

STUDY

Requested by the CULT committee



Research for CULT Committee - How to tackle early school leaving in the EU



Culture and Education



Policy Department for Economic, Scientific and Quality of Life Policies
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Abstract

This study is a concise update on early school leaving in the EU. It reviews the main developments and causes of the problem since the *Council Recommendation of 2011 on policies to reduce early school leaving*, and identifies policy initiatives taken by the Member States to address it. The study explores the interplay between early school leaving and public investment and lastly outlines recommendations to address future challenges. The study takes into consideration European and national literature focusing on six Member States.

This document was requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education.

AUTHORS

Panteia: Amber VAN DER GRAAF, Paul VROONHOF, Georgios ROULLIS, Federica VELLI

Research manager: Pierre HERIARD

Project and publication assistance: Lyna PÄRT

Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, European Parliament

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ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

To contact the Policy Department or to subscribe to updates on our work for the CULT Committee please write to: Poldep-cohesion@ep.europa.eu

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CF	Cohesion Fund
CULT	Culture and Education Committee
EACEA	Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency
EAFRD	European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
EC	European Commission
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EMFF	European Maritime and Fisheries Fund
EP	European Parliament
EPAL	Vocational secondary education in Greece
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESF	European Social Fund
ESI	European structural and investment funds
ESL	Early School Leaving
ET	Education and Training
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
NEETS	Not in Education, Employment, or Training
VET	Vocational Education and Training
YEI	Youth Employment Initiative

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Decreasing early school leaving (ESL) is one of the current priorities of the European Union in the field of education and training. ESL is a problem that affects all Member States to different degrees and which has serious repercussions on young people as well as for society at large. Indeed, young people between 18 and 24 who did not attain lower secondary education and who are not receiving any education or training can face difficulties when finding employment as well as have limited employment prospects. ESL is also associated with disengagement from social, political and cultural activities, which further compromises the situation of an early school leaver. In fact, ESL is a multifaceted phenomenon which comes into existence because a number of factors, most notably, a person's socio-economic situation, a family's educational background, market push and pull factors but also the relationship with the school and the programmes offered, and not less for individual reasons.

With the objective to reduce ESL throughout the Union, the EU set the objective to decrease the level of early school leavers to 10% within the Europe 2020 strategy. Later in 2011, the Council issued a Recommendation on reducing early school leaving inviting the Member States to adopt policies for prevention, intervention and reintegration. Within this context, this study aims to provide a current representation of the problem of ESL since the adoption of the abovementioned Recommendation while updating the 2011 study of the European Parliament 'Reducing early school leaving in the EU'.¹

Aim

The present study aims to provide an update of the 2011 European Parliament Study 'Reducing early school leaving in the EU' and:

- Present current developments of early school leaving in the European Union, outlining the main causes and drivers of the problem ;
- Understand the policies adopted by the Member States striving to prevent and/or intervene on the problem, or focused at the re-integration of early school leavers in education;
- Explore the relation between Member States' investment in education and the rate of ESL;
- Identify future challenges and provide recommendations on how to tackle ESL.

In order to do so, this study is based on international as well as national literature on the topic of ESL and an in-depth analysis of six Member States: Greece, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, and Sweden. Information were gathered through desk research as well as semi-structured interviews with experts at the national and European level.

Early School Leaving in the EU since 2011

A number of countries have made much progress since 2011 in reducing their rates of ESL. Some of the top performers in terms of reducing their rates of ESL are Portugal (with a reduction in ESL of 10.4%),

¹ European Parliament, Directorate General for Internal Policies, Policy Department B 'Reducing Early School leaving in the EU' (2011). Available at: <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail//publication/b0be26a1-8c22-4075-ba1f-f8f9840fe325/language-en/format-PDF/source-84695522>

Spain (reduction of 8%), and Greece (reduction of 6.9%). Ireland is not far behind in this regard, with a reduction of 5.7% in ESL between 2011 and 2017.

Countries which struggled more with ESL than the European average are in shorter supply. Nevertheless, certain Member States experienced increases in ESL between 2011 and 2017. Slovakia for example, experienced the highest increase in ESL with 4.2%. Luxembourg, Hungary, and Sweden in turn all saw a more modest rise in their national ESL rates with 1.1%.

Drivers and causes of ESL

Drivers of early school leaving are often categorised into three levels: Individual level factors, which this study understands as all those factors, which affect the individual student more directly. Institutional level factors, which relate to the school or VET institution environment, the educational practices, and teachers. And national macro level factors that focus on contextual factors affecting early school leaving.

Since 2011, the individual level drivers have not changed much over time. The influence of gender and nationality on an individual's likeliness of leaving school early are broadly recognised. The driver of socio-economic background was found to be one of the strongest drivers of ESL by academic research, and is also commonly cited as an individual level cause of ESL across the EU.

System level drivers, which relate to the school and educational institution levels on the other hand, vary more per country, and some of these have changed since 2011. The school environments, teaching practices, and quality of teachers appear to vary more across countries, and even within regions within countries.

Since 2011, however, the effects of the economic crisis have settled to a large degree, and labour markets exercise different push and pull forces on students compared to 2011, when unemployment, and especially youth unemployment was higher in the EU. This driver and the effect of the unemployment rate on the decision to leave school early interacts strongly with a pupil's socio-economic background.

Policy interventions to tackle Early School Leaving

Policies affecting ESL can be divided in measures having a preventative or interventive nature or policies aimed at the re-integration of students in education. These measures tend to target the national structural level, or the system level, though this means the policies also affect individual students.

Based on the current study there does not appear to be much specific national policy focus on early school leaving specifically; rather early school leaving policies are often related to broader policy programmes on improving education and social inclusion, reducing poverty, and labour market policies.

Analysing the impacts of different policy interventions on early school leaving is a complicated process and difficult. The reason for this being that early school leaving is a complex process itself, born of many different factors and drivers from the individual, system, and national macro level. To identify the effect of a single individual policy on this process is methodologically difficult to do; one cannot rule out interaction effects with other policies and other drivers.

What can be said however is that some of the individual level drivers remain similar if not the same across countries. This suggests that certain types of policies may be useful to target certain types of common challenges.

There appear to be trends in which types of policy approaches are used to address certain types of challenges. The connection between types of drivers and types of policy interventions to address those drivers could be an interesting point for further, deeper study.

The trends in the use of certain policy types is reflected back in EU level research as well. All EU countries have policies in place, which somehow address or help to reduce early school leaving. EU level research documents show that common practices to reduce early school leaving centre on improving the quality of teachers and teaching, better access to good quality early childhood education and care (ECEC), and better provision of career and educational guidance in schools. At a national level, implementing databases to monitor absenteeism of students is also cited as a general and useful approach to reducing ESL, as is better cooperation between different governmental department and institutions.

Public Investment on education and Early School Leaving

Based on the numbers provided, it appears that the **biggest spenders** on education include Sweden (7.04%), Finland (6.75%), Belgium (6.43%), France (5.47%), and Austria (5.43%). The **lowest expenditure** on education include Romania (2.72%), Greece (3.68%), Ireland (3.77%), and the Czech Republic (3.79%).

Despite being one of the highest spenders when it comes to education, Sweden demonstrates an increase in the rate of Early School Leaving. Furthermore, some of the lower spenders on education (based on the data used here), include Greece and Ireland, which are also amongst the top performers in terms of reducing the rates of ESL. What should be noted is that a large proportion of spending on education comes from private sources in Greece. This suggests that the landscape of investment in education, and its relationship with ESL should be examined in further detail.

The data at hand suggests that the relationship between public investment in education and reducing early school leaving is not immediately evident, no linear correlation appears. This is perhaps not so surprising given that drivers from other levels and policy fields also contribute to ESL.

It is therefore not so much a question of how much you spend, but rather, what you spend on it. More efficient and targeted spending based on needs of pupils in a country, could be a good starting point for approaching public expenditure to reduce ESL. The examples provided by Greece and Ireland could be further examined. According to information received during the study, Portugal would also be a relevant country to investigate further, as of course are countries with a (longer-time) low level of ESL.

The lack of immediate relationship between ESL rates and spending on education may suggest that to properly investigate the relationship, the public investment in other areas such as the labour market, or social inclusion and the reduction of poverty are also important to consider in order to establish a more accurate insight on the correlation between public investment and ESL.

Future Challenges and Recommendations

On the basis of the overview on the current situation of ESL in Europe and of a review of the Member States' policies to tackle ESL, in particular of six of them, persisting challenges can primarily be addressed by:

- Setting up **registers on absenteeism** to be able to monitor ESL systematically, and to establish targeted national and system level responses.
- Promoting more **sustained, cross-governmental cooperation** to foster a comprehensive policy approach.

- Research confirms the need to keeping **adopting comprehensive strategies** to target early school leaving. Countries should ideally adopt policies that target youth, social inclusion, education, and labour market areas. A comprehensive approach would ideally also focus on helping the individual pupil, supporting schools at the system level, and target national level drivers.
- Look at the **needs of students at the local level** when designing policies and programme
- More understanding and **further efforts by schools to make education and training more accessible to harder to reach groups** of students.
- Focus the efforts at the national and the system level to **help the groups of students most at risk** to reduce the chances of their leaving school or training early
- To **provide training and guidance to teachers** in how to keep engaging students from different backgrounds.
- Better and more **continuous training of teachers in recognising the signs of students at risk of dropping out.**
- For the European Parliament a recommendation would be to try to promote the implementation of such policy measures, and to work with other EU institutions **to raise the awareness of the different funds and EU supports**, which are available to help end users in Member States to set up such policies.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Study rationale

Panteia is pleased to present the report for the study on ‘How to Tackle Early School Leaving’ for the CULT Committee of the European Parliament. The rationale behind this study is to provide a concise update for the European Parliament regarding the level of early school leaving in the European Union, and to examine to what degree the 2011 Council Recommendation on this issue have been applied in Member States.

Early school leaving (ESL) can have serious consequences for young people in terms of finding employment, and their employment prospects in the long term. The process is associated with high societal and economic costs. On a personal level, research shows that leaving education early can lead to an increased likelihood of unemployment, socio-economic disadvantage, and health issues. Furthermore, ESL is associated with lower participation in social, political and cultural activities as well. This in turn can also affect the children of early school leavers, thus continuing the cycle.

The EU defines early school leaving as **young people aged between 18 and 24, who have attained no higher than lower secondary education and who are not currently receiving any education or training.**

This definition should be borne in mind as Member States sometimes use a slightly different understanding of early school leaving, sometimes capturing a broader age group for example.

Given the importance of ESL to the EU’s human capital and society as a whole, this study aims to arrive at an understanding of what the current main challenges are in this area, and to examine policy initiatives taken by Member States so far. Ultimately, the study aims to arrive at an indication of how public investment has helped reduce the rates of early school leaving. In fact, the overall aim of this study is as follows:

The primary aim of the project is to provide useful, authoritative and timely information as well as analysis and recommendations to the CULT Committee on the subject of “How to tackle early school leaving in the EU?” It will consist in updating a study on Reducing early school leaving in the EU carried out by the Policy Department in 2010-2011.

The European Parliament published a large-scale study in 2011 on this subject. The rates of early school leaving and key drivers were examined for the EU28. This past study also examined the various policy measures that had been taken to date in Member States, and given the breadth of the project, provided an assessment of the effectiveness of policy measures to reduce early school leaving, together with a series of recommendations on how to tackle the issue.

1.2. Study objectives and methodological approach

The present study aims to arrive at an understanding of what the current main challenges are in this area, and to examine policy initiatives taken by Member States. Ultimately, the study aims to arrive at an indication of how public investment has helped reduce the rates of early school leaving. Four separate study objectives have been developed by the CULT committee, and these have been operationalised by the research team.

Study objective 1: Provide an update of the above-mentioned study comprising a presentation of the main developments observed over the last 7 years, with the most recent figures and statistics. This

presentation will analyse both the case of EU countries facing the biggest difficulties and the case of EU countries having made most progress;

Study objective 2: Highlight the causes of the changes occurred over the last seven years and the impact of EU and/or national policies, in particular the Council Recommendation of 28 June 2011 on policies to reduce early school leaving;

Study objective 3: Investigate the relation between public investment in education systems and early school leaving;

Study objective 4: Outline potential future developments of the fields for which policy responses need to be prepared (new risks factors? evolving societal expectations?).

The **methodology** used for this study is based predominantly on desk research and semi-structured in-depth interviews with experts in fields relating to early school leaving. Desk research was conducted on academic and policy literature since 2011. The study included a European level examination of research, as well as a closer examination of 6 selected Member States. These 6 were selected to study a representative mix of large and small Member States which were geographically spread, and which showed varying levels of ESL rate progression, with some performing well and others less well. The countries studied in practice were Greece, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Slovakia and Sweden.

These Member States were examined in order to explore the topics covered in the study objectives listed above, namely the changes in ESL and the drivers behind ESL rates in different countries, what sort of policies had been implemented to address those drivers of ESL, and to examine to what degree a relationship exists between ESL and public expenditure.

In the context of the national level research, national level desk research was conducted and given the modest size of this study, one expert interview conducted in each country to understand the main trends in ESL and drivers of ESL in the country. Experts were also asked about what they considered to be the main future trends in ESL and how these trends ought to be met.

In parallel to the national level research, three interviews were held with EU level experts and policy makers to gain a more global view of the trends, drivers, and future challenges surrounding ESL in the EU, as well as which types of policies have been implemented so far to reduce ESL.

The research was carried out from December 2018 to February 2019.

1.3. Contents of report

This report is organised as follows. Chapter 2 addresses the first study objective on the changes in ESL rates in the EU since 2011. Chapter 3 then moves to discuss the main drivers, which affect ESL, and draws on the national research to illustrate how these drivers manifest in practice. Chapter 4 then addresses the types of policies that have been implemented in connection with ESL in general terms, and provides an overview into what has been done by different countries in terms of policy interventions. In doing so, Chapters 3 and 4 address study objective two. Chapter 5 refers to EU funding in education and vocational training and presents findings on the public expenditure by Member States discussing the degree to which a relationship can be established between expenditure and ESL. Last but not least, Chapter 6 presents the main insights and recommendations on tackling ESL in Europe.

