

IV. Education/Social policies and measures regarding ESL in nine partner countries

The 2013 *European Commission's country overview and country-specific recommendations* analysed the economic situation and provides recommendations for measures each country should adopt over 18 months. This document focused on the issues each Member State has to confront, including education and the fight against unemployment.

When it comes to **Austria** (AU), the Commission points out that even though its expenditure on education is above EU average, educational outcomes are still below average, especially for 10 and 15-year-olds. Therefore Austria is required to continue to improve educational outcomes, especially of young people with migrant background. The completion of higher education also needs to be addressed, as it is also low. **Belgium** (BE), in turn, is required to speed up the transition towards a more knowledge intensive economy, as it has below average and there are grave employment and unemployment disparities across regions and population subgroups. This includes people with migrant background and low-skilled young people. Therefore, BE is advised to take measures to reduce disincentives to work, to improve interregional labour mobility and to develop social inclusion strategies for these people.

The Commission advises **Hungary** (HU) to implement measures to tackle the fact that its relative success in lowering the number of ESLers in the last decade was reversed in 2011. In the **Netherlands** (NE), the focus is also on the economy. Investments in R&D and education arise as considerable challenges. According to the Commission, **Poland** (PL) has managed to carry out reforms to implement vocational training and to propose other changes to the education system, which will likely help to address the high levels of unemployment.

The most relevant achievements in **Portugal** (PT) relate to economic stabilisation and fiscal consolidation, but significant challenges remain, namely the need for measures to tackle the increasing unemployment, particularly among young workers. Moreover, the country is said to need significant structural reforms. Economic growth and employment are the main challenges to be faced by **Spain** (SP) as well. The labour market situation is still critical. In education, planned reforms need to be implemented, as the weaknesses of educational and training systems have negative impacts on high levels of early school leaving and youth unemployment.

According to the Commission overview, even if some measures have been taken, **Sweden** (SE) is faced with labour market integration especially of low-skilled youth and people with migrant background. Therefore, the country is called to develop measures to improve employability and the transition from school to work, including apprenticeships and other training forms combining employment and education. The **UK** is faced with a very high level of youth unemployment that is over 2.5 times greater than the UK overall unemployment rate. As a result, the Commission requires the UK to improve the quality of vocational training and to reduce the number of young people who do not attain sufficient skills to enter the labour market.

Moreover, in the current period of crisis, and in what concerns national translation of the EU 2020 targets, AU, HU and PT are required to reduce ESL to 10%, and SP is to reduce the rate of ESL to 15%. Other members are to achieve different percentages in reducing ESL rates: SE to less than 10%, BE to 9.5%, the NE to less than 8%, PL to 4.5%. Only in the UK is reducing ESL not a target in NRP (National Reform Programmes).

Changing contexts and national educational and training systems in post Lisbon 2000

All nine RESL.eu countries reported deep changes in their national educational and training systems by pointing to both the emphasis on the articulation between education and labour, in particular through vocational education and training, and the engagement of stakeholders in education. Countries' socio-political and economic contexts, including their diverse positions within the EU, account for the way in which countries managed to implement change in their education and training systems. Moreover, besides national socio-political changes, job scarcity, insecurity and low pay affecting young people from particular sub-groups of the population have influenced educational and training changes. The following main political changes impacting ESL were identified.

Belgium

In **Belgium**, education is a community responsibility, so the Flemish (Dutch speaking) Community has almost full competence regarding educational issues. Secondary education in Flanders is a tracked system with three main distinct pathways: *general education* leading to (academically oriented) higher education, *technical education* leading to (professionally oriented) higher education and technically skilled professions, and *vocational education* leading more directly to specific professions on the labour market.

Criticism for the early tracking of pupils into specific educational pathways as well as for the varying levels of social prestige associated with the different tracks is expressed by many actors in the political, educational and academic field and is strongly linked to the reproduction of educational inequalities (Clycq, Nouwen & Vandenbroucke 2013). It is within this broader educational context that three major issues have arisen in recent years, which illustrate the different rationales underpinning current discussions on education in general, and ESL in particular.

One major issue in the Flemish public debate on education concerns a longstanding aim of various political, socio-economical and educational stakeholders to structurally reform this tracked system in Flemish secondary education. The restructuring plans for secondary education mainly evolve around directing pupils into different educational tracks at a later (st)age and organising education into domains that provide tracks with different finalities within the same educational institution (or network of institutions) and therefore allow for more flexible learning pathways.

