



DIRECTORATE GENERAL FOR INTERNAL POLICIES
POLICY DEPARTMENT B: STRUCTURAL AND COHESION POLICIES

EDUCATION AND CULTURE

REDUCING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN THE EU

STUDY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Abstract

This study reviews the scale and nature of the problem of early school leaving in the EU. It examines in detail how countries are trying to tackle this problem and identifies characteristics of effective policies, leading to a range of recommendations for European and national level actors in the future. The study is based on in-depth country research in nine Member States, as well as analysis of international and national literature.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- ALJ** *Action locale pour jeunes* (Local action for young people - Luxembourg)
- Cedefop** European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
- DEIS** Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools - Ireland
- DG EAC** Directorate-General for Education and Culture
- DG EMPL** Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
- E2C** *Écoles de la 2eme Chance* (Second chance schools – France)
- ECEC** Early childhood education and care
- EEO** European Employment Observatory
- EES** European Employment Strategy
- EMA** Educational Maintenance Allowance - UK
- EPPE** Effective Provision of Pre-School Education project - UK
- EQF** European Qualifications Framework
- ESF** European Social Fund
- ESL** Early School Leaving / Early School Leaver(s)
- ESO** *Educación Secundaria Obligatoria* (compulsory secondary education - Spain)
- ESRI** Economic and Social Research Institute - Ireland
- E&T** Education and training
- ET2010** European strategic framework for education and training 2010
- ET2020** European strategic framework for education and training 2020
- GDP** Gross Domestic Product
- ISCED** International Standard Classification of Education

- (I)VET** (Initial) vocational education and training
- JCSP** Junior Certificate School Programme - Ireland
- JSA** Jobseekers Allowance – Ireland and UK
- LCA** Leaving Certificate Applied - Ireland
- LFS** Labour Force Survey
- LGBT** Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
- LLP** Lifelong Learning Programme
- LOE** Organic Law on Education Act - Spain
- MBO** *Middelbaar beroepsonderwijs* (secondary vocational education – Netherlands)
- MGI** *Mission générale d'insertion* (general mission of insertion – France)
- MLP** Mutual Learning Programme
- MS** Member States
- NEET** Not in Employment, Education and Training
- NESSE** Network of Experts in Social Sciences in Education and Training
- NGO** Non-governmental organisation
- NEWB** National Educational Welfare Board - Ireland
- NMA** New Modern Apprenticeship Scheme - Cyprus
- NQF** National Qualifications Framework
- OECD** Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
- OMC** Open Method of Coordination
- PCPI** *Programas de Cualificación Profesional Inicial* (Initial Vocational Qualification Programmes - Spain)
- PES** Public Employment Service
- PISA** Programme for International Student Assessment

- PLYA** Project Learning for Young Adults - Slovenia
- p.p** Percentage points
- PPRE** *Programme personnalisé de réussite éducative* (Individualised programmes for success – France)
- PROA** *Programas de Refuerzo, Orientación y Apoyo* (Programme for Reinforcement, Guidance and Support – Spain)
- ProgeSs** *Projekt gegen Schulschwänzen* (Project against Truancy- Germany)
- RAR** *Réseaux ambition réussite* (Ambition to Succeed Networks – France)
- RASED** *Réseaux d'aides spécialisées aux élèves en difficulté* (Network of specialised accompaniment for pupils facing difficulties – France)
- RONI** Risk of NEET indicator - UK
- RSR** *Réseaux de réussite scolaire* (Networks for School Success – France)
- SCP** School Completion Programme - Ireland
- SDE/ΣΔΕ** Second chance school - Greece
- SEN** Special Educational Needs
- SPHE** Social, Personal and Health Education – Ireland
- VMBO** *Vorbereidend middelbaar beroepsonderwijs* (pre-vocational secondary education - Netherlands)
- VTOS** Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme - Ireland

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rate of early school leaving in the EU

Most young people successfully navigate the school system and make a transition into further education or training opportunities, or into employment. However, **one out of every seven young Europeans** leaves the education system without having the skills or the qualifications which are now seen as necessary to make a successful transition to the labour market and for active participation in today's knowledge-based economy. This means that currently some **6.4 million young people in Europe are classified as early school leavers**¹.

The rate of early school leaving (ESL) has declined in most parts of Europe. In 2000, the rate stood at 17.6 % and there has been a reduction of 3.2 percentage points since then; the ESL rate now stands at 14.4 %. By 2009, eight countries had reached a level of ESL that was below the EU's 10 % target (Czech Republic, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Austria, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia and Finland). Countries like Luxembourg, Lithuania and Cyprus have seen significant reductions in the rate of ESL between 2000 and 2009.

The **progress towards the EU target has however been much slower** than anticipated and indeed hoped, despite the wide range of interventions that have been established across Europe. In several countries (Spain, Malta and Portugal) as many as one in three young people leave the education system early. The ESL rate varies from the high of nearly 37 % in Malta to just 4.3 % in Slovakia.