2. DEVELOPMENTS IN ESL IN THE EU SINCE 2011

KEY FINDINGS

- Since 2011, the rate of early school leaving has decreased in EU28 by 2.8%, from 13.4% in 2011 to 10.6% in 2017. Among the Member States, there are differences in performance regarding their 2020 national targets, with some performing well (i.e. Ireland, Greece) and some others less well (i.e. Slovakia).
- 18 member states had ESL rate below 10% in 2017 with the lowest rate to be that of Croatia (3%). On the other hand, the highest rate appears in Estonia (18.3%).
- Portugal showed considerable performance these 7 years, reducing ESL by 10.4%, from 23% in 2011 to 12.6% in 2017, followed by Spain (reduction of 8%) and Greece (reduction of 6.9%). On the contrary, Slovakia had the least improvement in the period between 2011-2017, where ESL rate increased by 4.2%, from 5.1% to 9.3%, followed by Luxemburg, Hungary and Sweden (increase of 1.1%).
- The majority of the countries show to have already achieved or to head of their national targets for 2020. However, there are examples of member states that are still far from it (i.e. Romania and Malta).

2.1. ESL rates in the EU since 2011

Since the Council Recommendation of 2011, the EU communicated a stronger policy focus on the topic of Early School Leaving in Europe. To get a first indication of how ESL rates have changed in the EU, the table below presents the ESL rates from 2011, compared with latest data from 2017, and the progress made in that time. In cases where a country's ESL difference is negative, this shows ESL rates have decreased in 2017 compared with 2011.

Table 1: ESL rates developments 2011-2017, EU28.

Member State	2011	2014	2017	Difference (2017-2011)	2020 country targets
EU28	13.4	11.2	10.6	-2.8	10
BE	12.3	9.8	8.9	-3.4	9.5
BG	11.8	12.9	12.7	0.9	11
CZ	4.9	5.5	6.7	1.8	5.5
DK	9.6	7.8	8.8	-0.8	10
DE	11.6	9.5	10.1	-1.5	<10
EE	10.6	12.0	10.8	0.2	9.5
IE	10.8	6.9	5.1	-5.7	8
EL	12.9	9.0	6.0	-6.9	<10

ES	26.3	21.9	18.3	-8.0	15
FR	12.3	9.0	8.9	-3.4	9.5
HR	5.0	2.7	3.1	-1.9	4
IT	17.8	15.0	14.0	-3.8	16
CY	11.3	6.8	8.5	-2.8	10
LV	11.6	8.5	8.6	-3.0	10
LT	7.4	5.9	5.4	-2.0	<9
LUX	6.2	6.1	7.3	1.1	<10
HU	11.4	11.4	12.5	1.1	10
MT	22.7	20.3	17.7	-5.0	10
NL	9.2	8.7	7.1	-2.1	8
AT	8.5	7.0	7.4	-1.1	9.5
PL	5.6	5.4	5.0	-0.6	4.5
PT	23.0	17.4	12.6	-10.4	10
RO	18.1	18.1	18.1	0.0	11.3
SI	4.2	4.4	4.3	0.1	5
SK	5.1	6.7	9.3	4.2	6
FI	9.8	9.5	8.2	-1.6	8
SE	6.6	6.7	7.7	1.1	<7
UK	14.9	11.8	10.6	-4.3	No target in national reform target

Source: Panteia based on Eurostat data

Note: blue rows are those countries that have been selected for further study

2.2. Member States progress in reducing ESL

The data above demonstrates that some of the top performers in reducing ESL include several southern European Member States. These countries were hit especially hard by the financial crisis of 2011. While this is no doubt not the only force affecting education and early school leaving, there may be a relationship here. Contextual level drivers, along with other drivers are discussed more in the following section.

A number of countries have made much progress since 2011 in reducing their rates of ESL. Some of the top performers in terms of reducing their rates of ESL are Portugal (with a reduction in ESL of 10.4%),

Spain (reduction of 8%), and Greece (reduction of 6.9%). Ireland is not far behind in this regard, with a reduction of 5.7% in ESL between 2011 and 2017.

Countries that struggled more with ESL than the European average are in shorter supply. Nevertheless, certain Member States experienced increases in ESL between 2011 and 2017. Slovakia for example, experienced the highest increase in ESL with – 4.2%. Luxembourg, Hungary, and Sweden in turn all saw a more modest rise in their national ESL rates with -1.1%.

In order to achieve the 2020 target of 10%, each Member State set its own national target on reducing ESL. Fourteen countries appear to have achieved their national target, with the best performers to be Ireland and Greece. In particular, Greece reduced ESL rate to 6.9% while Ireland decreased it to 5.1%, percentages well below their 2020 national targets which are <10% and 8% respectively. The majority of the other countries show to head of their national targets, with some to be close to achieve it (such as Denmark, Finland). In the following chapters, this report will provide a strong indication that these positive trends were a result of countries' effort towards ESL reduction with implementation of policies that were (in majority) in line with the 2011 Council recommendation.

Some Member States are still far from reaching their 2020 national targets. For instance Romania and Malta are both more than 7% above their national targets. There are also countries moving away from their national targets. In three countries, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Sweden, ESL rates were below their target in 2011. However, the following years their ESL rates increased and in 2017 were above national targets.

3. DRIVERS AND CAUSES OF ESL

KEY FINDINGS

- Drivers of early school leaving are often categorised into three levels: individual level factors, which this study understands as all those factors, which affect the individual student more directly. Institutional level factors which relate to the school or VET institution environment, the educational practices, and teachers. National macro level factors focus on contextual factors, which affect early school leaving.
- Since 2011, the individual level drivers have not changed much over time. The influence of gender and nationality on an individual's likeliness of leaving school early are broadly recognised. The driver of socio-economic background was found to be one of the strongest drivers of ESL by academic research, and is commonly cited as an individual level cause of ESL across the EU.
- System level drivers, which relate to the school and educational institution levels on the other hand, vary more per country, and some of these have changed since 2011. In particular school environments, teaching practices, and quality of teachers appear to vary more across countries, and even within regions within countries.
- Since 2011, the effects of the economic crisis have settled to a large degree, and labour markets exercise different push and pull forces on students compared to 2011, when unemployment, and especially youth unemployment was higher in the EU. This driver and the effect of the unemployment rate on the decision to leave school early interacts strongly with a pupil's socio-economic background.

Early school leaving is a complex issue, with drivers and causes originating at the individual, the institutional, and the national contextual level. These different factors and causes can also interact, so that the nature of early school leaving and its causes can differ per country, and even per region within a country. This chapter presents a summary of the main research available regarding the drivers of early school leaving.

The causes of early school leaving are frequently conceived in terms of three levels:

1. **Individual level factors**, which this study understands as all those factors, which affect the individual student more directly.
2. **Institutional level factors**: these relate to the school or VET institution environment, the educational practices, and teachers.
3. **National macro level factors**: this centres on national level contextual factors, which affect early school leaving. We consider national level forces here such as the economics of a country, its labour market, education and training policy in a country, and the socio-cultural perceptions regarding education.

Early school leaving should be viewed as a process, and not a sudden phenomenon. Students reach the decision to leave school early for a variety of reasons. Different drivers and causes can interact to lead to a feeling of social exclusion and disengagement for an individual student, which in combination with further circumstances, lead to early school leaving.

3.1. Individual level drivers

The first level of factors to be examined are those, which this report understands as individual level factors. This category concerns drivers, which relate to the individual level, and include aspects such as the individual's own characteristics, family background, and an individual's peers. Each of these aspects are analysed in turn in the following paragraphs, with examples of how these drivers manifest in the six selected countries under study.

The **socio-economic background** of a student and their family can have an effect on the likelihood of leaving school or training early, before completing a qualification. Students who come from families with lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to be more likely to leave school early than those whose families hail from more affluent socio-economic backgrounds.² Some academic research even notes that the effect of the socio-economic background of a pupil is one of the strongest individual level determinants, which influence ESL.³

The resources of the family play a direct role in this, with some families not being able to afford education or training as easily as families with more financial resources and assets. When resources are low for a family, the comparative **opportunity cost of education** becomes higher compared to for instance, not learning but working in a paid job instead. In cases of families in disadvantaged, marginalised, or impoverished areas, this effect becomes more acute; the opportunity cost of education compared to working rises.⁴

The **structure of a family** may also affect the likelihood of leaving school early. Some research shows that in households where both parents work, or in single parent households, it can result in more responsibility being deferred to a young person at school or training. The pupil may need to contribute to looking after other young (or elderly) family members, or need to contribute to the household finances by getting a job next to their studies. This observation was cited in the European Parliament 2011 study, and little evidence has been found that this driver is no longer relevant. As such it is cited here as an individual level driver of early school leaving.

Box 1: Individual level drivers- family structure (Poland, Slovakia, Greece and Italy)

- In Poland, similar individual level drivers hold as in the rest of the EU. The pupil's immediate environment and socio-economic background, peers and family, as well as psychological barriers such as lack of confidence and low self-esteem, are seen as key individual level drivers amongst students across age groups for ESL.⁵
- In Slovakia, at the individual level, the drivers are also similar as in other EU countries. Socio-economic and family background greatly influence a student's performance. This is especially evident in the context of ethnic minorities living in disadvantaged conditions and financial hardship. In regards to leaving VET education, low performance (often due to the lack of interest); limited support from family; and the lack of cooperation between school and family are the main reasons for leaving vocational training.⁶

² Tumino, Alberto; Taylor, Mark P. (2015) : The impact of local labour market conditions on school leaving decisions, ISER Working Paper Series, No. 2015-14, University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER), Colchester.

³ Jeroen Lavrijsen & Ides Nicaise (2015) *Social Inequalities in Early School Leaving: The Role of Educational Institutions and the Socioeconomic Context*, European Education, 47:4, 295-310, DOI: 10.1080/10564934.2015.1098265.

⁴ Jeroen Lavrijsen & Ides Nicaise (2015) *Social Inequalities in Early School Leaving: The Role of Educational Institutions and the Socioeconomic Context*, European Education, 47:4, 295-310, DOI: 10.1080/10564934.2015.1098265.

⁵ Early School Leaving. Monitoring and Preventative Solutions. Prevention and reintegration methods (2016). Available at: http://www.syscopolska.pl/pliki_ftp/O2_Prevention%20and%20reintegration_EN.pdf (accessed at 18-12-2018).

⁶ Cedefop REFERNET, 'Early leaving from vocational education and training in Slovakia' (2013)

- In Greece, a family's socio-economic background plays an important role in ESL. Low income of parents, low socio-economic background of the head of the household, low educational level of the parents and whether parents are unemployed are all factors that can increase ESL rates. In particular, households with economic difficulties cannot cope with the expenses of the private tutorial schools, thus their child lose the ability to achieve the high expectations of the curricular program, losing therefore their motivation for education. Furthermore, children from families with these characteristics are likely to have the need or wish to dropout school in order to contribute to the family income.
- Early school leaving remains largely determined by family background also in Italy. It is observed that the school system is not managing to invert this trend and give more opportunities to students from lower income families or lower educational background.⁷

Other aspects of a family background can also play a role. The **geographical location** of a student's family home can have an impact on the likelihood of leaving school of training earlier. On average, students living in rural areas of a country are more like to leave school early than students living in a city or more urban areas⁸. This relates to the quality of education in more rural areas. In addition, it will often be harder to reach schools. Within urban areas, there can also be discrepancies between areas. Research demonstrates that within urban areas, early schoolleaving rates tend to be higher in disadvantaged areas.

Box 2: Individual level drivers-geographical location (Greece, Italy, Ireland and Slovakia)

- In Greece, some of the drivers leading to ESL remain, despite the country's progress in this area: regardless of the positive findings, there are still significant differences between geographical districts. It can be noted that some regions have particularly high percentages of ESL, such as the eastern region of Eastern Macedonia and the northern and southern Aegean and Epirus regions.
- Because of the economic disparity between the north and south of Italy, regional differences in early school leaving can be partially explained by different socio-economic situations. The highest dropout rates are registered in some of the least developed regions mainly in the southern part of Italy and on the two large islands. In parallel, significant ESL rates are also present in deprived metropolitan districts where there is a concentration of immigrant communities.⁹
- Ireland and Slovakia are characterised by uneven ESL levels between rural and urban areas. In Slovakia, for example, rural areas are more affected by the phenomenon (10.9% in 2017) in comparison to cities (4.0%). In addition, the rate of ESL in towns and suburbs has also increased strongly in the last seven years, from 4.3% in 2011 to 9.3% in 2017.¹⁰

⁷ Maddalena Colombo, "La prevenzione della dispersione scolastica in Italia: quali strategie per spezzare i circoli viziosi?" (Conference paper presented at University of Cagliari, 18-19 september 2014 in "Scelte scolastiche e crisi del sistema educativo" of "Andare a scuola oggi") citing Istat, Cnel, 2013, p. 49

⁸ Nikolaou, S. M., Papa, M., & Gogou, L. (2018). Early School Leaving in Greece and Europe and Educational Inequality: Actions and Policies against Educational and Social Exclusion. *European Journal of Social Sciences Education and Research*

⁹ Federico Fragasso and Francesco Picone, 'Preventing Initial Dropout and fostering Trainee's inclusion: report on the national situation, Italy', In-VET Report 2014. Available at: http://invet-project.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/National-Report_Italy_Final.pdf

¹⁰ Eurostat, Early leavers from education and training by sex and degree of urbanization [last update 11.10.2018] Online data code: edat_ifse_30

Next, a student's **peers and friends** influence their likelihood of leaving school or training early. Peers can be either classmates or friends, and both can have influence on a student's appreciation for their school or education, or their feelings of inclusion at school. For example, amongst classmates, bullying can be an important factor for leaving school early. Friends in turn can also play a role, leading to virtuous or vicious circles. When friends also value their school or their training, a student is more likely to do so as well; a feeling of inclusion plays a role here as well as normalisation of participating and applying oneself to school. The reverse however can also be true; friends, who engage in truancy or substance abuse, can influence a student, normalising such behaviour instead. This in turn can lead to higher chances of early school leaving.¹¹

Box 3: Individual level drivers- peers and friends (Italy)

- As is the case in other European Member States, in Italy individual causes of early school leaving can encompass both external and subjective motivations. On the one hand, external reasons for abandoning education can include, among others, diseases, poverty, drug abuse, and difficult family situations. On the other, subjective drivers can include personal attitudes, suggestions from family, educational advices from middle school, and friends' influence.¹²

Other characteristics affiliated with the individual play a role, such as their **gender** and their **nationality**. The gendered phenomenon is well established in research, with early school leaving being systematically more prevalent amongst boys than girls across Europe. A pupil's nationality also has an effect on the likelihood of leaving school early. Early school leaving is a greater threat amongst individual with a migrant background¹³. Especially in cases where a migrant child is newly arrived in a country, language barriers and having a different educational background can lead to difficulties adapting at school. If such difficulties persist, this can enhance the chances of early school leaving.