These reform plans are mainly based on the social justice rationale mentioned above. However, opponents to this structural reform argue that it will negatively impact the performance level of the average and top performing students, which would have negative consequences for the economic competitiveness of the Flemish Region.

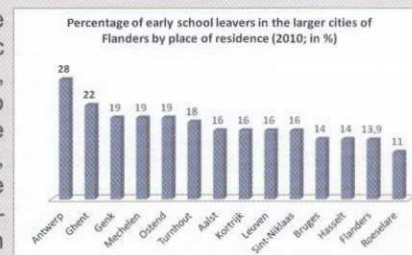
Nevertheless, this structural reform is also proposed by its protagonists as a preventive measure in tackling ESL, in which pupils from a lower socioeconomic and immigrant background are strongly overrepresented. Moreover, these same groups are also overrepresented in (youth) unemployment rates, a fact that relates to an important (albeit more implicit) economic rationale behind the reform plans.

Belgium (Flanders):

A focus on ESL and youth unemployment in Antwerp and Ghent

In Belgium, educational policy is a community responsibility, which entails that the Flemish community has the authority to design and implement educational policy in Flanders. We therefore focus only on Flanders in studying early school leaving in the Resl.eu-project. With respect to the awareness about the issue of ESL policy makers, educational and societal stakeholders on all levels recognise a sense of urgency. Although comparative EU figures (LFS, 2012) show that Flanders has a moderate level of ESL, administrative data show strong differences between Flemish cities, e.g. the ESL rate in Antwerp is 28% and in Ghent, 22%.

Furthermore, as these urban areas are characterized by high levels of ethnic diversity and socio-economic vulnerability, research shows that not only do these two variables intersect, but they also correlate strongly with high ESL rates. Moreover, specific minority and lower SES groups are overrepresented in the vocational and part-time education track, which are tracks with the highest ESL rates.



An expected consequence is that there is a strong link between ESL rates in these cities and their high youth unemployment rates, stressing again the dramatic impact of educational outcomes on labour market opportunities. The following figure maps the mean youth unemployment rates in 2010 (age group 15-24) per city in the Flemish Region, based on administrative data from the Flemish Employment Agency (VDAB). Both the city of Antwerp and the city of Ghent, the research areas for the Flemish Region in RESL.eu, are in the top 5 of the highest youth unemployment rates of the Flemish Region.

In recent years, the issue of ESL was already increasingly discussed in political, educational and academic arenas, often linked to high youth unemployment rates, which in October 2013 accumulated into a new Flemish Action Plan for tackling ESL. This Flemish Action Plan is strongly in line with EU recommendations and EU strategies for reducing ESL. More concretely, on a local level the cities of Ghent and Antwerp each designed specific city level actions to counter ESL. What is apparent in these public discussions is that most stakeholders involved put forward a few crucial issues in tackling early school leaving, one of which is the restructuring of secondary education. less, these issues are addressed in different manners as two main rationales - a social justice and an economic rationale - are stressed by different stakeholders.

A second issue related to policy discussions on reducing early school leaving is the status of part-time vocational education in the Flemish education system. Part-time vocational education was initially implemented after raising the compulsory school age to 18 and allowing pupils to leave full-time education at the age of 15 to start combining formal school education with workplace learning. However, both the school education and the workplace learning components of part-time vocational education are characterised by disproportionately high figures of truancy and ESL. For many pupils the choice for, or being directed towards, part-time education is often a last step down the waterfall of educational tracks, right before leaving education early, and is often not a positive choice.

Educational institutions providing part-time vocational education also increasingly encounter problems providing their pupils with (quality) apprenticeships that sufficiently simulate real work experiences. Employers express being hesitant to invest in pupils that they believe are not sufficiently motivated and/or guided by their educational institution, while some societal and educational stakeholders claim that employers do not take their societal responsibility of (sufficiently) investing in the professional capabilities of youngsters.

A final important issue that emerged out of the policy analysis concerns the implementation of the Flemish Qualification Structure in line with the European Qualification Framework. It focuses on matching labour market qualifications with qualifications that are provided in Flemish (secondary) education, especially for vocationally oriented types of education.