Causes

Young people who drop out of school come from diverse background. **Early school leaving is typically caused by a cumulative process of disengagement** as a result of personal, social, economic, geographical, education or family-related reasons. Such reasons can be **external or internal to school processes** and experiences and they are typically **highly specific to the individual**. For many, dissatisfaction results from a variety of reasons such as bullying, poor academic performance, poor relationships with teachers, lack of motivation or 'falling in with the wrong crowd', while others drop out because they are facing personal or family problems, such as substance abuse or homelessness. However, a significant part of the problem can be attributed to lack of support and guidance, disengagement from schooling and to secondary-level curricula which too often do not offer enough options for varied courses, alternative teaching pedagogies, experiential and other hands-on learning opportunities or sufficient flexibility.

Costs

ESL is a significant concern because it is **a fundamental contributing factor to social exclusion later in life**. Predictions of future skills needs in Europe suggest that in the future, only 1 in 10 jobs will be within reach of an early school leaver. Young people who leave school early are also more likely to have lower **incomes or to be unemployed**. Inadequate education can also generate large public and social costs in the form of lower

¹ In the EU, those young people who leave the education system with at most lower secondary qualification and not taking part in education and training are classified as early school leavers. Early school leavers are therefore those who have only achieved pre-primary, primary, lower secondary or a short upper secondary education of less than two years (ISCED 0, 1, 2 or 3c short5), and include those who have only a pre-vocational or vocational education which did not lead to an upper secondary certification.

income and economic growth, reduced tax revenues, and higher costs of public services such as healthcare, criminal justice and social benefit payments.

ESL in fact has enormous financial implications, generating major social and economic costs for both individuals and society, with **the lifetime cost of ESL reaching one to two million Euros per school leaver**. The cost of such exclusion has been calculated, for example, in the Netherlands, where the lifetime cost of early school leaving is estimated at around EUR 1.8 million². In Finland, the annual cost of one early school leaver reaches EUR 27 500, with the lifetime (40 years) cost of over EUR 1.1 million³; and it is widely believed that this is an underestimate of the real cost. In a similar manner, in Ireland, the annual cost to the state in benefits, together with lost tax revenue per male early school leaver, has been estimated at EUR 29 300, even before costs associated with health or crime are considered⁴. A young person staying in school for an extra year can earn an additional lifetime income of more than EUR 70 000⁵.

Thus, **a country with high levels of ESL will struggle to maintain high levels of employment and social cohesion**. If these high levels of ESL are found across Europe it will struggle to compete in the global marketplace and **will face a constraint to the achievement of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth** - the priority of the Europe 2020 Strategy. High rates of ESL are also detrimental to the objective of making lifelong learning a reality and represent "a waste of both individual opportunities and of social and economic potential"⁶. To reduce the European rate of early school leaving by just one percentage point would provide the European economy with nearly half a million additional qualified potential young employees each year⁷.

It is therefore not surprising that ESL is considered as **a major policy priority** not only in Europe but across the developed world. It is particularly pertinent because unlike many other attributes (such as family and personal characteristics), **educational attainment can be influenced by public policy**⁸.

The role of this study

European-level work to capture learning from the Member States has intensified in recent years. For example, for four years (2006-2010), the Directorate-General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) facilitated the activities of the [Cluster on Access and Social Inclusion](#), which brought together 17 Member States to explore issues relating to ESL and social exclusion. The work of the Cluster contributed to the production of the Commission Communication on ESL⁹. The Staff Working Paper accompanying the Communication included many policy examples that had been investigated by the Cluster. The Network of

² Calculated by Ecorys.

³ Valtiontalouden tarkastusvirasto (2007), [Nuorten syrjäytymisen ehkäisy](#). Toiminnantarkastuskertomus 146/2007. Valtiontalouden tarkastusvirasto, Helsinki. Ministry of Employment and the Economy (2009), [Nuoret miehet työelämään](#); mitä palveluja ja toimenpiteitä tarvitaan TE-toimistoissa. Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriön julkaisu. Työ ja yrittäjyys 34/2009

⁴ Smyth, E. and McCoy, S. (2009), [Investing in Education: Combating Educational Disadvantage](#), Economic and Social Research Institute, Dublin, 2009.

⁵ NESSE (2009), [Early School Leaving: Lessons from Research for Policy Makers](#).

⁶ European Commission (2011), [Reducing early school leaving](#). Commission Staff Working Paper. Accompanying document to the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on policies to reduce early school leaving. [SEC(2011)96], 26 January 2011.

⁷ European Commission (2011), [Tackling early school leaving: A key contribution to the Europe 2020 Agenda](#). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Brussels, 31.1.2011 COM(2011) 18 final.

⁸ See, Belfield, C.R. and Lewin, H.M (2007), The price we pay: Economic and Social Consequences of Inadequate Education. And NESSE (2009), [Early School Leaving: Lessons from Research for Policy Makers](#).

⁹ The Action Plan, the Commission Communication and Staff Working Paper on early school leaving can be found at: http://ec.europa.eu/education/school-education/doc2268_en.htm.

Experts in Social Sciences in Education and Training ([NESSE](#)) and [Cedefop](#) have also published European-level analyses on this topic, with the report of the former focusing on a review of literature and the latter on an analysis of guidance-oriented ESL policies and programmes in Europe.