Box 4: Individual level drivers -gender and nationality (Italy, Slovakia, Sweden, and Ireland)

- At the individual driver level, gender differences are also part of the aspects of early school leaving. In Italy, this phenomenon is more frequent in males, who tend to abandon their studies earlier their females peers. It is reported that, the perception of the 'man' as breadwinner has still a significant importance and can cause male students to leave the studies to economically support the family.¹⁴ The opposite situation takes place in Slovakia where more females leave school early, 10.3% compared to males 8.5% in 2017.¹⁵ This is thought to be connected with starting a family and early pregnancies, especially in the Roma communities.¹⁶
- As is the case in other European Member States, in Sweden some of the main individual level drivers centre on the pupil's background, namely whether they are Swedish or non-Swedish, and the family's socio-economic background. Eurostat data shows there are considerable

¹¹ RESL.eu, (2018), Attitudes of School Personnel, University of Middlesex

¹² Alessandro Pozzi, 'Giovani tra scuola e lavoro, dispersione scolastica, formazione e inserimento professionale in provincia di Pescara' (Franco Angeli, 2012); Maddalena Colombo, 2013, *Disadvantaged Life Itineraries and the Use of Personal Agency Among Italian Early School Leavers and At-Risk Students*. Estudios sobre Educación, Revista Semestral del Departamento de Educación de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la Universidad de Navarra Vol.24

¹³ RESL.eu, (2018) Attitudes of School Personnel

¹⁴ CARMA Project, 'Abbandono scolastico prematuro- Dati Statistici, Politiche e Buone Pratiche nell'Apprendimento Collaborativo (2016);

¹⁵ Eurostat data labour market and sex

¹⁶ Input from interview

differences between foreign-born and native-born early school leavers as well as early school leavers in rural areas compared to those in cities.¹⁷ Migrants and newly arrivals, which often are older and came from countries with weaker school systems, find it therefore difficult to follow the school progress. In particular, data shows that in Sweden, pupils born outside of Sweden have an ESL rate of almost 16% while the national average is just under 8%. Regarding the family background, the financial situation of parents as well as their educational background influence significantly the level of participation of their children.¹⁸

- Also in Italy students with a migrant background show higher levels of early school leaving. Possible reasons for this are the additional difficulties in adapting and participating to classes due to language, cultural and economic barriers.¹⁹ In 2017, migrant students who abandoned school reached the 33.1% (European average of migrant students leaving school early is 22.0%), a much higher percentage compared to Italian students 12.1%.²⁰ At the same time, however, in few countries such as Ireland, student's origins do not seem to be relevant in the context of ESL. Eurostat estimates that the percentage of non-Irish students leaving school early in 2017 was lower (4.2%) than that of nationals (5.1%).²¹

3.2. System level drivers: schools and VET institutions

The institutional level in this context constitutes schools and vocational education and training providers. The factors at this level which may affect early school leaving include issues such as the school size and location, the approach to teaching and general educational practices at the school or provider, and the quality of the teachers employed there²². These are all considered part of a school's or provider's general environment.

The way in which education and/or training is provided in a school or provider contributes to the feeling of engagement experienced by a student. Learning approaches and practices where students have less opportunity to engage with their peers or teachers can lead to feelings of isolation and a lack of motivation. This in turn can increase the chance of a student becoming an early school leaver. School practices where grade repetition is normal have also been shown to have adverse effects on students' self-esteem and motivation. Educational institutions where this is the norm therefore tend to have higher likelihoods of school dropouts.

Other educational practices, such as the availability of apprenticeships at enterprises, or the policy when it comes to failing students, affect the motivation and engagement of students. If students know

¹⁷ Eurostat (LFS, 2017). 'Early leavers from education and training by sex and country of birth' (online data code: [edat_lfse_02](#)) and 'Early leavers from education and training by sex and degree of urbanisation' (online data code: [edat_lfse_30](#))

¹⁸ Swedish Higher Education Authority (2017). "Early higher education drop-out rates in Sweden- Analyses of throughput rates of ten large study programmes". Report 2017:17 E (summary of Swedish full report 2017:17). Available at: <http://english.uka.se/download/18.18aa5939160507d580f229d/1513951218718/report-drop-out-rates.pdf> (accessed at 16-01-2019)

¹⁹ Marta Codato, 'Il Sociodramma come strategia di inclusione contro l'abbandono scolastico precoce (PensaMultiMedia Editore srl, 2018)

²⁰ Eurostat, Early leavers from education and training by sex and citizenship [last update 11-10-2018] Online data code: edat_lfse_01

²¹ Eurostat, Early leavers from education and training by sex and citizenship [last update 15.01.2019] Online data code: edat_lfse_01

²² Nikolau, et al. 2018.

that they have access to a good apprenticeship, and are learning useful, relevant skills in their studies, their levels of motivation for their education and/or training tend to remain higher. Where this is not the case, the lack of motivation and disengagement may take hold and increase the likelihood of early school leaving.

Box 5: System level drivers (Slovakia, Greece, and Italy)

- At the system level, Slovakia forms an interesting case. The rates of early school leaving appear to be influenced by informal segregation of schools in the country. Ethnic Slovak children are often transferred by their parents to schools with lower levels of Roma children; and secondly, a large proportion of Roma children are registered in special needs schools as opposed to the ethnic Slovak counterpart.²³ Being over-represented in classes with lower learning standards, hampers Roma children's possibility of completing school education and to find employment in the labour market.²⁴ Always at an institutional level, primary schools (competent for teaching primary and lower secondary education, which take 4 and 5 years respectively²⁵) might not offer the 9th grade or open the 9th grade if there is not a sufficient number of students with passing grades in order to attend it.²⁶ This forces students to travel to another school in order to complete lower secondary education that can result in "losing students" especially from the Roma minority.²⁷ Another important aspect when looking at the Slovakian education system is the low teacher salary, which has been the subject of several recent measures.²⁸
- The high rate of ESL during the first few months of the first grade of upper secondary vocational education is a key issue for Greece. An explanatory factor for this high rate could be that students begin on a vocational route but are quickly disappointed, either because the curriculum does not meet their expectations, or because they believe that their qualification will not increase their employment opportunities since it will not meet the needs of labour market.
- In Italy, a key system level challenge and driver of ESL, is that educational institutes are often unable to address the needs of students who are at risk of becoming early school leavers. Teachers are not frequently supported by authorities or schools when intervening to reverse the process of disengagement of students who have lost motivation and desire to continue their school.²⁹

²³ Amnesty International, 'Slovakia. Submission to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial discrimination' 94th session (20 November-8 December 2017) Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR7273222017ENGLISH.pdf>; REF Country Assessment, 'Advancing education of Roma in Slovakia' (2014) Available at: https://www.romaeducationfund.org/sites/default/files/publications/country_assessment_sk_2014_en.pdf

²⁴ European Commission, Education and Training Monitor 2016:Country Analysis Slovakia (2016) and Executive Summary (2016)

²⁵ Eurydice website, Slovakia Key features of the education system https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/slovakia_en

²⁶ Input from interview

²⁷ Input from interview

²⁸ European Commission, Education and Training Monitor 2018:Country Analysis Slovakia (2018)

²⁹ Maddalena Colombo, "La prevenzione della dispersione scolastica in Italia: quali strategie per spezzare i circoli viziosi?" (Conference paper presented at University of Cagliari, 18-19 september 2014 in "Scelte scolastiche e crisi del sistema educativo" of "Andare a scuola oggi"); inputs from the interview

An important influencing factor within a school environment is the relationship that students have with teachers. Students who do not feel listened to by their teachers, or who do not feel understood, face higher chances of leaving school early. Migrant students or students from disadvantaged backgrounds may suffer in particular from a lack of understanding from their teachers as their personal background and experiences are less likely to align with those of a teacher. This in turn can mean that migrants and students from such backgrounds feel less understood and can end up feeling excluded and unmotivated for school, thus increasing the chances of early school leaving. This is of course not an overly surprising driver, but one which warrants attention at the system level if early school leaving is to be further reduced in the EU. Possible practices and responses to this driver are outlined in chapter 4, but include better supporting teachers and schools to allow them to give students with different backgrounds the support they need.

Furthermore, though teachers are often bound by school policy and curricula and are therefore constrained to a certain degree, when the quality of teaching is perceived as bad by a student, motivation can decline. When students get the feeling teachers do not listen or are not interested in them, the school experience becomes more negative and motivation declines.³⁰

3.3. National context drivers

A country's national context also has an effect on early school leaving. A few key national level drivers can play a role here. The **economics** and specifically, the **labour market** in a country can act as a driver for early school leaving. However, research also points to an interaction effect between the impact of the economy and unemployment rate, and a pupil's socio- economic background. The labour market has been documented as having both push and pull factors on students. Students may be pulled to the labour market and thus out of education when they perceive more opportunities for employment by starting to work early (as opposed to completing their education). In periods of economic downturn, students can be pushed to stay in school for longer as there is less work available, or the reverse can hold and a student feels compelled to go to work to earn money in a period of economic decline.

Box 6: National context drivers-labour market (Greece, Italy, and Ireland)

For example:

- The economy of Greece and its labour market are strong drivers of ESL. In Greece, employment rates of recent graduates increased further, but continue to be the lowest in the EU. Skills mismatches are the highest in the EU (43.3 % in 2016) and the share of tertiary graduates working in jobs that do not require a higher education qualification was higher than elsewhere in the EU. These factors explain the significant high share of NEETS (young people who are no longer in the education system and who are not working or being trained for work) in Greece.
- In Italy, the geographical difference in terms of economic development leads to different push and pull factors from the labour market. The southern regions register the worst levels of early school leaving caused above all by social and financial hardship. On the contrary, in some of the northern regions such as Lombardia, a significant rate of early school leaving can be explained by the entry in the job market as industries also look for unskilled workers.³¹

³⁰ RESL.eu, (2018), Attitudes of School Personnel, University of Middlesex

³¹ Nahit Mentеше Mesleki, Teknik Anadolu Lisesi (Turkey), VITECO (Italy), Pareto UK Ltd (United Kingdom), CIPFP Misericordia (Spain) EPRALIMA Escola Profissional do Alto Lima, C.I.P.R.L. (Portugal), Don't Waste Your Future Project 'Abbandono Scolastico in Europa: analisi e possibili soluzioni' (November 2016); input from interview

- Market push and pull factors have significantly influenced the changes in the levels of ESL in Ireland. The so-called “Celtic Tiger” and the booming of the construction sector have attracted youngsters to leave school and enter the job market between the 90’s and early 2000.³² Currently instead, an interview clarified that the opposite trend is taking place in light of the economic crisis and the increasing unemployment. Consequently, more students are choosing to stay in school.

Based on the findings of the present study and the expert interviews highlighting the situation of countries such as Greece, Spain and Portugal, it can be seen that high unemployment is often coupled with lower ESL. In this situation, youngsters are not attracted to enter a broken labour market and the most natural course of action is to complete upper secondary education. In a situation of scarce employment opportunities, in fact, poorly qualified individuals have little chance to succeed.

At the same time, research shows that students with different socio-economic backgrounds are affected differently by a situation of high unemployment. Here, disadvantaged learners are more prone to reduce their educational aspirations than students with more affluent socio-economic backgrounds. On the one hand, the latter are less subject to labour markets shocks when taking decisions on their education. On the other, despite the unfavourable job market, disadvantaged students tend to be discouraged and unmotivated to continue to study holding that they might not be able to find employment regardless of their level of education.³³

Another factor, which can act as a driver on early school leaving, is the **political sphere and policies** geared towards education and the labour market. This driver is more apparent when there is political will and resources dedicated to education and the labour market as it is in this situation that early school leaving drivers are indirectly addressed as well. The political sphere and the political will relating to education affect the types of policies implemented. Support for improving teacher quality, supporting the education of harder to reach individuals such as members of minorities and harder to reach pupils, or improving the quality of ECEC are all aspects, which may gain more or less support depending on the political will at the national or regional decision-making level. In this way, the political sphere can be seen as a national level driver of ESL. Please refer to chapter 4 for examples of policy actions taken which directly or indirectly affect ESL.

The **societal perception of education** is also a key national contextual driver of ESL. In countries where the national appreciation for education and formal qualifications is higher, the levels of early school leaving are likely to be lower. The reverse also holds true; when society demonstrates distrust or displeasure with the education system in a country the commitment to completing school or training there is a higher likelihood of higher ESL rates.