Tensions have arisen between educational and labour market representatives in search of a middle ground that acknowledges the importance of both generic competences acquired through education and concrete vocationally oriented courses that focus on specific skills and competences to fill specific vacancies in the labour market.

Furthermore, educational stakeholders have concerns about the high expectations prescribed in the Flemish Qualification Structure. Educational stakeholders feel that they do not have the means, nor mandate, to provide youngsters with these professional qualifications and want to invest more in a broader and (therefore more) empowering education for all.

These three main issues have emerged out of the Flemish policy analysis and illustrate current tensions between the different stakeholders (political, educational, labour market, civil society) involved. All perspectives to some extent combine the two main rationales – social justice and the economic factor – however, with differing emphasis, goals and strategies. Seeing as elections will be held in May 2014, policy focus can and likely will shift in the following years, also affecting some of the discussions mentioned above (see Nouwen, Clycq and Timmerman, 2013).

United Kingdom

In the **United Kingdom**, education and youth policy have both held priority on the agenda of the previous Labour government and the present Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition government alike – both of which have been in power in the post-Lisbon period. Although differences between the education policies of the two administrations remain clear, both continued with the same paradigm in many aspects – in particular, the subordination of education to the perceived needs of the globalised market and knowledge-based economy, promoting the marketisation of the education system, increasing school autonomy, and a discourse of individual aspirations, choice and responsibility.

While the New Labour government introduced a number of reforms explicitly aimed at combating social exclusion and social inequalities in education along with the so-called neo-liberal education reforms, the Coalition government seems to have fully adopted the ideals of neo-liberalism. In this policy paradigm, education is conceived as central in solving both social and economic problems, its duty being to increase economic competitiveness and at the same time also to provide social justice. The Conservative-led Coalition government

elected in May 2010 presented their education model in the 2010 schools' White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*, which promotes the reform of the whole education system.

Education and ESL Policy in England

Current UK policy discourse interprets the role of education primarily from a labour market perspective and tends to define problematic and/ or vulnerable youth predominantly in terms of their labour market outcomes. Therefore, the youth policy agenda focuses on young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEETs). Reducing ESL has not been the explicit aim of education reforms, and the term ESL is hardly mentioned in the policy discourse.

However, this issue is not being neglected; rather, it is articulated using different terminology. Raising the participation age to 17 in 2013, then to 18 in 2015, can be interpreted as the main policy initiative designed to tackle ESL in England. Participation does not have to be in full time education; alternative options include work-based learning, including apprenticeships, and part-time education for those employed, self-employed or volunteering.

The government has also introduced a new initiative to raise test results specifically in maths and English, whereby students who fail to achieve a grade C in the GCSE will be required to continue studying these subjects till age 18, even after they progress on to the next stage of study. There seems to be a genuine push to equip young people with in-demand skills through reform of the apprenticeship programme.

However, the pressure on schools to raise GCSE and A-Level scores appears to reinforce the privileging of academic qualifications. The rationale behind the current educational policies seems to be that there is a direct correlation between educational achievement and employment outcomes; young people are regarded as 'intelligent customers' who will choose the best possible option from the educational offers available to them.

During the 2000s, spending on education in the UK saw the fastest growth in decades. After 2010, however, the most severe cuts to the education budget in over fifty years were announced. The 16-19 age group is one of the most affected: the very successful Education Maintenance Allowance scheme was cancelled and spending on further education and youth services – including careers guidance – was reduced. On the surface, it seems that EU impact on English education and youth policy is marginal.

Nonetheless, EU objectives and measures do indeed shape these initiatives, but this is achieved through EU funding schemes –ESF projects most significantly– and not by direct legislation. In addition, good practice examples from other European countries are often cited by both local and national policy makers. While there is a strong convergence in the objectives and rationales of the policy discourse in England and the EU, this can be interpreted more as cross-fertilisation and transfer of ideas than the [often assumed] causal relationship.

The Barnet Skills, Employment and Enterprise Action Plan

In 2012-13, £1 million was allocated to developing better connections between business and education in the London borough of Barnet. The Action Plan includes a number of strands relevant to reducing ESL numbers, such as apprenticeship and internship schemes, a proposal for a 'Studio School', and support for young people with learning difficulties.

