



International
Labour
Organization

Policy brief on early intervention measures and youth employment*

1. Introduction

This brief reviews the implementation of early intervention measures within national YG plans and analyses the interactions between prevention and curative policies and their effectiveness in addressing the difficulties young people face at different stages in the life-course.

The deterioration of the youth labour market during and after the global economic crisis led the European Union (EU) to establish the Youth Guarantee (YG), which aims to ensure that all young people under 25 years of age receive a good quality offer of employment, continued education, apprenticeship or traineeship within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving school.¹

Unemployment and inactivity have long-lasting consequences both for young individuals and for society as a whole (e.g. reduced employment opportunities and lower earnings in adulthood, greater reliance on welfare, early pregnancy and anti-social behaviour).² They also give rise to substantial economic costs. In 2011, the direct economic loss across the EU due to the high proportion of young people neither in employment, nor in education or training (NEET) was estimated at €153 billion (or 1.2 per cent of EU's gross domestic product).³

The policy framework introduced by the YG has universal coverage for the target group: young NEETs aged 15–24 (in some countries 15–29). It combines a variety of policy areas (early intervention, activation and labour market integration measures), and builds on extensive partnerships among public institutions at both

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¹Council of the European Union: Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee, (2013/C 120/1).

² K. McLaren: *Reconnecting young people. A review of the risks, remedies and consequences of youth inactivity*, Ministry of Social Development of New Zealand, Youth Transition Report Series (2003).

³ These costs were calculated as the sum of welfare transfers to NEETs (social assistance, unemployment, disability and sickness benefit) and the lost contribution of the individual to society (foregone earnings, unpaid taxes and social security contributions). These estimates, however, do not include indirect costs such as those stemming from ill health, poor self-esteem, loss of skills and social exclusion. See EUROFOUND: *NEETs – Young people not in employment, education or training: Characteristics, costs and policy responses in Europe*, Publications Office of the European Union (Luxembourg, 2012).

central and local levels, and between these and the social partners, youth and civil society organizations and the private sector.⁴

Key features of the YG include the combination of policies for prevention and “cure”, to be implemented at different stages in the lives of young people. Prevention measures typically take place during compulsory education and are aimed at addressing the risk factors associated with failure at school and early school leaving, which are likely to lead to unemployment and inactivity later in life.⁵ Curative policies serve as a remedy when these labour market outcomes have already occurred. In this regard, early intervention and activation approaches in the YG are the key to avoiding the long-lasting effects of unemployment and inactivity.⁶ The European Commission emphasized the importance of reducing early school leaving and the need to provide young people with opportunities to return to formal education and training and, more generally, to acquire skills that are relevant to the labour market.⁷

2. Early intervention measures: The framework in EU countries

There are two areas of youth employment policy where early intervention approaches are considered instrumental to achieving public policy objectives. These are labour market policies, and education and training policies.

In the design of labour market policies, early intervention prevents the problems associated with long-term unemployment. As the duration of unemployment increases, contact with the labour market and work habits become weaker, skills deteriorate and job search intensity decreases. Furthermore, the longer the period of unemployment, the more intensive and complex the labour market interventions required.

Employment assistance (job search and intensive counselling and guidance) provided in the early stages of unemployment increases the transition to employment and avoids unemployment recurrence.⁸ Already in 1998 the employment guidelines proposed by the European Commission encouraged EU countries to ensure that young individuals were offered a new start before reaching six months of unemployment and that adults were provided with employability-enhancement services before reaching 12 months of unemployment.⁹ While the impact of early intervention measures is generally positive, there may be some displacement effects and deadweight.¹⁰

⁴ Council of the European Union: Council Recommendation of 22 April 2013 on establishing a Youth Guarantee, op.cit.

⁵ K. McLaren: *Reconnecting young people. A review of the risks, remedies and consequences of youth inactivity*, op.cit

⁶ There is a copious literature and research about the scarring effects of unemployment early in life on future employment and wages, but also on young people's health, well-being and job satisfaction. See D.N.F. Bell and D.G. Blanchflower: *Young people and the Great Recession*, IZA Discussion Paper No. 5674 (2011); L.B. Kahn: “The long-term labor market consequences of graduating from college in a bad economy” *Labour Economics* 17 (2010), pp. 303-316; D. Doiron and T. Gorgens: “State dependence in youth labour market experiences, and the evaluation of policy interventions”, *Journal of Econometrics*, 145 (2008), pp 81-97.

⁷ See European Commission: *Commission staff working document accompanying the document proposal for a Council Recommendation on establishing a Youth Guarantee*, COM 729, (2012).