Box 7: National context drivers-societal perception (Poland, Slovakia, Italy)

For example:

- Poland has a considerably low rate of ESL, with a few interesting drivers at the root.³⁴ One driver is that at the national level, there remains a high national societal appreciation for formal education qualifications. This can be considered a legacy of the country’s communist

³² Maria Lally (Foróige – Blanchardstown Youth Service) for ‘Access All Areas – a Diversity Toolkit for the Youth Work Sector’ published by NYCI and Youthnet 2012

³³ Jeroen Lavrijsen & Ides Nicaise (2015) Social Inequalities in Early School Leaving: The Role of Educational Institutions and the Socioeconomic Context, European Education, 47:4, 295-310, DOI: 10.1080/10564934.2015.1098265.

³⁴ Early School Leaving. Monitoring and Preventative Solutions. Prevention and reintegration methods (2016). Available at: http://www.syscopolska.pl/pliki_ftp/O2_Prevention%20and%20reintegration_EN.pdf (accessed at 18-12-2018).

history as education was needed to get into higher, more prestigious job positions. In addition, unemployment rates tend to be relatively high in Poland, and most Polish parents believe that their children will not have a good enough chance on the labour market without being as highly educated as possible. Furthermore, the on average low to lacking unemployment benefits together with high rates of youth unemployment encourage students to stay in education for longer.

- Slovakia forms an interesting case in the sense that it historically has had a low level of early school leaving, always under the European average. Reasons why the rate of early school leaving is not as pronounced can be explained by a traditionally high value of education in society³⁵. While literature does not offer a detailed reason for this, the observation is made that after the fall of the communist regime, 'one of the more significant changes was the awareness and willingness to attend school and obtain university degree.'³⁶ In parallel, a reason for skewed ESL rates rests in the fact that statistical data from Slovakia are subject to a ban in collecting data on the basis of ethnicity and race. The data therefore do not reflect the disadvantaged situation of ethnic Roma.³⁷
- In Italy the phenomenon of early school leaving is often considered within the broader context of 'school disengagement'. A distinction is made between students who dropout from school in the middle of the year (drop-outs); and students who leave school prematurely or do not attend school regularly such as have numerous absences or have repeated school grades (dispersion).³⁸ The expert interview shed light on a progressive distrust in the educational system and in education in general. There is a decrease in the value attached to formal qualifications, in the substantive information and abilities learned, and in the perception of the role of teachers. This creates the belief that advancing in education might not be worth the effort as it is not necessary in life. In the Italian context, this is also reflected in the low numbers of students who obtain tertiary education degrees.³⁹ Furthermore, it is reported that the media also played a role in fuelling this sentiment of distrust by depicting schools as a run-down service.⁴⁰

A further societal national driver, which becomes apparent from the national research conducted, is the societal attitude towards **minorities**. In some countries, the minorities are more prevalent and less integrated, leading to informal segregation of communities. Minorities in a country in turn tend to show on average higher rates of early school leaving when compared to the rest of a country's population. Some minorities, such as the Roma communities in Eastern Europe, and Travellers in Ireland, are especially difficult to reach. Enrolling children with minority backgrounds in school can therefore be a challenge. The Roma population and their degree of social inclusion with the main population can, for example, be seen as a driver which contributes to early school leaving.

³⁵ Johanna Leek, 'An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Reducing Early School Leaving in Slovakia' (Museum Historii Polski, 2014).

³⁶ Johanna Leek, 'An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Reducing Early School Leaving in Slovakia' (Museum Historii Polski, 2014) .

³⁷ Cedefop, REFERNET Early leaving from Vocational education and training Slovakia (2014).

³⁸ For further reference to the meaning of the terms please see Cedefop Report 'Leaving Education Early: putting vocational education and training at the centre stage- Italy'

³⁹ Input from interview

⁴⁰ Federico Fragasso and Francesco Picone, 'Preventing Initial Dropout and fostering Trainee's inclusion: report on the national situation, Italy', In-VET Report 2014

Box 8: National context drivers- minorities (Greece)

For example:

- In Greece, school segregation can be considered as a significant problem. High proportions of ESL can be noticed in specific types of schools, such as those located in disadvantaged areas, vocational schools, larger schools or schools with an over-representation of students from disadvantaged and/or migrant backgrounds. Even though there are several policies aiming to cope with segregation, schools can still become segregated with high proportions of immigrant or Roma children and higher rates of ESL. Furthermore, significant deviation can be noted between schools in terms of students' results.

3.4. Analysis of drivers of ESL in Europe

As has become evident from the preceding sections, the drivers of ESL are diverse. This section draws together the main findings and examines to what degree these changed in recent years.

The main drivers of early school leaving can best be categorised in terms of three levels: the individual level drivers, the system level drivers, and national level drivers. Looking back at the findings presented above, it appears that since 2011, the individual level drivers have not changed much over time. In fact, the individual level drivers appear to be quite common across Member States. This became evident from academic and policy literature as well as the research conducted in six selected Member States. The influence of gender and nationality on an individual's likeliness of leaving school early are broadly recognised. A point of interest is that the driver of socio-economic background was found to be one of the strongest by academic research. This driver is also commonly cited as an individual level cause of ESL across the EU in literature and by experts.

System level drivers, which relate to the school and educational institution levels on the other hand, vary more per country, and some of these have changed since 2011. The school environments, teaching practices, and quality of teachers appear to vary more across countries, and even within regions within countries. The degree to which these drivers have changed since 2011 is not clear from the information collected. National drives in turn seem to have changed somewhat. The same aspects of the national context still play a role, but there have been shifts within those different types of national drivers. For example, the economy and labour market, and the perception of society towards school were identified in the 2011 European Parliament study as important national drivers influencing early school leaving. Since 2011 however, the effects of the economic crisis have largely settled, with most European countries having employment rates return to or approach employment rate levels from before the crisis. Spending on education is therefore easier once again from a policy making perspective, and labour markets exercise different push and pull forces compared to 2011, when unemployment, and especially youth unemployment was higher in the EU.

4. POLICY INTERVENTIONS TO TACKLE EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

ESL emerged as a common concern for the Member States in the Europe 2020 Strategy as well as in the

KEY FINDINGS

- Many of the policies that were encountered in this study which (also) affect ESL were preventative policy measures, or aimed at intervention. These measures tended to target the national structural level, or the system level, though this means the policies also affect individual publics and students in practice.
- Based on the current study there does not appear to be much national policy focus on early school leaving specifically; rather early school leaving policies are often related to broader policy programmes on social inclusions, reducing poverty, labour market policies, and improving education.
- Analysing the impacts of different policy interventions on early school leaving is a complicated process and difficult. The reason for this being that early school leaving is a complex process itself, born of many different factors and drivers from the individual, system, and national macro level. To identify the effect of a single individual policy on this process is methodologically difficult to do; one cannot rule out interaction effects with other policies and other drivers.
- What can be said, however, is that some of the individual level drivers remain similar, if not the same across countries. This suggests that certain types of policies may be useful to target certain types of common challenges.
- There appear to be trends in which types of policy interventions are used to address certain types of challenges. The connection between types of drivers and types of policy interventions to address those drivers could be an interesting point for further, deeper study.
- The trends in the use of certain policy types is reflected back in EU level research as well. All EU countries have policies in place, which somehow address or help to reduce early school leaving. EU level research documents show that common practices to reduce early school leaving centre on improving the quality of teachers and teaching, better access to good quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECEC), and better provision of career and educational guidance in schools. At a national level, implementing databases to monitor absenteeism of students is also cited as a general and useful approach to reducing ESL, as is better cooperation between different governmental departments and institutions.

Framework for European Cooperation in education and training (ET 2020).⁴¹ A benchmark was set for reducing the proportion of ESL within the Union below 10% by 2020.⁴² In fact, ESL was recognised as an obstacle to economic growth and employment, with detrimental effects on social inclusion. The Council Recommendation of 28 June 2011 to reduce early school leaving provided guidance as to how to achieve the 10% objective through policy-making.⁴³ This Recommendation called on the Member States to establish comprehensive policies against ESL, which were categorised as preventative,

⁴¹ Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('ET 2020') (2009/C 119/02), Official Journal of the European Union 28.5.2009

⁴² For more information please see: https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester/framework/europe-2020-strategy_en

⁴³ Council Recommendation of 28 June 2011 on policies to reduce early school leaving (2011/C 191/01), Official Journal of the European Union 1.7.2011

intervention and reintegration measures.⁴⁴ This understanding of the types of policies to fight ESL is currently foundational to understand the EU's approach to the topic as well as the policies of Member States. Policy cooperation between the Member States on the topic started in 2013, with the creation of a Thematic Working Group to support the implementation of the 2011 Recommendation. Its conclusions highlighted the fact that as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, reducing ESL required comprehensive action involving multiple stakeholders, among others, teachers, parents, local communities, social and employment. Furthermore, for optimal results it was essential to develop and find a balance among all three types of policy actions.⁴⁵ In 2014, The Education and Training 2020 Working Group on Schools Policy reached a similar conclusion. In addition, it provided concrete operational support to schools by developing an online toolkit 'European Toolkit for Schools for inclusive education and early school leaving prevention'.⁴⁶ Later in 2015, the Council adopted Conclusions on reducing early school leaving and promoting success in school. It took note of the progress made so far to reduce ESL and pointed to actively pursue the persisting challenges, and to the creation of comprehensive policies.⁴⁷ Most recently, in 2016, the European Commission introduced the 'New skills agenda for Europe' in the context of the Council initiative 'Upskilling pathways'.⁴⁸ The latter aims at facilitating individuals above 25 to re-enter education or obtain an upper secondary qualification. The New Skills Agenda instead has a broader focus aiming to promote and improve the quality of skills of individuals, ensure that competences are understood and comparable, and the development of labour market and skills intelligence to facilitate decisions in the field of education and employment.

In parallel to EU initiatives on the topic of ESL, Member States have developed a wide variety of policies in the field. In academic as well as grey literature⁴⁹, policies addressing early school leaving tend to be categorised according to the 2011 Council recommendation to reduce early school leaving, namely into: preventative measures, intervention measures, and compensation measures.

1. Preventative measures target the underlying, foundational drivers, which may eventually lead to early school leaving.
2. Intervention measures are designed to help those learners who are at more immediate risk of early school leaving. These measures focus on identifying and targeting more short-term threats to a learner's progress and likelihood of completing their education or training.
3. Compensation measures aim to help early school leavers who indeed left their education or training. These measures may focus on reintegration or on creating new opportunities for a learner who left education or training early.⁵⁰

These different types of measures may be targeted towards different levels of ESL drivers. A country may for example develop preventative policy measures at both the system and the national level, or

⁴⁴ *ibid*

⁴⁵ Thematic Working Group on Early School Leaving, 'Reducing early school leaving: Key messages and policy support' (November 2013)

⁴⁶ For more information please see: <https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/resources/toolkitsforschools.htm>

⁴⁷ Council conclusions on reducing early school leaving and promoting success in school (2015/C 417/05) Official Journal of the European Union 15.12.2015

⁴⁸ European Commission, 'European Semester Thematic factsheet. Early School leavers' (02.10.2017). Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/european-semester_thematic-factsheet_early-school-leavers_en_0.pdf; for more information please see <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223&langId=en>

⁴⁹ Eurydice and Cedefop, 'Tackling early leaving from education and training in Europe' (2014). Available at:

<https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/1b66bb9e-7d3e-11e5-b8b7-01aa75ed71a1>

⁵⁰ *ibid*

national level intervention measures (such as national registers of student absenteeism from school, often seen as a proxy indicator for a learner's likeliness of leaving school or training). The way in which those different types of measures may focus on different levels of drivers will be illustrated in this chapter.

The different types of policy measure which fall within each of these three types will be examined briefly in turn in the following paragraphs. The precise impacts of each of these different types of policies go beyond the scope of this paper to examine however. As such, a bird's eye view of the different policy types available is provided, with examples of such policy measure from the six selected Member States.

It is important to note that because early school leaving is a complicated process involving individual, system and national contextual level drivers, one single type of policy response would not resolve early school leaving in a country or region. Academic and policy experts alike therefore recommend comprehensive policy approaches, applying a mix of complementary types of policy measures to address the different and various causes of early school leaving.