Related to this context, this study on 'Reducing early school leaving in the EU' was commissioned in November 2010 by the European Parliament and was carried out by an independent public policy research organisation, GHK Consulting Ltd., over a five month period between December 2010 and April 2011. The **ultimate goal of this study is to suggest possible future actions that could help Member States to perform better in this area** in the future.

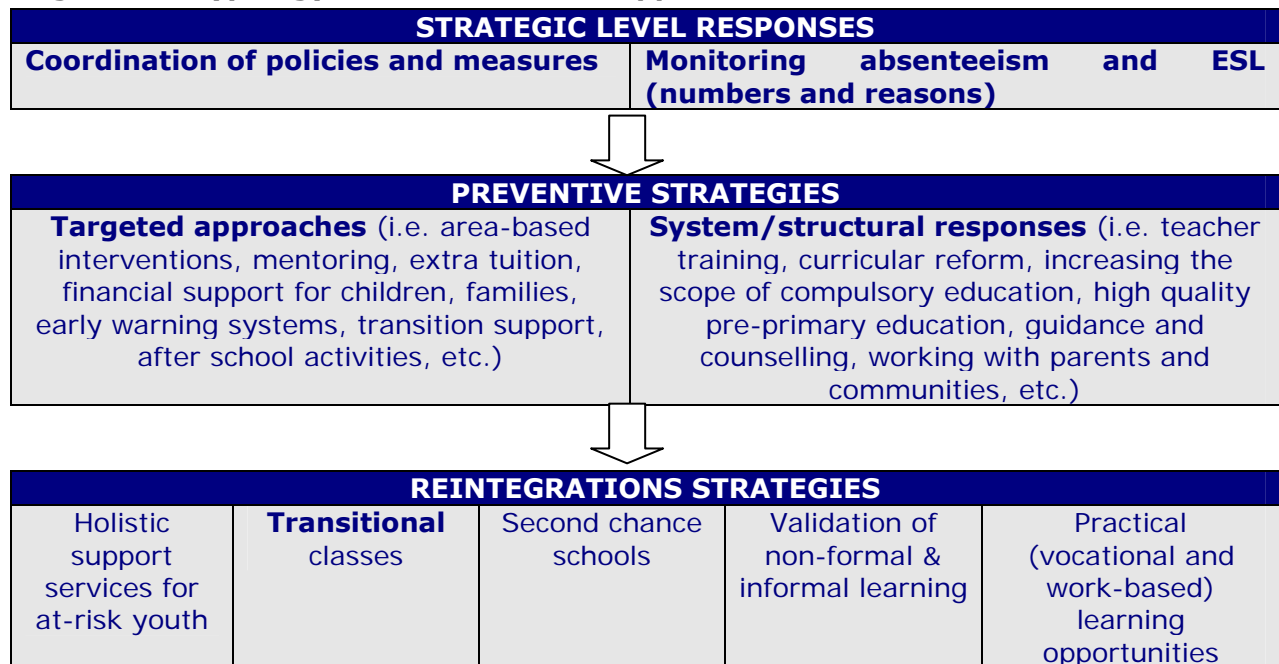
Importantly, the research approach adopted for this study is different from previous European reviews on this topic, in that it allowed for a more **detailed review of a small number of Member States, with consultations of a broad range of stakeholders** in these countries. This included representatives of education authorities, teachers, parents and secondary school students, as well as practitioners working with early school leavers through NGOs and projects targeted at at-risk youth.

The study covers all 27 EU Member States but includes an in-depth analysis of nine countries. These are: **Ireland, Greece, Spain, France, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Finland and UK (England)**.

Overview of policy responses to early school leaving

The different policy responses taken by EU countries to address ESL are informed by many values and perspectives, as well as being influenced by the history and traditions of the Member State concerned. Furthermore, each individual early school leaver has a unique history and finds him/herself in a specific context or 'ecosystem'. Responses to ESL therefore need to be tuned and tailored. For these reasons there is **no single response to ESL** and a kaleidoscope of policies, programmes, projects and approaches have been found across the Member States. These approaches can be grouped into three broad categories: (i) Strategic level responses; (ii) Preventive strategies; and (iii) Reintegration strategies, as illustrated in Figure 1, below.

Figure 1: A typology of Member States' approaches to ESL



Source: GHK Consulting Ltd., 2011

Strategic level responses: Reducing ESL through better coordination and monitoring

There has been a noticeable, positive change in the way in which early school leaving is approached in many Member States. Two out of five interviewees (43 %) for this study stated that there was a **'strong' commitment to addressing ESL** in their country, backed by appropriate policy, funding and programmes. Only one out of five (20 %) felt that the level of commitment and investment was 'weak'.

Furthermore, there are now **more countries which address ESL within a broader policy framework**, for example a lifelong learning policy or a broader strategy to promote economic and social cohesion, thus recognising that the issue is multi-faceted and complex. **Another positive development is the creation of explicit, comprehensive policy frameworks on ESL**, bringing together key stakeholders and programmes under one overarching policy.