⁸ European Commission: *Employment policies in the EU and in the Member States. Joint Report 1998* (Luxembourg, 1999).

⁹ Council of the European Union Resolution of 15 December 1997 on the 1998 Employment Guidelines (98/C 30/01).

¹⁰ See A. Weber and H. Hofer: *Employment effects of early interventions on job search programmes*, IZA Discussion Paper No. 1076 (2004); B. Crépon, M. Dejemeppe and M.Gurgand: *Counseling the unemployed: Does it lower unemployment duration and*

In many countries, profiling tools are used to identify and prioritize interventions for individuals who are at risk of long-term unemployment.¹¹ The requirement of the YG to help young people enter the labour market or return to education and training within four months has refocused attention on early intervention as a key area of youth employment policy.

Early intervention also plays an important role in education and training policy. The term “early intervention” originates from the field of education for children with special needs. It includes a wide array of education services and programmes designed to mitigate the risk factors related to poor education outcomes.¹² Early childhood interventions generate significant benefits in several domains, including cognitive and academic achievements, behavioural and emotional competencies, educational progression and attainment, health, anti-social behaviour, and labour market outcomes, mostly in terms of increased employment and earnings. These findings are supported by a significant body of evidence on the positive relationship between education and labour market outcomes. The fact that gaps in cognitive and non-cognitive skills can be tracked to early school years, and that these are key drivers of subsequent economic and social success or failure, demonstrates that this is a crucial stage at which interventions need to be planned. Interventions at this stage will thus prevent school failure and early school leaving, and thereby avoid poor labour market outcomes.¹³

In EU countries, the definition of early intervention currently encompasses system-level education reforms combined with specific measures to reduce school failure and drop-out.¹⁴ Figure 1 below depicts the main elements that relate to prevention and intervention in early intervention systems in EU countries.¹⁵ In the context of strategies to address early school leaving, early intervention systems are combined with compensation measures. The latter aim to bring young people who have not completed their studies back into education to obtain a qualification. Most of these compensation measures (e.g. second chance programmes) are included in the labour market integration pillar of the YG.¹⁶

recurrence? IZA Discussion Paper No. 1796 (2005); L. Behaghel, B. Crépon and M. Gurgand: *Private and public provision of counseling to job-seekers: Evidence from a large controlled experiment*, IZA Discussion Paper No. 6518 (2012); J. Maibom Pedersen, M. Rosholm and M. Svarer: *Experimental evidence on the effects of early meetings and activation*, IZA Discussion Paper No. 6970 (2012).

¹¹ For example, Denmark, Germany, Ireland and Portugal. For a review of profiling systems see P. J. O’Connell et al.: *National profiling of the unemployed in Ireland*, The Economic and Social Research Institute (Dublin, 2009).

¹² M. Guralnick: *The effectiveness of early intervention* (Baltimore, P.H. Brookes, 1997).

¹³ For a review of the type of costs entailed by early school leaving see G. Psacharopoulos: *The costs of school failure. A feasibility study*, European Expert Network on Economics of Education, EENEE Analytical report No 2 (2007).

¹⁴ European Commission: *Reducing early school leaving: Key messages and policy support*. Final Report of the Thematic Working Group on Early School Leaving (2013). For a complete synopsis of recent country practices on early school leaving see European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Cedefop: *Tackling early leaving from education and training in Europe: Strategies, policies and measures*, Eurydice and Cedefop Report (Luxembourg, 2014).

¹⁵ See Council of the European Union Recommendation of 28 June 2011 on policies to reduce early school leaving (2011/C 191/01).

¹⁶ See ILO: *The Youth Guarantee in Europe: Labour market integration measures* (Geneva, 2017).

FIGURE 1: KEY FEATURES OF EARLY INTERVENTION SYSTEMS

Prevention	Intervention
• Access to quality childhood education • Relevant and engaging curriculum • Flexible education pathways • Smooth transition between educational levels • High quality and relevant vocational education and training • Involvement of pupils • Teacher education • Strong guidance system	• Effective and evidence-based early warning systems • Focus on individual needs • Systematic support frameworks • Extra-curricular and out-of-school activities • Support to teachers • Empowering families and parents

Source: Based on European Commission: *Reducing early school leaving: Key messages and policy support*. Final Report of the Thematic Working Group on Early School Leaving (2013).

3. Early intervention in national Youth Guarantee plans

3.1. Prevention

In many EU countries, the prevention measures provided for in national YG plans include strengthening the vocational education and training systems, as well as making them more attractive by allowing horizontal and vertical mobility across education pathways. In countries with a dual apprenticeship system (e.g. Austria and Germany), reforms include the introduction of pre-apprenticeship courses that increase school retention rates, or the expansion of apprenticeship to non-traditional occupations (see Box 1).