4.1. Preventative measures and strategic level responses

As the name suggests, this class of measures aim to prevent learners from leaving school or training to begin with. The European Commission Thematic Working Group, as well as Cedefop and Eurydice provide reports with overviews of the different types of preventative measures that may be implemented to prevent ESL. These measures are summarised below, and focus to a large degree on the system level, namely on educational institutions and schools, though often with the support of public authorities. From a preventative perspective, different policy measures include:

- **Accessible and good quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECEC):** having a good education and being socialised at a young age has been shown to improve the development of key competences for students later in life. Good ECEC has positive impacts on a student's educational performance during later stages and thereby reduces the chances of ESL.
- **Reducing grade retention:** grade retention has been shown to negatively affect students' self-esteem, while making them repeat a grade often does not solve the underlying problems for the insufficient educational performance. As such, repeating a grade tends to compound the negative effects and increase the chances of ESL. Restricting this practice could therefore be useful to reduce ESL. Indeed, other preventative measures and intervention measures are like to be more useful if a student is performing badly and is at risk of leaving school.
- **Positive discrimination measures to address specific regions** suffering from socio-economic challenges, or targeting specific population groups such as minorities. The aim is to provide targeted measures to help reduce low educational attainment as well as reducing ESL. Greece, Cyprus, Portugal and Lithuania all had such measures in place in 2014.
- **Developing extra-curricular activities** can enrich the learning experience for students and enhance the feeling of inclusion and connection with the school community. These measures are usually not developed with the sole purpose of targeting ESL, but they are reported to help reducing the number of students leaving early.
- Measures to **integrate newly arrived migrant children:** children from newly arrived migrant families tend to require specific and tailored support in terms of language learning in order to bring them up to the level of the curriculum in their new school. Migrant children have had a different educational background, which does not always align with that of their new country

of residence. To avoid migrant children falling behind and becoming unmotivated due to language barriers or lack of understanding of the material, a preventative policy measure is to provide targeted support to newly arrived migrant children. Added to this, enrolling migrant families should also be designed to allow for timely and clear registrations of migrant children in their new schools.⁵¹

- **Increasing flexibility and permeability of education pathways:** in some systems, learners and their parents must make a decision regarding a learner's future by selecting a pathway while the learner is still relatively young. Interests and attitudes to studies and learning can change as a learner grows, and as they develop, they may wish they had made a different choice. However, if students are stuck in an educational path that does not interest them, for example because it is too difficult or too easy, the motivation declines. As such, educational trajectories that allow students to move more easily between pathways facilitate students to follow their aptitudes and interest better. Such educational designs are thought to reduce the chances of ESL amongst students.
- **High quality and attractive Vocational Education and Training (VET) options:** VET equips learners with skills and competences for the labour market, providing opportunities for young people on the labour market. Having good quality VET, which aligns well with the labour market and with clear opportunities, can be a useful measure to avoid ESL⁵².
- **Desegregation policies** can be implemented to widen the access to schools and the composition of those schools. Such policies can encourage better quality education provision and ultimately better education for a wider group of students, with different backgrounds, including more of the especially hard to reach students. This last group of students are often at an above average risk of ESL.
- **Education and career support and guidance:** often such guidance and support has not been developed to specifically target ESL, but they can act as important measures to help learners to complete their education at all stages (including where a student is at immediate risk of leaving education, or if early school leavers wish to reintegrate into education or training).
- **Initial and continued education of teachers and trainers:** the practical implementation of the various preventative measures presented above places quite a demand upon teachers. They require teachers to have good soft skills and to be alert to different types of signals that a student is struggling, academically and/or personally. Teacher training to be attuned to such signals, and learning how to address them is therefore an important preventative measure.

4.1.1. National level examples

Box 9: Preventative policies in Sweden

In Sweden, there is no national strategy aiming to prevent early leaving from upper secondary education. Nevertheless, the Swedish government has determined that it is of vital importance for municipalities to be well informed about of the situation of early school leavers. To this effect, an amendment was included to the Education Act⁵³ concerning the responsibilities of the municipalities. According to this amendment, since 1 January 2015, municipalities are required to

⁵¹ Thematic Working Group ESL, 2013

⁵² Thematic Working Group ESL, 2013

⁵³ For more information: http://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/skollag-2010800_sfs-2010-800 (accessed at 18-12-2018).

keep records of early school leavers from education under the age of 20, who have completed their compulsory schooling but have not completed upper secondary school, with the aim to provide them with tailor-made support. In the first half of 2017, more than 75.000 young people were registered and eligible to benefit from such support. Of this group, the majority is male and one third is recently arrived⁵⁴.

In 2015, the Swedish government formed a delegation aiming to promote labour market policies against youth unemployment at local level. This measure therefore addresses both national and system level drivers with policy action. These measures also focus more on prevention of ESL rather than immediate intervention. The aim of the '*Delegation for the Employment of Young People and Newly Arrived Migrants*' (Dua)⁵⁵ is to promote state and municipal cooperation and development of new forms of cooperation. The focus is on both existing labour market policies and additional initiatives in the field of labour market policy. While not directly related to ESL, the aim of Dua also includes addressing issues, which are also drivers of ESL. Exclusion of young people and newly arrived migrants are important drivers of ESL in the country.

Box 10: Preventative policies in Greece

During the last 7 years, several policies have been implemented in Greece aiming to enhance education system and combat ESL. The main strategies and policy measures to tackle early leaving from education and training include national strategic level measures, and both structural and targeted preventative policy interventions.⁵⁶ The national strategic policies include providing income benefits for families with low incomes and children that are still in compulsory education. In this way, social exclusion and obstacles relating to family backgrounds are mitigated. Furthermore, a series of actions were developed and implemented to reduce early school leaving through the operational programme (2014-2020) "Human Resources Development, Education and Life Lifelong Learning"⁵⁷. A collaborative team of three institutions aimed at addressing and reducing early school leaving was set up as well. These three institutions are: the DIOFANTOS CTI which aims to measure early school leaving by rationalizing the results of the students database in a national, regional, provincial, local and unit level (through the MySchool Information System), the Institute for Educational Policy with a consultative role and the Transition Observatory. The three institutions work together to analyse data and indicators addressing compensation and supportive measures at the national level⁵⁸.

Preventative targeted measures in Greece seek to address the regional differences in ESL by establishing for instance, educational priority zones in regions with low educational attendance and high percentage of early leavers in order to support students at risk. In schools in the Educational Priority Zones, several measures have been implemented that target the above issues, such as the introduction of intercultural education activities, the enhancement of the operation of reception

⁵⁴ European Commission (2018). Education and Training Monitor 2018- Sweden. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/document-library/education-and-training-monitor-2018-sweden-report_en (accessed at 18-12-2018)

⁵⁵ For more information: <https://www.dua.se/> (accessed at 18-12-2018)

⁵⁶ ICE Database (2015), "Strategies and recent policy measures to tackle early leaving from education and training (ELET), 2014", ifo Institute, Munich, online available at <http://www.cesifo-group.de/DICE/fb/3fUN3N8wP> (accessed at 13-12-2018), Nikolau, et al. 2018.

⁵⁷ For more information: <https://www.epiteliki.minedu.gov.gr/?cat=60&lang=en> (accessed at 16-01-2019)

⁵⁸ European Commission (2016). Education and Training Monitor 2016-.Country analysis (page 124). Available at: http://europski-fondovi.eu/sites/default/files/dokumenti/monitor2016-country-reports_en.pdf (accessed at 16-01-2019)

classes (core-curricular classes focus on Greek and English language, mathematics and Information Technology designed for students with limited knowledge of the Greek language)⁵⁹ and the provision of remedial teaching classes for students from socially vulnerable groups.⁶⁰

Other policy measures include '**Cross-cultural schools**', aiming to adapt the curriculum to the specific educational, social and cultural needs of students. In these schools, language of instruction (mainly Greek) lessons are a key priority. Measures also include providing **language support for children with a different mother tongue**, through programmes such as 'ODYSSEAS – Education of immigrants in the Greek language, history and culture'.⁶¹ These measures and actions, which emphasise intercultural and language education, aim to reduce some of the key drivers for ESL amongst migrants and minorities.

Besides this, Greece implements policies to help identified groups of pupils who are at risk of early school leaving through the **development of early warning systems**, particularly for students with special educational needs.

In terms of more structural preventative measures, Greece has emphasised the implementation of policies **to make primary school and pre-primary school more attractive** and more varied for children from different backgrounds. For instance, the All Day Primary School, with an extended timetable in addition to the compulsory one and extra activities such as study, arts and cultural activities, English, a second foreign language and ICT⁶².

Positive discrimination measures have also been implemented to counter the trend of segregation in schools across Greek regions, particularly with the purpose of fighting against school failure and dropout of foreign, repatriated⁶³, and Roma students as well as students from the Muslim minority⁶⁴ ⁶⁵. These measures include training and support of teachers, in-school supportive interventions and coordination of school networks. In addition, special curriculum arrangements are developed in areas with a high density of migrant, repatriated or Roma population.⁶⁶

Refugee education is becoming an integral part of the system. In 2017, 23 kindergartens started operating in refugee centres, including on the islands of Lesbos, Kos, Samos, Chios and Leros. Seconded permanent teachers worked as refugee education coordinators in all considerable

⁵⁹ Ziomas, D., Antoinetta, C. and Konstantinidou, D. (2017). Integrating refugee and migrant children into the educational system in Greece. European Social Policy Network Flash Report 2017/67, European Commission. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=18245&langId=en> (accessed at 11-02-2019).

⁶⁰ European Commission (2016). Education and Training Monitor 2016-.Country analysis (page 124). Available at: http://europski-fondovi.eu/sites/default/files/dokumenti/monitor2016-country-reports_en.pdf (accessed at 16-01-2019)

⁶¹ For more Information: <https://www.inedivim.gr/en/programmes-actions/%E2%80%99Codysseus-education-immigrants-greek-language-greek-history-and-greek-culture> (accessed at 16-01-2019)

⁶² OECD (2017). Education Policy in Greece. A preliminary Assessment (page 66). Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/education/Education-Policy-in-Greece-Preliminary-Assessment-2017.pdf> (accessed at 16-01-2019)

⁶³ Repatriated students in this case are those from former Soviet States, namely Georgia, Kazakstan, Moldavia, Russia, Armenia and Ukraine. These students and their families returned to Greece after the fall of the Soviet Union and have historically enjoyed specific policy attention in Greece.

⁶⁴ Tsaliki, E. (2016), PRESENTATION OF THE INTERCULTURAL SCHOOLS IN GREECE: PROMOTING INTERCULTURAL AND CITIZENSHIP ISSUES?, Journal Plus Education, Vol.15, no 1.

⁶⁵ Nikolaou, S. M., Papa, M., & Gogou, L.,2018, Early School Leaving in Greece and Europe and Educational Inequality: Actions and Policies against Educational and Social Exclusion. European Journal of Social Sciences Education and Research.

⁶⁶ ICE Database (2015), "Strategies and recent policy measures to tackle early leaving from education and training (ELET), 2014", ifo Institute, Munich, (page 6) Available at <http://www.cesifo-group.de/DICE/fb/3FUN3N8wP> (accessed at 13-12-2018).

refugee accommodation centres and monitored school attendance of children in residential neighbourhoods. Reception classes in primary and secondary schools allowed 5,291 children to attend mainstream schools in 2017/2018, while another 2,025 children benefited from preparatory afternoon classes. Two new preparatory afternoon classes for primary school children started on Lesvos. In addition, the working group for the refugees' integration within the Ministry of Education has been upgraded into an independent department. Nevertheless, despite these initiatives and efforts, the challenge remains of vital importance and with long-term characteristics, particularly on the islands where most refugee children still do not have access to education.⁶⁷

Box 11: Preventative policies in Poland

In Poland, there is a strong emphasis on **targeted as well as more structural preventative policies**. While there are no specific national strategies to tackle ESL, the issue is addressed indirectly through other policies and programmes concerning education, inclusion, and young people. These national strategies target both national level drivers and system level drivers.

In particular, two **national level strategic policy documents** have been implemented that target early school leaving: the 2013 'Strategy for the Development of Human Capital 2020' and the 'Lifelong Learning Perspective'. The '**Strategy for the Development of Human Capital 2020**' aims, amongst others, to improve VET quality, to strengthen counselling and guidance at school, and to improve the quality of teachers through training across levels of education. Furthermore, the programme also aims to improve the quality and accessibility of early school education, specifically in rural areas, and to adjust education and training to the needs of socio-economic conditions and the labour market. The Lifelong Learning Perspective in turn also includes preventative measures such as the improvement of access to ECEC, as well as promoting lifelong learning.⁶⁸

Other **system level policies** that have contributed to reducing ESL include improvements on the second chance schools, such as flexible classes and ways of delivering learning opportunities (weekend and evening study opportunities) and availability of psychological support for students.⁶⁹

Box 12: Preventative policies in Italy

Italy does not have a comprehensive national policy to tackle early school leaving. However, some measures were introduced before 2011, such as a prolonged compulsory education until the age of 16, VET secondary education as an integral part of mandatory education, and the creation of a students' register, which however is not yet fully functioning.⁷⁰ The lack of further action may have

- ⁶⁷ European Commission (2018). Education and Training Monitor 2018- Greece. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/document-library/education-and-training-monitor-2018-greece-report_en (accessed at 18-12-2018)
- ⁶⁸ Cedefop (2017), "Poland - Leaving education early: putting vocational education and training centre stage". Available at: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/sl/publications-and-resources/country-reports/leaving-education-early-putting-vocational-education-a-11> (accessed at 17-12-2018).
- ⁶⁹ Tomaszewska-Pekala, H., Marchlik, P., & Wrona, A. (2015). Between school and work. Vocational education and the policy against early school leaving in Poland. *Educação Sociedade & Culturas*, 45, 75-96 (page 91). Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Hanna_TomaszewskaPekala/publication/303811800_Between_school_and_work_Vocational_education_and_the_policy_against_early_school_leaving_in_Poland/links/5754e51008ae6807fb04d351/Between-school-and-work-Vocational-education-and-the-policy-against-early-school-leaving-in-Poland.pdf (accessed at 16-01-2019)
- ⁷⁰ Maddalena Colombo, 2017, *ITALY: First steps forward in the fight against early school leaving*. Conférence de comparaisons internationales sur: 'Prévention et intervention : comment agir efficacement face au décrochage scolaire?' Organised by CNETCO, Sèvres (PARIS, France), 9.11.2017; Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della ricerca (MIUR), 2018, *Una*

something to do with the economic crisis, which hit Europe and still wreaked its havoc by 2011. Some of the policy measures recently introduced which could have a future impact on ESL include the “Good School Law” which renders mandatory from the academic year 2017/2018 making school-work alternation experiences part of compulsory education and a National system for the evaluation of schools.⁷¹ The expert interview highlighted how actions at the local level and by non-governmental organizations or associations have played an important role in tackling ESL. Some core initiatives include Fuoriclasse by Save the Children Italia and the Angelli Youth Foundation, and projects carried out by Maestri di Strada, a non-profit organisation.⁷²

Box 13: Preventative policies in Ireland

In 2005, Ireland implemented an Action Plan for Educational Inclusion ‘Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)’.⁷³ This Plan gives particular attention to preventing ESL by identifying schools at all levels with a high concentration of economically disadvantaged students and providing additional resources directly to such schools.⁷⁴ The core elements of the plan encompass a standardised system for identifying, and regularly reviewing, levels of disadvantage, and a new integrated School Support Programme (SSP) that will bring together, and further develop existing interventions for schools with a concentrated level of educational disadvantage. Two relevant schemes included in SSP for ESL are the School Completion Programme and the Home School Community Liaison Scheme.