However, most countries still have a fragmented and insufficiently coordinated approach to addressing ESL, **leading to duplication of activity and funding**. Too many responses are still time-bound, project-based measures or targeted initiatives to address a specific concern as opposed to operating within **a coherent, joined-up framework, both strategically and operationally**. Nearly a third (31 %) of the interviewees for this study thought the level of ESL policy coordination was 'poor' or 'very poor'. Nearly half (45 %) were of the opinion that there is 'some' coordination of ESL policies and that 'some' links with other policy areas are sought but that the situation could be improved.

In some cases collaboration between education and social and employment authorities is missing, while in other countries there is a need to strengthen the collaboration between education and youth policies, before a more coherent, joined up approach can be achieved. In some contexts several different authorities are implementing similar programmes, leading to clear duplication of activity.

ESL is the result of a combination of factors. Therefore inter-agency and multi-disciplinary working is key to implementing a common vision on ESL and they **should move from theory to practice** at national, regional and local levels. This study has shown that the approaches that are based on ***genuine cooperation between different agencies and specialists*** at national, regional, local *and* school levels help to reduce ESL. Such cooperation and multi-disciplinary approaches can also ensure that different stakeholders are engaged in both the design and implementation of ESL policy and programmes. This enables the adoption of a 'whole child' approach to the issue of ESL that addresses the full range of contributory and influencing factors. Such cooperation needs to include, in addition to authorities from education, youth, social, health and employment spheres, also social partners, parents, NGOs, the youth sector and young people themselves. **For such cooperation to work and to have sustained impact, it must be embedded into the mainstream working practices** of agencies and other key stakeholders working with young people, **rather than be an add-on, generated by project activity**. This also involves making better use of the influence and/or expertise of certain stakeholders, in particular parents, social partners, the youth sector and NGOs.

The research evidence from this study also shows that policy and programmes should be informed by learning from research and evaluations (the latter being an area which currently seems weak), as well as analysis of the trends in data. **Research should take particular account of the student voice**, as well as those of the other stakeholders involved. Two out of five respondents (42 %) to our study were of the opinion that the views of young people were never or only rarely considered in the context of ESL policies in their country. Furthermore, one in five (18 %) stated that hardly any ESL measures / policies are based on solid evidence from research and evaluation.

Preventing early school leaving

In too many cases young people drop out of education or training for reasons which could have been prevented. Thus, preventive measures aim to tackle ESL before it even takes place. They are **typically more cost-effective than reintegration measures**.

Overall, Member States have acknowledged the need to find effective ways of recognising and addressing the issues that can increase the risk of ESL. At the same time the implementation of such strategies is at very different stages across Europe and great variation can be detected in the types of responses chosen by different countries. A wider recognition of the need to find different solutions for different points in the education system process can be detected; this is illustrated, for example, by the growing recognition of the role of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in ESL strategies.

The policies adopted by the Member States to alleviate the risk of and prevent ESL can be classified into two broad categories:

- Policies and measures that are targeted; these provide particular support to young people who are at risk by identifying individuals, groups of individuals, schools or neighbourhoods with a higher risk of drop-out.
- Policies and measures that are comprehensive in scope; their goal is to improve the education system for all and thereby to improve outcomes and reduce the risk of students disengaging from education.

These **approaches are complementary and therefore both are needed**: targeted policies channel support to those identified as being most at-risk but can mean that some young people 'slip through the net'. Furthermore, such approaches also leave the core of the education system unchanged. Comprehensive measures can therefore tackle the systemic issues which contribute to the incidence of early school leaving within a country.

However, the long-term focus should be placed on early intervention, which is necessary to tackle the issues emerging at the start of the cumulative process which leads to ESL. In order to facilitate timely intervention, **identification, monitoring and tracking activities are important**. Early warning systems within the school can help to identify pupils who are at risk of dropping out. They need to be accessible by and linked up between the different providers of education and other stakeholders concerned. Early intervention is also important because reintegration can become progressively more difficult as the period of disengagement extends.

Key transition points (primary to post-primary, lower secondary to upper secondary) are critical for potential early school leavers. Some measures to make these transitions easier include 'buddy' or mentoring programmes, intensified guidance provided by professionals and greater communication between teachers at different schools and levels, as well as 'welcome' or induction programmes.

Young people at risk of ESL can be offered **alternatives to the traditional curriculum**. New qualifications and curricula should however have respect from the community and **should offer viable progression pathways**. More could be done to promote the value of learning in terms of earning opportunities and transforming the life chances of young people at risk of dropping out.

Advice and guidance is vital in not only ensuring that young people identify appropriate further study options and find the motivation and confidence to apply to such courses, but also make the right decisions about their studies (thereby leading to fewer drop-outs from education due to wrong study choices). Thus, young people need to be given clear, impartial and **constructive advice to help ensure they are aware and feel in control of their pathway of learning and career development**. Furthermore, young people at risk of ESL often face a range of complex issues which require support from a specialised counsellor or other professional input. In addition to the inputs of professionals, families and parents also need to become more involved in school activities.

It is important for teachers to have the skills to engage and motivate all students in their class. Teacher training in identifying and addressing the risks of ESL, as well as in the use of modern teaching methods and classroom management and relationship-building skills, is important.