Prevention measures address early school leaving at early stages, acting on the design and key features of national education and training systems. Some of these features include:

- **Relevance and quality of education.** Education programmes that attract participants' interests and provide skills that are valued in the labour market can motivate young people to remain in school. They should include the development of key competences and measures to foster educational progression and achievements, particularly for students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.
- **Flexible education pathways.** When students and their parents are required to choose between different educational pathways at an early age, motivation can suffer if the result of the selection and orientation does not meet expectations. Measures to facilitate adaptation of educational pathways or flexibility (in terms of change of courses of study and pathway), induction programmes that match young people's expectations with learning content, and targeted support for students facing difficulties can reduce school drop-out.
- **Learner-centred teaching methods.** Teaching skills and practices are the key determinants of student performance. Active learner-centred methods enhance

motivation by engaging young people directly in learning processes and thereby reduce early school leaving and drop-out.

- **Early education and career guidance system.** Good quality, up-to-date guidance at an early stage of schooling enables young people to make informed education and career choices. It helps them understand their own strengths, talents, study options and employment prospects. Guidance can be provided through interactive approaches (mentoring, coaching, one-to-one guidance, work placements), including online services.
- **Vocational education and training-cum-work experience.** In order to ensure relevance and quality, vocational education and training (VET) should provide opportunities to explore the world of work and allow for progression to higher education, similarly to academic education. In particular, the inclusion of elements of work experience in VET provision (through “tasters” and traineeships during the school period) can help young people understand job demands, how enterprises function, and employer expectations. It can also enhance students’ motivation to continue their studies.

Box 1: Prevention measures in the European Union

Reforms have been introduced in several EU countries to improve teaching and learning in the compulsory stages of education. For example, in **Cyprus**, a new curriculum has been implemented for pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education focusing on the development of new skills and key competences. **Portugal** has made learning more flexible by giving schools the opportunity to make the curriculum more relevant to learners and to the needs of the local labour market.

In more than half of EU countries, recently adopted policies and measures aim to increase the flexibility and permeability of educational pathways. **Belgium, Cyprus, Finland** and **Poland** have undertaken reforms to improve the quality, attractiveness and flexibility of their VET systems. This includes changes in qualifications systems to improve the recognition and validation of skills. In **Italy**, a recently passed legislative decree encourages the recognition of non-formal and informal learning experience, and their inclusion in the education system. In **Belgium, Germany, Lithuania** and **Portugal**, projects have been implemented to reduce early school leaving by improving the transition between general education and vocational pathways or between the various types of vocational programmes. In **Bulgaria, Portugal** and **Spain**, reforms under national YG plans include the introduction of apprenticeship systems.

Career guidance is an important support measure that can contribute to reducing early school leaving, in particular among at-risk students. In **Finland**, guidance and counselling are directed at all students, especially those with learning difficulties, low achievers or drop-outs. In **Luxembourg**, in addition to local centres for youth action, which offer individual guidance and support to the lowest achieving students, there is a dedicated guidance service for recently arrived migrant students and their parents (*Cellule d'accueil scolaire pour élèves nouveaux arrivants*).

Other countries have recently revised other features of their education and career guidance services. These initiatives include the development and expansion of existing educational and career guidance services (**Cyprus, Lithuania** and **Spain**), the introduction of individual development and career plans (**Hungary** and **Romania**); the provision of specific guidance and counselling services to students at risk of dropout (**Austria**); and the improvement of the quality of career guidance and enhancing the skills of career guidance counsellors.

Source: European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Cedefop: *Tackling early leaving from education and training in Europe: Strategies, policies and measures*, Eurydice and Cedefop Report (Luxembourg, 2014), op.cit.

3.2. Interventions

Early intervention measures address the difficulties that students may encounter in school. While some of these measures apply to all students and serve as prevention, others specifically target young people who disengage from learning activities and are thus at high risk of dropping out. Reasons for early school leaving can be analysed with the support of data on various aspects. These include age at which discontinuation of education and training occurs, differences by gender, socio-economic background, academic performance and education level, and differences in drop-out rates between schools, including their location and the types of education and training they provide. This information is generally included in national student databases, administrative registers or large-scale quantitative and qualitative empirical studies on the reasons for early school leaving.