Box 14: Preventative policies in Slovakia

At the system level in schools, preventative measures in Slovakia include the strategy of issuing ‘Motivation scholarships’. This has been found to improve students’ attendance and attainment. School directors have built the award of scholarships around conditions such as school attendance and fulfilling study duties. Following the introduction of this scholarship, there has been an improvement in school attendance from the students receiving scholarships, which often resulted in better performance at school.⁷⁵ Scholarships specifically targeted to students from the Roma minority have also been established to promote education at upper secondary and university level.⁷⁶

politica nazionale di contrasto del fallimento formative e della povertà educativa: cabina di regia per la lotta alla dispersione scolastica e alla povertà educative

⁷¹ Law of the 13th July 2015 No. 107 ‘The Good School Law’

⁷² M. Tibisay Ambrosini (Save the Children Italia) and Gianfranco De Simone (Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli), ‘Fuoriclasse. Un modello di successo per contrastare la dispersione scolastica’ available at:

<https://www.savethechildren.it/sites/default/files/files/uploads/pubblicazioni/fuoriclasse-un-modello-di-successo-il-contrasto-alla-dispersione-scolastica.pdf>; for more information please see pp.37

http://www.fondazionebrodolini.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/file/wp-3-web_0.pdf

⁷³ Department of Education and Science, DEIS (Delivery of Equality of Opportunity in Schools). An Action Plan for Educational Inclusion (May 2005). Available at:

https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/PolicyReports/deis_action_plan_on_educational_inclusion.pdf

⁷⁴ Thematic Working Group, 2013, EP Study 2011, Cedefop, Leaving Education Early: putting vocational education and training in centre stage. Ireland (2017). Available at: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/leaving-education-early-putting-vocational-education-an-6>

⁷⁵ European Parliament, ‘Reducing Early School leaving in the EU’ 2011

⁷⁶ REF Country Assessment, ‘Advancing education of Roma in Slovakia’ (2014). Available at:

https://www.romaeducationfund.org/sites/default/files/publications/country_assessment_sk_2014_en.pdf

4.2. Intervention measures

Intervention measures in practice can take the shape of various different policy measures and practices at the national as well as the system (school or provider) and individual level. Some of the main policy measures implemented to intervene against ESL include:

- **Providing individual support to students:** supporting students who are low achievers, from different backgrounds, or with special needs or learning difficulties can be important in early intervention against ESL.
- Closely connected to providing special individual support is the practice of **offering language support to students** whose mother tongue is different from the country in which they live. Language support to migrants can reduce key obstacles to learning, as well as make migrants feel more socially included in their school community.
- **Facilitating transitions between different levels of education:** research shows that for some learners, the transition from for instance primary school to secondary school can be difficult. The style of teaching changes from having one teacher to having several, schools and classes can become bigger in size, the material studied more challenging, and the workloads become heavier. The transition between lower and upper secondary school involves another step into more independent learning of more challenging educational material. For some students this transition is difficult to adapt to, resulting in poorer academic performance, or feelings of loneliness or exclusion. To avoid the lack of motivation and engagement growing to point where a student leaves school early, measures can be provided aiming to provide extra support or attention to students who transit from one educational level to another.
- **Specialist staff supporting teachers and students** can be important to help creating inclusive and constructive school environments. Teachers are specifically trained to offer the courses they teach, and have often not received specific training in how to deal with ESL or how to notice early warning signs in this regard. Specialist staff can help teachers in how they can support students or create a good school environment.
- **Identifying groups at risk of ESL:** at a national or system levels, school attendance databases can be put in place to monitor attendance at schools. Some countries implement national obligations for schools to set up such registers for example. Such a measure requires complementary implementation measures concerning steps to undertake, and to explain how to intervene with those students who are absent too often and appear to be at risk of ESL. Thus, developing **early warning systems** for students at risk of ESL and **absenteeism management** go hand in hand. These two types of practices aim to monitor students and trigger warnings when a student is absent a lot of the time. In those cases, the school can then initiate steps to intervene with a student and offer support before they leave school or training early.
- **Cooperation with parents:** when children are absent from school, having mechanisms to help setting up support for students to ensure that their needs are being fully understood and met by the school can help to intervene early if a student is struggling and absent, and at risk of ESL.

4.2.1. National examples

Box 15: Intervention measures in Sweden

System level responses in Sweden from the last 7 years include setting up of the Plug-In project. Plug-In is considered the biggest cooperative project of Sweden in preventing early school leaving at upper secondary level. The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting) is the central project owner. The aim is to help reduce the ESL rate in upper secondary school and to get more young people to complete their studies by spreading awareness and knowledge of the absenteeism issues, contributing to strategic influence at national and international level as well as developing methods and forms of collaboration that are focused on positive change for individuals, organizations and systems. The project does so by examining an individual student's needs, examining the student's environment, school and other factors to adopt a holistic approach to reducing ESL. The Plug-In project with approximately 80 methodology workshops in 47 Swedish municipalities support more than 7700 young individuals that dropped out or were at risk of dropping out upper secondary school. The first round of the project took place between 2012 and 2014. Plug-In 2.0, started at the beginning of the autumn term 2015, is expected to reach approximately 3.000 young adults from around 40 municipalities during the project period. The initiative has been awarded support from the European Social Fund.⁷⁷

Other initiatives try to enhance **absenteeism management** and **early warning systems** for students at risk of ESL. As of 1 July 2018, the school principal has the obligation to examine repeated and longer periods of absence. The purpose of examining causes of absence is to be able to provide proper support to students, thus helping them to fulfil education goals. Moreover, schools are required to notify the municipality where those students are registered on their repeated or long absence. Then, if necessary, the municipality in which students are registered coordinates the work around students with problematic absence together with other actors or stakeholders.⁷⁸

Box 16: Intervention measures in Ireland

A **whole-school approach** is immediately evident in the Irish strategy Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL), operating in the context of the DEIS plan. The HSCL Scheme is managed and coordinated by a national leadership team within the Senior Management Team of the Educational Welfare Services of Child and Family Agency. This scheme is active in the schools included in the DEIS programme and counts 400 full-time HSCL coordinators teachers who are tasked to be a point of contact between the school, the parents and community agencies such as social services. The programme includes home visits for providing extra assistance to pupils at risk of dropping out or with poor results.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ For more information: <https://skl.se/tjanster/englishpages/activities/plugin.1281.ht> and <https://www.plugininnovation.se/plugin-20/om-plugin>

⁷⁸ Input from the interview.

⁷⁹ For more information please see: http://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/education/primary_and_post_primary_education/attendance_and_discipline_in_schools/home_school_liaison.html#la82be

Box 17: Intervention measures in Greece

Greece takes measures to make **vocational training education more attractive**. For instance, the ESF-funded 'New beginning for EPAL' program, introduced in October 2017, aimed at improving the efficiency of VET provision and decreasing the dropout rates in upper secondary VET schools. The program offers, among other things, pedagogical support in schools to enhance learners' literacy and numeracy competences as well as psychological support to assist their smooth integration into school.⁸⁰ Another policy initiative that is expected to improve the quality and attractiveness of vocational upper secondary schools is the ability of EPAL students to follow training programs in Universities. This will enhance the prestige of these programs and consequently its attractiveness, by giving an extra motivation to EPAL students to continue and finalize their studies.⁸¹

4.3. Reintegration or compensation measures

Besides preventative and early intervention strategies, reintegration measures are also important for those young people who indeed leave their training or education. Two main types of reintegration or compensation measures include:

- **Second chance education systems** or improving compensatory education and training can help students to re-enter learning. Second chance schools are relatively common in Europe.
- **Developing alternative measures for early school leavers** to help them re-enter education and training: most countries in the EU have measures in place to help early school leavers to re-enter the learning system. These can be measures designed to provide alternative channels of education for at risk students and young adults. Other countries developed alternative pathways for students who have left school early and did not receive any formal qualifications.

4.3.1. National examples

According to research carried out by Cedefop and Eurydice, most countries in the EU have some form of second chance schools in place, and alternative educational pathways.

Box 18: Reintegration measures in Ireland

An interview clarified that Ireland has not recently introduced new policies specifically targeting ESL reintegration but it has further developed and maximised already existing ones, such as the **Youthreach** programme. This is a national strategy that provides for second chance opportunities to early school leavers between the ages of 15 and 20. The programme was established in the late 80's and since then over 100 Youthreach centres have been created throughout the country. Some of the features of these programmes include individualised education plans, career counselling assistance and support in re-entering education or finding work placements and apprenticeships. This programme has been regarded as having a positive impact on reducing ESL.⁸²

⁸⁰ European Commission (2018). Education and Training Monitor 2018- Greece. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/document-library/education-and-training-monitor-2018-greece-report_en (accessed at 18-12-2018)

⁸¹ Input from the interview.

⁸² EP, Reducing early school leaving in the EU2011; Inspectorate Evaluation Studies, An Evaluation of Youthreach (2010 Department of Education and Skills). Available at: http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/3_2_3a_evaluation_youthreach_en.pdf

Box 19: Reintegration measures in Sweden

A policy measure that targets reintegration in Sweden is '**Folk High School Initiative**'. Folk high school is a second chance institute for those who have not been able to complete their education in the regular education system. With its exclusive pedagogy and its flexible conditions, folk high school educates individuals that other education forms fail to do. In particular, this programme provides young people a course that lasts 3 months which aims to prepare them for returning to or beginning with studies at upper secondary education.⁸³ Each folk high school decides independently what courses to provide and is free to design its own teaching. Traditional and preliminary courses of upper secondary school are provided, while the idea is the education to be based on the needs, experience and precious knowledge of students.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, all courses are in Swedish hence, students should at least have a beginner level of knowledge of the language.⁸⁵

Another reintegration measure is municipal adult education (**komvux**). In particular, students who lack completed elementary or upper secondary education but are too old to study in elementary school or upper secondary school are entitled to follow municipal adult education (komvux) where they can continue and complete their studies. Learning programmes are flexible, with students to have the opportunity of full-time, part-time or distance learning studies. Furthermore, migrant students who lack elementary education and do not have sufficient ability in Swedish can follow particular courses in their own native language.⁸⁶

Box 20: Reintegration measures in Greece

Greece implemented several measures in order to facilitate the transition between different levels of education mainly by enhancing the **flexibility** and permeability of the educational system. Such examples are the all-day, pre-primary school which targets the full preparation of pupils to enter primary education but also the needs of the working parents; the all-day primary school that aims at the reduction of family's financial burden since parents do not have to find any additional educational services outside the school environment⁸⁷; evening lower secondary schools and vocational upper secondary schools that help students at work attending classes, and initial vocational training for those who do not want to continue in general education⁸⁸.

⁸³ ICE Database (2015), "Strategies and recent policy measures to tackle early leaving from education and training (ELET), 2014", ifo Institute, Munich, online available at <http://www.cesifo-group.de/DICE/fb/3fUN3N8wP> (accessed at 13-12-2018)

⁸⁴ Tägtström, J. (2016). Nordic Projects to Combat School Dropout: Good practice in helping young people complete upper secondary education. Available at: <https://norden.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1071115/FULLTEXT01.pdf> (accessed at 16-01-2019)

⁸⁵ For more information please see: https://www.folkhogskola.nu/globalassets/dokument-och-filer/folkhogskola_eng_engelska.pdf (accessed at 16-01-2019)

⁸⁶ For more information please see: <http://www.omsvenskaskolan.se/engelska/vuxenutbildning/kommunal-vuxenutbildning-komvux/> (accessed at 16-01-2019)

⁸⁷ Eurydice, 'Greece: Primary Education'. Available at: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/primary-education-20_en (accessed at 11-02-2019)

⁸⁸ ICE Database (2015), "Strategies and recent policy measures to tackle early leaving from education and training (ELET), 2014", ifo Institute, Munich, online available at <http://www.cesifo-group.de/DICE/fb/3fUN3N8wP> (accessed at 13-12-2018)

Box 21: Reintegration measures in Slovakia

In February 2018, the **Action Plan for the Strategy of the Slovak Republic for Roma Integration** up to 2020 was updated. Its main goal in the education area is to reduce the differences between the education level of the Roma community and the population average by means of **improving education of children from marginalised Roma communities**. Among others, the government set the goal of providing second chance education to early school leavers.⁸⁹ In doing so Slovakia targets some of its main social issues, some of which also appear to act as drivers for ESL in the country.

4.4. Analysis of policy interventions relating to Early School Leaving

The following section seeks to draw together the findings presented above on different policy interventions, and to analyse the use of these interventions in the 6 countries under study. Based on the current study, there does not appear to be much specific national policy focus on early school leaving specifically. This is not to say that the theme is not important or recognised at in national policymaking; rather early school leaving policies are often part of broader policy programmes on social inclusions, reducing poverty, labour market policies, and on improving education. Addressing and reducing regional differences are also common areas of policy making, which also have an effect on early school leaving due to the role of socio-economic background and access to good education in the process. Many of the policies that were encountered which also affect ESL in this study were preventative and intervention policy measures with comparatively fewer interventions aimed at reintegration. These measures tend to target the national structural level or the system level, though this means the policies also affect individuals and students in practice.

Analysing the impacts of different policy interventions on early school leaving is a complicated process and very difficult at the best of times. The reason for this being that early school leaving is a complex process itself, born of many different factors and drivers from the individual, system, and national macro level. To identify the effect of a single individual policy on this process is methodologically difficult to do; one cannot rule out interaction effects with other policies and other drivers. For this reason, maintaining more of an overall perspective when examining policies to tackle early school leaving would appear to be a more valid approach, less prone to assumptions of fake causality.