A Spanish survey of early school leavers found that nearly 9 out of 10 dropped out due to their experiences of repeating a year¹⁰. Thus, small class sizes, teaching assistants and extra tuition can stop individual students from falling behind, before these have a serious impact on their educational achievement and increase their risk of dropping out.

¹⁰ Mena Martínez, L., Fernández Enguita, M. y Riviére Gómez, J. (2009), *Desenganchados de la educación: procesos, experiencias, motivaciones y estrategias del abandono y del fracaso escolar*, Revista de Educación, número extraordinario 2010, pp. 119-145.

In the current economic context, where public budgets are facing unprecedented constraints, it is important to note that **not all interventions require substantial investment**. Evidence from this study has shown the importance of an encouraging, positive and supportive school environment to reduce the risk of ESL. **A sense of belonging and a learning relationship between a teacher and a student that is based on mutual trust and respect are extremely important for young people**. Furthermore, opportunities for staff working with the target group to exchange experiences, practices and skills can be a way of spreading effective practice and learning.

Where there is not a strong culture of education within the community, **measures may be required to engage parents, to raise their awareness of the importance of education**, and to provide educational opportunities to enable them to improve their own skills.

Extra-curricular activities can not only help students to catch up and to revive their interest in learning, but also help them to re-build a positive relationship with the school and its staff, as well as provide fulfilling activities which can boost self-esteem and reduce frustration.

Providing second chances

Reintegration measures offer young people who have dropped out of mainstream education a second chance to learn or to achieve a qualification, or an alternative learning opportunity. **They vary in the intensity of support provided to participants, depending on the needs of their specific target groups**; some young people require counselling and practical support in addressing problems such as homelessness or substance abuse before they can embark on a journey of reintegration to education, while others are motivated to return and just need to be given a second chance to undertake their studies.

Any action targeting those who have already left school must begin with a process of engagement, of building trust and a sense of belonging. It should also be infused with high expectations, be structured as well as safe and challenging. In addition, it is important to note that many early school leavers regard themselves as adults and expect to be treated as such. In their own descriptions of what has succeeded with them, words such as 'respect' and 'trust' recur.

Most reintegration measures aim to provide an alternative to mainstream education, either in content or teaching / learning styles. The initiatives use different ways of providing a student-centred, individualised approach to learning, which might be through the provision of guidance, mentoring, individual learning plans or case management for example. Teaching and learning styles used in reintegration measures are often practical and / or experiential. Initiatives providing more intensive support aim to take a 'whole person' approach, by addressing the full range of needs of the individual, from personal and social issues to gaps in learning. In fact, early school leavers may have additional gaps in skills and competences which must be filled before they can undertake further education, training or employment. Basic skills and life skills – going beyond basic literacy and numeracy to include for example financial and health literacy – can also be provided in smaller units or can be embedded within the teaching of other subjects.

Flexibility is key, in order to ensure that reintegration measures can be made to fit around the young person's other commitments, such as work and family responsibilities. A multi-

disciplinary approach, with mixed staff teams or collaboration with external stakeholders, means that the full range of support needs of the young person can be addressed. **Individual action plans and clear pathways for the future** – which may be made up of small units of learning – can be motivating for young people with low self-esteem and negative previous experiences of formal education. Related to this, **follow-up is important to ensure that the outcomes of the good work achieved by the reintegration measures are not lost in the long term.**

Indeed, there needs to be continuity, consistency and cohesion between services and supports available for young people. Otherwise young people can get confused in the web of different services. The ‘individual case manager’ approach adopted has the potential to offer a more consistent means of supporting at-risk youth than some other approaches, where young people are expected to find different services without any specific support.

The outcomes achieved by reintegration measures cannot always be evidenced through quantitative data. It is therefore necessary to find ways of measuring soft outcomes. Quality assurance frameworks should also be designed to take account of both quantitative and qualitative measures.

Finally, **a high proportion of actions attempting reintegration are temporary initiatives** and projects. Although ESL is a deeply embedded feature of EU education and training systems, there appears to be a tendency not to give a meaningful tenure or status to reintegration activities. This is something to be addressed in the future, while however recognising that it is challenging to replicate successful local projects on a larger scale. Developing regional or system-wide measures requires time and commitment. However, where governments recognise the importance of reintegrating young people who have dropped out of education and guarantee **support on reintegration efforts a long-term basis, greater cohesion can be achieved** as can greater clarity regarding best practices, standards and the training and support needs of learners and staff.

A summary of effective ESL practice

Across both (prevention and reintegration policies and measures), there are four broad features determining strategic success. These are:

- Acknowledgement of the issue and determination to firstly alleviate and, if possible, prevent it and secondly to reintegrate early leavers into education.
- Integrated strategic planning, policy implementation and service delivery and the provision of adequate and effective supports for both early school leavers and those who work with them.
- Creativity, innovation, flexibility and willingness to change on the part of policy makers and practitioners and, in particular, a problem-solving approach to the individual dilemmas encountered by early school leavers and those at risk of dropping out.
- A broad approach to service delivery (in and out of schools) that:
 - communicates compassion, respect, challenge and high expectations to early school leavers, their families, peers and communities;
 - encourages learners and promotes a sense of belonging;
 - is clear, cohesive, comprehensive and consistent, and is based on multi-agency work; and
 - is timely, vigilant, responsive, outcomes-oriented and cost-effective.

