the success that enables one third of these learners to complete a VET programme.

<sup>5</sup> Cedefop's 2014 report (page 1, *ibid* 4) highlights research which shows that early leavers cost 1.25% of the EU's gross domestic product.

<sup>6</sup> VET prevents and counteracts early leaving from the education system, September 2015, Cedefop. <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/9101+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=uk>



It is not just those who dropped-out of upper secondary school who are at risk of not completing a VET programme. We know from the case studies in the PLA that completing questionnaires and learner profiles helps to identify other factors that indicate learners are more likely to drop-out. Establishing and using a profiling system to identify those most at risk of non-completion is an important policy consideration for many VET systems.

During the PLA the discussions included reference to the [difficulty of measuring drop-out rates and the various definitions](#) which are in common use<sup>7</sup>. It is also possible for learners to leave a VET programme for a 'good reason' e.g. they move to another course which is more suitable, they move to another city, they gain employment etc. A quality assurance system which is based on accurate data needs to be able to distinguish between drop-outs for a 'good' and a 'bad' reason. In addition in some countries the official EU definitions differs from the ones used at national or system level<sup>8</sup> and this makes policy development more difficult to understand if only EU data is considered.

Reducing the rate of non-completion in VET is something that has to happen at a local level in individual VET contexts. While system level measures support local actions (e.g. funding models, data systems, analysis of predictive factors that influence non-completion etc.) improvement depend on strong leadership which use the principles of quality assurance to monitor and review practice.

## POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Cedefop (2015) comments<sup>9</sup> that '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.'

The examples from this PLA show the role of [quality assurance processes in identifying the changes that have the greatest impact on drop-out rates](#).

Student profiling which predicts learners who are more at risk on non-completion is likely to increase in importance. The ability to complete learner profiles as individuals enter the VET system helps providers to make predictions and organise bespoke support. This works best when the local and system level data is comparable as this allows for benchmarking and the identification of the most effective practice. Early warning systems are part of the solution to reducing non-completion rates in VET.

To get the most from these systems they [need to be part of the quality assurance cycle](#) in order for the impact of actions that arise from their use to be evaluated and the results used to inform the development of new practice. This enables these systems to be seen and valued as part of a quality culture rather than a 'stand-alone' practice. The PLA confirmed that those early warning systems which were based on the four stages of the EQAVET Recommendation were able to manage and reduce the risk of non-completion.

<sup>7</sup> Cedefop comments that the official EU calculations of 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.

<sup>8</sup> The case study from Luxembourg highlighted a significant difference between the EU and national statistics on ESL.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid 3