Box 2: Data collection systems on young people at risk of early school leaving

In the **Netherlands**, each student has a unique reference number administered by a nationwide system (Basic Record Database for Education, BRON) that tracks the progression of all pupils. Young people registered in the system as being of compulsory school age but not attending education or training and not holding a basic qualification are classified as early school leavers. A national agreement requires schools to provide data on these young people to the Regional Registration and Coordination Centre (RMC). The RMC also receives data from the Public Employment Service (PES) on early school leavers who already have a job or are receiving social security payments. This allows the RMC to make early contact with young people who are not working and are not receiving social security payments, to provide them with information and guide them back to school. The BRON system captures a broad range of variables (including age, gender, place of residence, ethnic origin, education and school type). Aggregate data is available at national, regional and local levels and for each school and training institution.

In **Luxembourg**, a digital national pupil register and a systematic procedure developed by the Ministry of Education and Local Action for Youth (*Action Locale pour Jeunes, ALJ*) is able to identify young people who leave school without a diploma. Monthly lists are produced, which are used by the ALJ to follow up on early school leavers.

In **Portugal** the education information and management system (*Sistema de Informação e Gestão da Educação e Oferta Formativa*) collects information on students (age, special needs), parents (profession and employment status as well as education level) and learning activities (absences, class, school year, evaluation). The data are accessible at the individual, school, regional and national levels and are delivered through a business intelligence system that supports school managers and other decision-makers. This system has been upgraded to capture data on the performance of the entire education and training spectrum, including private schools and universities, and to assess labour market outcomes for students after having left the education system, using administrative data on employment and social security.

Data pooling and exchange have also been trialled in the **United Kingdom** as part of the European Parliament Preparatory Action on the Youth Guarantee. This project involved the development of a database that collects information on secondary education students from the municipality of Hartlepool. Each school in the municipality was responsible for providing information on the expected educational outcomes for students, rates of absenteeism, special education needs, and involvement with juvenile and other social services, along with its in-depth knowledge about each young person. This information is being used to develop an early intervention indicator – similar to the At Risk of becoming NEET Indicator (RONI) – to be used to identify potential beneficiaries of early intervention services.

Source: European Commission: *Reducing early school leaving: Key messages and policy support* (2013) op.cit.; European Commission: *PES practices for the outreach and activation of NEETs: A contribution of the Network of Public*

The development or expansion of systems for identifying at-risk students and young school drop-outs are part of the national YG plans in Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Portugal. Early identification is usually based on a comprehensive analysis of the student's characteristics, including social, family-related and emotional factors. These are combined with indicators of school performance and absenteeism to assess the risk of early school leaving (see Box 2).

Education professionals have a key role in detecting disengagement and providing first-hand responses. This support is based on a multi-professional approach involving psychologists, teachers and guidance counsellors. It includes individual learning and other measures to improve student motivation and resilience, develop and adapt learning methodologies. It also seeks to involve parents in early detection of disengagement, academic difficulties or problems, and encourage them to become a resource for their children's learning. These support measures can also include extra-curricular and out-of-school activities. Some of the measures included in national YG plans are summarized in Box 3.

Box 3: Intervention measures in the European Union

In **Austria**, the Ministry for Social Affairs, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, runs the youth coaching programme (*Jugencoaching*) to keep, or re-integrate, young people in the education and training system. The target group includes young people who are at risk of not attaining lower or upper secondary education, and young people under 19 years of age who are NEET. Youth coaching providers cooperate with schools (to identify at-risk youth) as well as with the PES, training providers, and organizations supporting youth with disabilities.

In **Denmark**, municipal Youth Guidance Centres help young people to continue or complete their education. The main target groups are students in primary and lower secondary schools, and young NEETs under the age of 25. In the compulsory education system, each student is required to prepare an education plan with the support of a youth guidance counsellor. The student is expected to participate in a series of consultations to develop this plan, and is encouraged to start thinking ahead to employment and further education opportunities beyond compulsory education. If the student is unable to decide, he or she may be offered a 10-day "bridging course", which explains various educational pathways and employment fields. Youth Guidance Centres are obliged to contact young persons (aged 18–24) who have not completed upper secondary education and are not following an educational programme, to guide them in their education choices.

In several countries of the European Union (**Bulgaria**, **Romania**, **Slovenia** and **Spain**), student support measures also include financial assistance through scholarships – especially for in-demand occupations – or cash transfers conditional on school attendance.

Source: European Commission: *Reducing early school leaving: Key messages and policy support* (2013) op.cit.; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Cedefop: *Tackling early leaving from education and training in Europe: Strategies, policies and measures* (2014), op.cit.; European Commission: *PES practices for the outreach and activation of NEETs: A contribution of the Network of Public Employment Services* (2015), op.cit.

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