EU-level action on ESL

The **EU recognition of the urgent need** to address ESL has been channelled through a series of **strategic policy declarations establishing a European framework of action and targets**, as well as financial and organisational supports to the Member States. The [Lisbon Strategy](#) introduced a series of five benchmarks including one that concerned reducing the EU early school leaving average to 10 % by 2010. However, this target was not met and consequently the target was adopted again in May 2009 at the [2 941st Education, Youth and Culture Council meeting](#). In June 2010 the European heads of state and government adopted the [Europe 2020](#) strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Giving a strong message to Member States, the 10 % target on ESL was designated as **one of the headline targets underpinning this strategy**. The Member States have agreed to work towards the 10 % target through strategic frameworks for cooperation in education and training ([ET2010](#) and [ET2020](#)).

The issue has also been highlighted in several **Communications from the Commission on education and training**. Most notably, the Commission recently published a Communication on tackling early school leaving and a proposal for a Council Recommendation on policies to reduce ESL¹¹.

The importance of ensuring that all young people leave the education system with sufficient skills to enter the labour market has also been emphasised by the EU in the framework of the [European Employment Strategy](#) (EES). The **guidelines for Member States' employment policies** have highlighted the need to substantially reduce the number of young people who drop out of the school system early. **The European Commission's youth policies** have also underlined the importance of developing non-formal learning opportunities as one of a range of actions to address ESL.

The EU's broad strategic policy statements have been given expression in a range of **actions**. The priorities identified for the programming periods 2000-2006 and 2007-2013 of the [European Social Fund](#) (ESF) reflect the recognition on the part of the Commission and Member States of the need to tackle this problem through the modernisation of educational systems and curricula. The [Lifelong Learning Programme](#) (LLP) has also provided opportunities for the Member States to develop and implement actions in this area. For many years the annual strategic priorities of the LLP have emphasised the importance of supporting at-risk youth, for example, through the development of new second chance opportunities, better utilisation of ICT to motivate and enable learners to re-enter education and closer involvement of parents in their children's education.

Opportunities have also been facilitated for representatives of the Member States, NGOs, social partners and practitioners from schools and training institutions to exchange experiences. For example, for four years (2006-2010), key stakeholders from 17 countries had a chance to compare ESL policies and practices in different cities and countries across Europe (as part of the activities of the Cluster on Access and Social Inclusion). The [Study Visit](#) programme has also supported study visits for practitioners and policy makers on the topic of ESL. Other EES-related programmes operated by the Directorate-General Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL), such as the European Employment Observatory ([EEO](#)), Mutual Learning Programme of the European Employment Strategy ([MLP](#)) and PES to PES dialogue have also facilitated exchanges of experiences between Member States on the issue of ESL.

¹¹ The Action Plan, the Commission Communication and Staff Working Paper on early school leaving can be found: http://ec.europa.eu/education/school-education/doc2268_en.htm.

The development of **common European tools for education and training**, such as the European Qualifications Framework ([EQF](#)), has also helped to encourage reform at national level. The EQF for example has encouraged Member States to work towards the introduction of their own National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF), defining levels of learning in terms of learning outcomes. When qualifications are defined in this way it is possible to break them down into units, which means that individuals can incrementally accumulate units of learning towards a qualification. For early school leavers, who may have already completed parts of a qualification during their time in school, this presents an opportunity to undertake tailored learning in order to fill the gaps in their knowledge, rather than having to repeat a full course. Awarding learning in units can also be more motivating to individuals with low self-confidence and can lead to a sense of achievement each time a unit of learning is completed.

Of equal significance, the introduction of the EQF and respective NQFs indicates a shift in education and training qualifications emphasis from measuring learning 'inputs' (attendance at a training course, participation in a learning experience) towards **learning 'outcomes'** (the development of knowledge or skills). This means that qualifications frameworks can also be used to support the validation of non-formal and informal learning, which in itself is a potential means of supporting early school leavers, by providing an opportunity to recognise the skills and competences they have acquired outside of the school environment, for example in the workplace or home.

Finally, the [Youth on the Move](#) flagship initiative of the Europe 2020 Strategy has recently set out a framework for youth employment based on a number of priorities for reducing youth unemployment and improving youth job prospects, one of which is 'support for at-risk youth'.

Perceived outcomes of EU-level activities

It appears¹² that **a range of different 'soft law' measures introduced by the Commission have had an impact on national (and regional) efforts to reduce ESL.** Stakeholders from the Member States feel that European funding (ESF in particular) and clear ESL benchmarks allowing countries to compare their performance have had a particularly important impact on national (and regional) efforts to reduce ESL.

All of the Member States concerned confirmed that ESF co-funding had been used to finance activity aimed at preventing school failure and reintegrating those who have dropped out of education early; indeed, **the ESF was seen by many as the most effective EU instrument, affording the greatest impact.** Examples of ESF-funded actions include the introduction of differentiated curricula, special needs classes, second chance opportunities, early warning and attendance monitoring systems, social and labour market integration opportunities and improvements to existing guidance and counselling provisions.