What can be said however, is that some of the individual level drivers remain the similar if not the same across countries. This suggests that certain types of policies may be useful to target certain types of common challenges. Consider for instance newly arrived migrants, and the use of language courses in schools, which are tailored to learning the national language as a second language. Measures which address an individual's access to education, or which seek to reduce regional disparities in a country to help promote access to better education are common in countries such as Slovakia, Poland, and Greece. Countries with larger groups of minorities such as the Roma in Slovakia and Greece, as well as Travellers in Ireland, initiate policies aimed at social inclusion and the reduction of poverty.

From a system level perspective, many preventative policies also focus on improving the access to ECEC, better quality VET approaches, and the training of teachers. Enhancing the flexibility and permeability of education is also of vital importance on combat early school leaving. For instance, measures taken in Greece, aimed at offering different pathways for students throughout educational levels, appear to have positive effects. Moreover, developing early warning systems, a proper

⁸⁹ Eurydice, 'Slovakia: ongoing reforms and policies'. Available at: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/slovakia/ongoing-reforms-and-policy-developments_pt-pt (accessed 18-12-2018)

absenteeism management are effective ways to understand the needs of students at risk of dropout school and prevent the rise of ESL. Finally, second chance schools and reintegration programmes in countries such as Sweden and Ireland are significant factors that encourage early school leavers to return to education and finalise their studies, helping hence their social inclusion.

There appear therefore, to be trends in which types of policy interventions are used to address certain types of challenges. The connection between types of drivers and types of policy interventions to address those drivers could be an interesting point for further, deeper study. Much EU policy documentation has been prepared on the topic of ESL between 2011 and 2015, and this avenue could be included in following studies on ESL.

The trends in the use of certain policy types is reflected back in EU level research as well. According to a study conducted by the European Commission, Cedefop, Eurydice and EACEA, in 2014⁹⁰, six different EU countries had established comprehensive strategies for education and early school leaving. While these countries do not have national level policy strategies targeted specifically at early school leaving, the phenomenon is addressed nonetheless through comprehensive strategies to promote better education, labour market policies and social inclusion. Policy interventions implemented across policy areas, and across levels of drivers, are cited as being the key approach to addressing ESL by experts and research. The 2011 Council Recommendation advises towards a combination of preventative, intervention and compensation or reintegration measures, and six Member States adopted a strategy of that type. These were Belgium (the Flemish portion), Bulgaria, Spain, Malta, the Netherlands, and Austria (where Spain and the Netherlands had introduced their comprehensive strategies before and the publishing of the Council Recommendations).

All EU countries have policies in place, which somehow address or help to reduce early school leaving⁹¹. However, this is to a large degree because early school leaving is the product of various different drivers, as has been shown in Chapter 3. Policy strategies and instrument to address labour market issues, to improve education, support young people, or to promote better social inclusion and the reduction of poverty can all affect early-school leaving, as these are all aspects, which can contribute to the phenomenon of ESL. Countries, which have specific national strategies aimed at early school leaving particularly, are in the minority.

The academic and policy research collected for this study shows that common practices to reduce early school leaving centre on improving the quality of teachers and teaching, better access to good quality ECEC, and better provision of career and educational guidance in schools⁹². At a national level, implementing databases to monitor absenteeism of students is also cited as a general and useful approach to reducing ESL, as is better cooperation between different governmental department and institutions⁹³. By setting up sustainable cross-governmental organisations or formal working structures, the stakeholders working on the different themes, which relate to ESL are brought together. Such collaborations can take place at national, local, or regional levels, but the main point is that different relevant public authorities come together in a continuous manner to support educational and youth related institutions in preventing ESL.

⁹⁰ European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Cedefop (2014). *Tackling Early Leaving from Education and Training in Europe: Strategies, Policies and Measures*. Eurydice and Cedefop Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

⁹¹ *ibid*

⁹² *ibid*

⁹³ EACEA, (2015), *Eurydice Brief – Tackling Early Leaving from Education and Training in Europe*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

5. PUBLIC INVESTMENT AND EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

KEY FINDINGS

- Based on the numbers provided, it appears that the **biggest spenders** on education as percentage of GDP include Sweden (7.04%), Finland (6.75%), Belgium (6.43%), France (5.47%), and Austria (5.43%). The **lowest expenditure** on education include Romania (2.72%), Greece (3.68%), Ireland (3.77%), and the Czech Republic (3.79%).
- Despite being one of the highest spenders when it comes to education, Sweden demonstrates a slight increase in the rate of Early School Leaving. Furthermore, some of the lower spenders on education (based on the data used here), include Greece and Ireland, which are also amongst the top performers in terms of reducing the rates of ESL. What should be noted is that a large proportion of spending on education comes from private sources in Greece. This suggests that the landscape of investment in education, and its relationship with ESL should be examined in further detail.
- The data at hand suggests that the relationship between public investment in education and reducing early school leaving is not immediately evident, no linear correlation appears. This is perhaps not so surprising given that drivers from other levels and policy fields also contribute to ESL. It is therefore not so much a question of how much you spend, but rather, what you spend it on. More efficient and targeting spending based on needs of pupils in a country could be a good starting point for approaching public expenditure to reduce ESL. The examples provided by Greece and Ireland could be further examined. According to information received during the study, Portugal would also be a relevant country to investigate further, as of course are countries with a (longer-time) low level of ESL.
- The lack of immediate relationship between ESL rates and spending on education may suggest that to properly investigate the relationship, the public investment in other areas such as the labour market, social inclusion, and the reduction of poverty are also important to consider in order to establish a more accurate insight on the correlation between public investment and ESL.

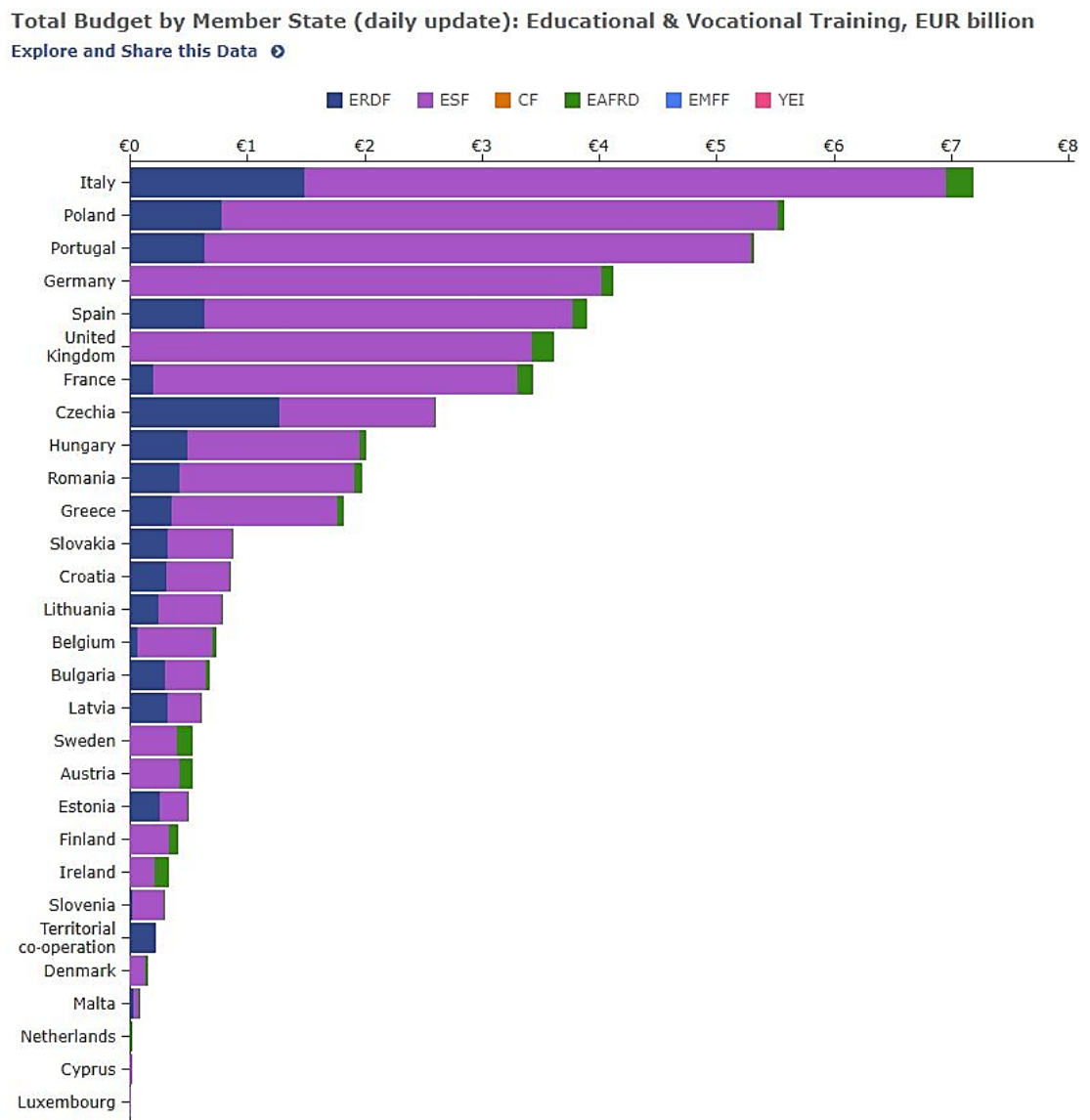
5.1. EU funds for education and ESL

In addition to their own national budgets on education, Member States often make use of further contributions from EU funds as can be seen from figure 1. Educational policies are a competence for the Member States as well as the responsibility for the core funding in education and training. Nonetheless, the EU strives to support investments made at national level through a series of European funds. The most relevant ones in the field of education are the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESI Funds), the 7th Framework Programme or Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+.

Within the ESI Funds, the European Regional Development Fund and even more so the European Social Fund have financed a broad range of projects on education in line with the ET 2020 Strategy. In the programming cycle 2007-2013, these projects focused on financing reforms of education and training systems, increasing participation in education, developing research and innovation, as well as improving education and childcare. The new Regulation for the European Structural and Investment Funds for the period 2014-2020 has allocated 33.9 billion EUR for education projects. The main priorities tackled by the fund in the field of education encompass reducing early school leaving; promoting equal access to education and lifelong learning; increasing the market relevance of the

education and training systems; and last but not least, improving education and childcare infrastructure. The Member States that are benefitting most from these projects in terms of budget are Italy, Poland, Portugal, and Germany.

Figure 1: Total Budget by Member State in Education & Vocational Training



Source: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/themes/10> (17.01.2019)

Aside from being the primary EU fund for education and training, the ESF is also one of the primary sources of funding for the Youth Guarantee. This programme was established following the 2013/C 120/01 Council Recommendation and shed light on providing education and training opportunities for everyone under 25 years old.⁹⁴ The Youth Guarantee specifically aims to reduce the obstacles in the transition between education and work in order to decrease unemployment.

⁹⁴ Council Recommendation of April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee (2013/C 120/01) Official Journal of the European Union 26.4.2013

To access funds such as the ESF, Member States need to fulfil ex-ante conditionality measures. Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 defines applicable ex ante conditionality as the essential prerequisites that need to be in place at the national level in order for a certain fund to be effective.⁹⁵ This ensures that Member States identify the concrete critical issues that are linked to an EU priority, and make the necessary regulatory and policy framework adaptations before the funds are granted.

5.2. Public Investment by Member States on education and ESL

One of the study objectives for this project focuses on examining what kind of relationship can be established between public expenditure and ESL. As a first step, the research team has used data from Eurostat to compare spending on education.

Table 2: ESL and public expenditure by Member States and EU funds for education and training (%).

Member State	% ESL 2011	% ESL 2017	Difference (2017-2011)	2020 Target (Reducing ESL to < 10%)	Public expenditure education (2012) ⁹⁶	Public expenditure education (2015) ⁹⁷
EU28	13.4	10.6	-2.8	10	5.13	5.04
BE	12.3	8.9	-3.4	9.5	6.43	6.43
BG	11.8	12.7	0.9	11	3.68	3.93
CZ	4.9	6.7	1.8	5.5	4.33	3.79
DK	9.6	8.8	-0.8	10	NA	NA
DE	11.6	10.1	-1.5	<10	4.64	4.52
EE	10.6	10.8	0.2	9.5	4.7	NA
IE	10.8	5.1	-5.7	8	6.16	3.77
EL	12.9	6.0	-6.9	<10	3.64	3.68
ES	26.3	18.3	-8.0	15	4.34	4.16
FR	12.3	8.9	-3.4	9.5	5.46	5.47
HR	5.0	3.1	-1.9	4	NA	NA
IT	17.8	14.0	-3.8	16	4.08	4.1
CY	11.3	8.5	-2.8	10	6.67	6.4
LV	11.6	8.6	-3.0	10	6.59	5.33

⁹⁵ Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and laying down general provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, Official Journal of the European Union 20.12.2013

⁹⁶ As a percentage of GDP, taken from Eurostat data. Online code: educ_uoe_fine06

⁹⁷ As a percentage of GDP, taken from Eurostat data. Online code educ_uoe_fine06

LT	7.4	5.4	-2.0	<9	4.83	4.12
LUX	6.2	7.3	1.1	<10	4.39	3.9
HU	11.4	12.5	1.1	10	4.07	4.26
MT	22.7	17.7	-5.0	10	6.53	5.42
NL	9.2	7.1	-2.1	8	5.89	5.4
AT	8.5	7.4	-1.1	9.5	5.62	5.43
PL	5.6	5.0	-0.6	4.5	4.91	4.81
PT	23.0	12.6	-10.4	10	NA	4.79
RO	18.1	18.1	0.0	11.3	2.64	2.72
SI	4.2	4.3	0.1	5	5.44	4.64
SK	5.1	9.3	4.2	6	3.05	4.59
FI	9.8	8.2	-1.6	8		6.75
SE	6.6	7.7	1.1	<7	7.38	7.05
UK	14.9	10.6	-4.3	No target in national reform target	NA	5.68

Source: Panteia based on Eurostat

The table above demonstrates early school leaving rate changes, as well as the levels of expenditure on education policy in a country. This second criteria is expressed as a percentage of the total national GDP, and acts as an indicator for public investment in education.