ESF has been particularly important in supporting the *development of national approaches for tackling ESL.* This means that typically the desire to do something about ESL has been 'internal' but the ESF has provided the funding to seed actions. Unfortunately however in some cases Member States have failed to secure sustainable funding for their ESL policy approaches and continue to rely on ESF. ESF funded activities also need to be

¹² It is important to note that the 'outcomes' in this part of the report are not based on a formal evaluation of the activities of the European Commission in this field. Instead, they are based on the perceptions of interviewees on this issue and information from literature.

appropriately defined and targeted, based on a precise assessment of the extent and nature of the problem being faced at national, regional or local.

Another benefit of European funding (all strands) identified by several stakeholders was that it has encouraged the development of a culture of monitoring and evaluation, though it is widely recognised that **further improvement in this regard is still needed**. In the future, it is important to target EU funds at activities that can have a sustainable impact on the lives of young people and working practices of key stakeholders (authorities and schools).

Although the awareness of the 10 % benchmark on ESL is patchy among some stakeholders, **a total of 61 % of stakeholder respondents to this study stated that the benchmark had had an impact on their policy making ('some' or 'significant')**. Only 18 % of the interviewees stated that there had been no impact. In some countries it has helped to raise an interest in the issue, measure it and define it. More commonly it has helped to reinforce and maintain the national focus on the issue as in most countries it had already been recognised as an important policy priority before the benchmark was first introduced. It has also served as a benchmark against which progress in the country could be measured. In some cases this factor has generated 'peer pressure' to act in this field because they have not wanted to be seen to lag behind other countries. The benchmark has also been picked up by the media in many countries, adding pressure on some governments to take action. This was seen as a positive outcome. At the same time, it is important to note that this pressure is felt more in some countries than others.

Overall, Member State respondents felt that there was a lack of evidence to demonstrate whether other EU level activities, tools and programmes have had an effect on ESL policies in their country¹³.

In relation to the future, it is **expected that the Europe 2020 benchmark on ESL will help to continue to reinforce the importance of the topic** and maintain its high profile. The request for the Member States to set their own targets on ESL and the advent of the 'European Semester' are expected to have a positive impact on the ESL agenda. In recent years, a number of countries have also set up more ambitious targets.

Key recommendations

This study provides an overview of the current state-of-play across Europe in relation to the issue of early school leaving, based on a review of policies and measures in all EU Member States and more in-depth research in nine case study countries. On the basis of this work, it is possible to identify some areas of policy and provision which need to be strengthened, or where gaps need to be filled. These are outlined below.

On the basis of the findings of our study, **we recommend that the European Commission:**

- Promotes the understanding in the Member States of ESL as a complex phenomenon influenced by a range of educational, individual and socio-economic factors.
- Continues to monitor developments in the scale and scope of the ESL phenomenon at different education levels across the Member States. Setting targets can help to maintain its high profile.

¹³ It is important to note that officials with direct links to many of these activities were not interviewed for this study – the views are simply based on the opinions of interviewed actors working on the ESL agenda in the nine study countries.

- Continues to co-fund opportunities for the Member States to reform and improve education and training systems that can better cater for the needs of at-risk youth. As regards funding, the following actions should be considered:
 - Ensure that funding is focussed on producing sustainable results – that is, activities that lead to permanent change in the working practices of authorities at different levels – rather than large numbers of new projects, especially in countries where many pilot activities have been already been implemented.
 - European co-financed activities for ESL should be implemented on the basis of adequate analysis of the existing situation and the expected or targeted results.
 - A multi-disciplinary approach is required to tackle ESL and therefore the EU could consider making it a condition of funding measures supporting interventions to tackle early school leaving in the Member States that these cross the boundaries of different sectors (i.e. education, employment, social affairs and youth).
 - Funding could be directed towards more precisely targeted and/or defined actions or priority groups under the available funding programmes (i.e. ESF, LLP).
- Continues to strengthen horizontal cooperation and the exchange of experience and good practice among the Member States (both among policy makers and practitioners) on the measures to prevent ESL and to reintegrate young people into purposeful educational and training activities. This will mean enhancing working groups and peer learning opportunities by making them more target-oriented.
- Continues to gather evidence and promote the socio-economic benefits of preventing early school leaving (for example, by supporting research into the short and long-term cost impacts of ESL) and successful approaches to addressing ESL in different contexts. As an example, an online Best Practice Observatory could be established as a central site gathering successful models of policy and practice which could be linked with working groups, networks and peer learning programmes.
- Encourages Member States to invest in better monitoring of early school leavers. Early warning systems can prove particularly effective.

In terms of ESL policies and strategies, we recommend that national/regional(/local) authorities:

- Ensure that they have a comprehensive, coordinated strategy in place for tackling ESL.
- Review the strategy on a regular basis to make sure that policies and provision remain appropriate to the current context and needs.
- Develop and implement ESL policies in close interaction with broader policies affecting the lives of children and young people.
- Ensure that policy and other decision makers are aware of the costs and consequence of ESL; too often 'exclusion from education' goes hand in hand with exclusions of other kinds (e.g. social exclusion, health problems, involvement in criminal activity, inactivity, unemployment).
- Reduce their focus on ESL approaches that rely on large numbers of projects dealing with the issue on a small-scale and with short-term funding. Instead, ensure that addressing early school leaving is part of an effort to improve the quality of education for all, combined with targeted approaches to support those most at risk.