Based on the numbers provided, it appears that the **biggest spenders** on education include Sweden (7.04%), Finland (6.75%), Belgium (6.43%), France (5.47%), and Austria (5.43%). The **lowest expenditure** on education include Romania (2.72%), Greece (3.68%), Ireland (3.77%), and the Czech Republic (3.79%).

Despite being one of the highest spenders when it comes to education, Sweden demonstrates a slight increase in the rate of Early School Leaving, though it has classically had a low rate of ESL. The reasons for this are not fully clear given that ESL is a process with many different causes and drivers. In the case of Sweden, discrepancies in educational quality are starting to show. Specifically, a gap is starting to grow between the performance of native-born and foreign-born Swedish young people. The latter group are more likely to come from a poorer socio-economic background, thereby compounding the previously observed demographic trend in early school leaving; both socio-economic background and migrant origins have been shown to play a role in the likelihood of leaving school early.

Based on research conducted in this study, the last 5 years in Sweden, there was a huge influx of newly arrived students, something that is expected to grow in the years ahead. The majority of these newly arrived individuals are adults with a poor level of education, coming from a completely different educational system. Therefore, their integration in the Swedish educational system is quite difficult, leading to losing motivation in the early stages. At the same time, trends of early school leavers with special learning needs remain stable, underlining that this particular group of students face many

difficulties to finish upper secondary education on time. This group with special needs refers to those students with disabilities, or other obstacles to learning in Sweden.. This underlines that the measurements that target the ESL of these groups did not have a significant effect. Given these trends, the Swedish educational system could be adjusted in these demands and support newly arrived students as well as students with special needs to complete their education goals. Expert inputs suggest that targeting measures to students with special needs could reduce the overall ESL rate, as the ESL rate of this group remains quite constant. Despite the progress of the Swedish educational system in several areas such as second chance schools and reintegration programs, the lack of flexibility throughout educational levels, the lack of a national wide tracking system of early school leavers as well as the lack of a national coordinator of the various initiatives that target this issue should be addressed.

On the other hand, some of the lower spenders on education (based on the data used here), include Greece and Ireland, are also amongst the top performers in terms of reducing the rates of ESL. Greece and Ireland show reductions in ESL of 6.9% and 5.7% respectively. Ireland in fact saw a significant decline in its education spending, namely from 6.16% of GDP in 2012 to 3.77% of GDP in 2015. In case of Greece, this opposite trend of public spending on education and rate of ESL (low public spending - decrease of ESL) can be partly explained from the considerable private spending which accounts over one third of overall spending on education. It is worth to mention that even though the households' income decreased significantly during the years of economic crisis, the private investment on education remains high and particularly the spending on tutorial schools (frontistiria) and private tuition.⁹⁸

On the contrary, an interesting point is that though Slovakia increased in spending on education, the rate of ESL has steadily increased too. Between 2012 and 2015, the expenditure was increased from 3.05% of GDP to 4.59% of GDP.

5.3. Investigating the relationship between public investment and ESL

The data above suggests that the relationship between public investment in education and reducing early school leaving is not immediately evident. This is perhaps not so surprising given that drivers from other levels and policy fields also contribute to ESL. Indeed experts' interviews in the context of this study, as well as the desk research conducted suggest that it is likely not the level of expenditure that leads to ESL changes, but rather how and on what the budget is spent. Experts interviewed in the context of this study indicate that the local needs of learners and pupils must be analysed so that policies, which address those needs, may be implemented. It is therefore not so much a question of *how much* you spend, but rather, *what you spend it on*. This is perhaps not a revolutionary insight, but an important one to bear in mind nonetheless when investigating the relationship between ESL and public expenditure.

More efficient and targeting spending based on needs of pupils in a country could be a good starting point for approaching public expenditure to reduce ESL. The examples provided by Greece and Ireland could be further examined. These countries have managed to place themselves amongst top performers in terms of ESL rate reduction, while being some of the lowest spenders on education amongst the six Member States. What should be noted is that a large proportion of spending on education comes from private sources in Greece. This suggests that the landscape of investment in

⁹⁸ European Commission (2018). Education and Training Monitor 2018- Greece. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/document-library/education-and-training-monitor-2018-greece-report_en (accessed at 18-12-2018)

education, and its relationship with ESL should be examined in further detail. A first observation which can be made is that Greece has made concentrated efforts at the system level to introduce policy interventions which support migrants and non-Greek learners, as well as targeting rural and more removed areas with educational policy and programmes. According to information received during the study, Portugal would also be a relevant country to investigate further, as of course are countries with a (longer-time) low level of ESL.

The data at hand suggests that the relationship between public investment in education and reducing early school leaving is not immediately evident, no linear correlation appears. This is perhaps not so surprising given that drivers from other levels and policy fields also contribute to ESL. For the sake of this research, the first step was made of comparing expenditure on education policy and ESL rates. In fact, the lack of immediate relationship between ESL rates and spending on education may suggest that to properly investigate the relationship, the public investment in other areas such as the labour market, social inclusion, and the reduction of poverty are also important to consider in order to establish a more accurate insight on the correlation between public investment and ESL.

6. FUTURE TRENDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS RELATED TO ESL

KEY FINDINGS

- Individual level drivers that lead to ESL are uniform across Member States. These include gender, nationality (notably whether a pupil is newly arrived migrants in a country), their family background, and their socio-economic background. These aspects play a similar role in contributing to a student's decision to leave learning or training early, with the socio-economic background to be particularly important.
- The six Member States examined in this study tend to have policy interventions which target the national and the system (educational) levels. These measures tend to be preventative and reintegration types of policy interventions. Nevertheless, it is evident that specific challenges and needs that students from poorer socio-economic background face benefit more from specifically designed policy measures. Therefore, Member States also need to have policy interventions that will focus on local, community level and will target these specific needs. Sweden, Ireland and Greece already have measures in place which target the needs in certain areas and communities.
- Schools need to put further efforts on making education and training more accessible. Provision of training, guidance, and support to teachers in how to keep engaging students from different backgrounds is of vital importance.
- The majority of countries target ESL indirectly, through policies implemented to improve education in general or policies aimed at reducing social exclusion and poverty. However, Member States should adopt comprehensive policy strategies to target early school leaving by mainly focus on the groups of students most at risk. Setting up national registers on absenteeism and promoting more sustained, cross-governmental cooperation to foster a comprehensive policy are considered as good starting points.
- The European Parliament is recommended to promote the implementation of such comprehensive policy measures, and to work with other EU institutions to raise the awareness of the different funds and EU supports that are available to help end users in Member States to set up such policies.

6.1. Trends observed relating to ESL

One of the key trends that has been observed anew is that early school leaving is very much a process, consisting of drivers at different levels. This insight has been well established in academic and policy literature and has again been supported by the findings collected during this study. Given that ESL is a complex process, the policy responses to help reduce ESL have been varied as well, combining interventions from different policy areas and targeting different levels.

The research conducted here shows that the individual level drivers that lead to ESL are quite uniform across Member States. Literature and insights from experts confirm that the same main types of drivers apply to individual level. These include gender, nationality (notably whether they are newly arrived migrants in a country), their family background, and their socio-economic background. These aspects all play a similar role in contributing to a pupil's decision to leave learning or training early. The socio-

economic background has been shown to be especially important as a driver for ESL. Academic research demonstrates that this factor has a particular interaction effect with the economy and the unemployment levels in a country. Where a pupil comes from a better socio-economic background, increases in unemployment rates are less likely to affect their decision to stay in school, whereas students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more affected; these students are more likely to leave school or training in times of high (youth) unemployment. This interaction effect is important to bear in mind when designing policy interventions to reduce ESL.

A further trend observed is that many EU Member States, and especially those examined in this study, tend to have policy interventions focused at the national level and the system level. National level interventions focus on improving access to and quality of education, including ECEC. Regional development initiatives are also observed, as well as efforts to make VET more attractive. At the system level, the countries studied show interventions aimed at helping to train teachers, to provide better language courses for migrants or non-national students, and to provide better career and study guidance during school. Providing guidance has been mentioned as an especially important measure, one which can help at the prevention, intervention, as well as the compensation/reintegration stage. For this reason training teachers in how to approach and support students who are struggling with learning (for whatever reason), is cited as an important policy intervention across levels as well as across countries.

There is a danger here however, that too much of the responsibility of helping to reduce ESL falls to the shoulders of teachers. In some countries, the pressure on teachers in terms of workload (compared with their remuneration) threatens to become a challenge to finding and keeping qualified teachers. In Italy, the national data collection showed this, and from broader literature research, this is becoming a trend in the Netherlands as well (where teachers were on strike over work pressure in 2018). Supporting teachers therefore becomes an especially important policy point and a future potential challenge in reducing ESL further.

Another trend observed is that a selection of EU countries have specific ESL policies in place, and several have adopted comprehensive policy strategies to reduce ESL. The majority of countries however do not have specific ESL strategies in place. ESL is often not a primary policy goal, but one which falls under education or labour market policy, or a positive indirect outcome of policies implemented to improve education, access to the labour market, regional development, youth policy, or policies aimed at reducing social exclusion and poverty. Member States therefore seem to indirectly adopt comprehensive policy strategies that address different drivers of ESL in practice. In general, given the average ESL rate has decreased since 2011, evidence suggests this approach seems to be working. That being said, some countries, such as Slovakia and Sweden show increases in ESL, and this is a reason for pause. This finding, along with the observations for Greece and Ireland, also suggest that further research into the public investment in education, labour market, youth, and social inclusion policies is needed, with specific attention being paid to national circumstances and needs. This signals a need to examine which particular combinations of drivers are leading to ESL amongst which groups of pupils, and to consider more specific needs based policies.

6.2. Recommendations and concluding remarks

Based on the trends and future challenges observed for ESL in the EU, a number of recommendations can be made.

A first challenge which was identified is that though the EU is on average decreasing its rate of ESL, the final stages to reach the EU target will be the most difficult. Experts interviewed indicate that the **hard to reach students** (those living in rural or removed areas, disadvantaged areas, students special needs,

etc.) are precisely the most difficult to reach with policy and programme interventions, but these are also the students which face a greater distance in accessing education and the labour market. Students in this group include students from poorer socio-economic backgrounds, pupils from more isolated communities, those living in disadvantaged urban areas, those who live in far removed rural communities, and students with special learning needs. Reaching these types of pupils will require a concentrated, targeted effort, which **address the specific challenges and needs faced** by these groups when following education or training. Experts interviewed indicate that in practice this will mean looking at the local, community level, and examining what the main needs are for the students there. This is key to setting up good policies and programmes to help reduce early school leaving amongst students generally, but especially in the case of harder to reach groups of students.

A related challenge here is that those groups of harder to reach students, are also more likely to need more attention from their education system to avoid their leaving school early. More understanding and **further efforts by schools to make education and training more accessible** to these harder to reach groups of students is important. In practice, a challenge is that the responsibility of providing such extra attention to harder to reach groups will largely fall on teachers as they must keep students engaged and be able to recognise students who are struggling. A recommendation would be to **provide training and guidance to teachers** in how to keep engaging students from different backgrounds.

Similar conclusions and recommendations were reached in an earlier study by the European Parliament on the Erasmus+ programme. Though the programme performed well in supporting end beneficiaries by helping to finance education and youth related projects in Member States, those groups most in need of support were most likely to not have access to support offered by the programme. Then and now, targeted policy efforts for these groups are required. Mobility and educational policy support, especially those with a focus on social inclusion, can all be provided via the Erasmus+ programme. As such from the European policy making level, a recommendation would be to examine which funds and programmes from across policy making sectors could be used to implement such targeted policy interventions to support those harder to reach groups of pupils.

Further recommendations that were signalled from academic and policy literature confirm this need to look at the **needs of students at the local level** when designing policies and programmes. In addition, research confirms the need to adopt **comprehensive strategies** to target early school leaving. Countries should ideally adopt policies that target youth, social inclusion, education, and labour market areas. A comprehensive approach would ideally also focus on helping the individual pupil, supporting schools at the system level, and target national level drivers. While this appears to happen in practice, a more focussed approach targeting early school leaving could be adopted. The different phases are also of importance. Introducing policies which target the prevention, intervention, and reintegration phases are also key. In practice, this does seem to happen in EU Member States. Therefore, a recommendation could be to **focus the efforts to help the groups of students most at risk** to reduce the chances of their leaving school or training early.

Specific policy recommendations drawn from the research relate to facilitating such comprehensive approaches. Setting up **registers on absenteeism** to be able to monitor ESL systematically in schools, and promoting more **sustained, cross-governmental cooperation** to foster a comprehensive policy approach were cited in literature as well as the national level research as good starting points. Furthermore, echoing the point made above, **better and more continuous training of teachers** in recognising the signs of students at risk of dropping out, as well as training in providing engaging education and understanding their pupils, are also key to help reduce ESL.

For the European Parliament a recommendation would be to try to promote the implementation of such policy measures, and to work with other EU institutions to **raise the awareness of the different funds and EU supports, which** are available to help end users in Member States to set up such policies. The European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund could for instance be promoted specifically in connection with ESL to relevant, potential beneficiaries such as national authorities and schools. The Erasmus+ programme and the European Solidarity Corps could also be used in this context. The former especially supports projects across administrative levels and across the policy areas including youth, mobility and education, and in particular, those projects which help to increase social inclusion in Member States.

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This study is a concise update on early school leaving in the EU. It reviews the main developments and causes of the problem since the *Council Recommendation of 2011 on policies to reduce early school leaving*, and identifies policy initiatives taken by the Member States to address it. The study explores the interplay between early school leaving and public investment and lastly outlines recommendations to address future challenges. The study takes into consideration European and national literature focusing on six Member States.

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