Such strategies need to apply to schools of both general and vocational education and need to be tailored to local, regional and national conditions.

- Place the long-term focus on prevention and early intervention, although a combination of preventive and reintegration measures is always needed. Prevention can prove particularly (cost-)effective and early interventions are important because reintegration can become progressively more difficult as the period of disengagement extends.
- Ensure that the findings from research, monitoring and evaluation are taken into account and acted upon; effective ESL policies are based on evidence about factors leading to ESL, as well as an understanding of the number and profile of early school leavers.
- Ensure that ESL policies are driven by the needs of young people rather than institutional or system-based needs; the young person needs to be placed at the heart of the common vision on how to tackle ESL. This can be done, for example, by ensuring that young people and organisations / practitioners working with at-risk youth, are meaningfully consulted about policies affecting them.
- There is merit also in ensuring better involvement of parents in the education process. Methods and tools should be shared with schools about ways to engage parents of at-risk students and raise their awareness about the importance of education.

In relation to the allocation of responsibilities, we recommend that national/regional/local authorities:

- Make inter-agency and multi-disciplinary working reality at national, regional and local levels; ESL is the result of a combination of factors and cannot be tackled by education authorities alone. Therefore, inter-agency working can be more cost-effective by avoiding overlap and duplication of effort and can also help to ensure that no child / young person slips through the net.
- Consider giving the *overall responsibility for coordination* of the work to tackle ESL to one party. However, this coordinator needs to be committed to working with authorities from education, youth, social, health and employment spheres, also social partners, parents, NGOs, the youth sector and young people themselves.
Make available funding and time, when inter-agency, multi-disciplinary working is not yet in place, so as to ensure that a collaborative approach is embedded into mainstream practice (rather than on project activities).
- Strengthen links with youth and student organisations, NGOs working with vulnerable groups and social partners. Collaboration with social partners can increase the labour market responsiveness of learning, while outreach work undertaken by NGOs, mentors and community groups can help to identify and reach the hardest-to-help groups. The importance of peer support cannot be underestimated either. Youth as well as student sector actions targeting young people in out-of-school contexts should continue to be supported but they can also play an important part in supporting the school completion agenda.
- Consider, where appropriate, giving schools and local partners greater autonomy to find their own solutions to meet the needs of young people who are at risk of or have already dropped out. However this must be balanced by effective monitoring and accountability.

The main report for this study provides a comprehensive overview of different measures adopted by the Member States to approach the problem of ESL and

discusses their successes and limitations. A number of specific areas requiring attention have emerged in relation to **the practical implementation of measures** to tackle ESL. **We recommend that national/regional/local authorities pay particular attention to the following issues:**

- Reviewing secondary-level curricula to ensure they are sufficiently tailored to the individual and offer flexible learning pathways and individual learning plans which meet the needs of learners in terms of content (both academic and vocational) and learning styles. In tandem, teachers then need to be provided with appropriate continuing professional development opportunities to ensure that they have the competences to work with new methods of teaching and learning.
- Consider providing supplementary tuition (individual or small group tuition) as a way of minimising the number of students who are required to repeat a year and helping to stop individual students from falling behind, before these have a serious impact on their educational achievement and increase their risk of dropping out.
- The need to promote the importance of an encouraging, positive and supportive school environment to reduce the risk of ESL. A sense of belonging and a learning relationship between a teacher and a student that is based on mutual trust and respect are extremely important for young people.
- The promotion of better collection of data on ESL and systems to monitor absenteeism as they can help to develop focused policy and act as early warning systems that enable schools and authorities to intervene early and thereby reduce the risk of exclusion.
- The need to connect education / training with the world of work, e.g. via work experience, mentoring and vocational pathways based on work-based learning. This can increase young people's perceptions of the relevance and value of their education and improve their employability.
- The availability and quality of counselling (psychological and emotional support) and career guidance in schools and training institutions.
- Ensuring teachers, head teachers, counsellors and other practitioners working with potential or actual school leavers are adequately trained, supported, motivated and empowered. This can be done by:
 - investing in teachers training – initial and continuing – to ensure that teachers and head teachers have the skills and competences to deal with at-risk youth;
 - ensuring that teachers and other practitioners regard young people as resourceful individuals, rather than as trouble-makers or under-achievers; and
 - promoting high educational expectations for all – teachers' expectations should not be different for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- The importance of making sure that children start school on an equal footing, by improving access to high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC).
- Support for students in transition points from one level of education to another as a way of ensuring that these transition points are seamless (in order to do so, collaboration and communication with other schools and authorities is vital).
- Making sure that the support on offer in VET institutions is sufficient to meet the needs of the student cohort.
- The need for a range of reintegration measures, including those which take a 'whole person' approach to address the full range of issues faced by individuals with complex needs.