We need to continue down that pathway, making sure what training institutions provide is tailored to the labour market.

Local Authority Manager

The major themes of this policy document are: improving the quality of teaching, enhancing school autonomy and supporting children from disadvantaged background. Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education at present, announced the reform of the National Curriculum, the introduction of an English Baccalaureate and a more rigorous assessment system, and the return to a more 'traditional approach' to education.

The policy discourse emphasising accountability, individual responsibility and choice is based on the assumption that lack of motivation and aspiration are the roots of educational underperformance; while ignoring key obstacles to educational attainment, such as the financial limitations of young people from low-income families and lack of adequate learning provision. In this way, attention is focussed entirely on the supply-side - individual 'employability'- and drawn away from economic problems affecting demand for labour, such as socio-economic inequality, lack of employment opportunities, and a large percentage of insecure, low-paid jobs, especially in some geographical regions and within particular employment sectors. Unemployment is redefined as a 'learning problem', shifting responsibility from the state to the individual. This approach and the increasing policy emphasis on parental choice are likely to increase existing socio-economic inequalities in education.

It needs to be mentioned that education policy focuses on state schools, which are funded by the central government. However, England and the United Kingdom, more generally, has a diverse school system ranging from publicly funded state schools to fee-charging private schools, the so-called 'independent schools'. But even within the category of state education there is considerable variety.

While state schools are under the direct control of local authorities, there is a growing number of diverse educational providers including Academies, Free Schools, University Technical Colleges and Studio Schools, which report back to the Department for Education instead of the local authorities. The dichotomy between state schools and private schools - largely attended by the children of the upper middle class, is not reflected in the policy discourse, as private schools do not fall under the same regulatory demands as state schools do.

Given government cutbacks and rising university tuition fees, there is a growing emphasis on employer needs. This new direction is being implemented through a reform of the vocational offers on one hand, and, on the other hand, taking away funding incentives from courses of study deemed to be of little economic value. There seem to be profound underlying contradictions in current policy initiatives. Under the popular catchphrase of decentralisation, a large number of schools are becoming 'free' of local authority control, reporting back directly to the Department of Education. Thus - while the middle tier of administration and management is removed - it is not clear whether the move is from centralised to decentralised education system, or the exact opposite.

In addition, there is a curious paradox between the large number of educational initiatives introduced recently by the central government, and the growing importance of Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) as a mechanism for regulating schools and enforcing government policy, at a time of growing devolution and increasing school autonomy. Finally, local authorities are under increasing pressure. On one hand, they have an increasing duty to ensure that all young people receive adequate education in their borough. They have to produce 'destination measures' showing what young people are doing post-16, and encourage 'effective participation in education, training and/ or employment'.

Local authorities also have to provide the so-called September Guarantee, which ensures a suitable place for each young person in the borough in post-16 education and training. However, they do not have power over the new types of schools, including Academies and Free Schools.

To conclude, it seems that the education and training system in England is undergoing historical changes that will likely have widespread consequences - at a time of economic downturn that affects young people disproportionately. While adequate reforms of the education and training system could potentially contribute to improving young people's labour market opportunities, it is unlikely that education policy initiatives alone will solve the issue of disproportionate and large-scale youth unemployment (Ryan and Lörinc 2013).



Sweden

In **Sweden**, internal tensions are expressed in opposite right wing and left-wing political agendas. There was an ideological turn affecting education policies. Since 1991, social democrats intended to provide higher studies to all. In 2011, right wing reform called for a clearer distinction between vocational and academic tracks. The political priority was to strengthen the link between education and the labour market, upper secondary education being seen as the minimum competence level for a steady position in it.

School segregation increased since the 1990s and was reinforced by free school choice. Even if implementing other European guidelines, the government does not seek to fulfil EU desegregation initiatives related to socioeconomic background of the children and youngsters. Access to public upper secondary education programs depends on grade level in Swedish, English and Maths. Municipalities are to distribute resources to schools and to provide upper secondary school for people under the age of 20. They get a state grant to increase salaries for pedagogically competent teachers. Formal and non-formal municipal adult education is available at 'folk high schools' (county councils, trade unions and non-profit organizations). School leadership is depicted as democratic, focused on pedagogy and instruction, and teachers are seen as being role models. Schools are obliged to strive for all pupils' belief in their ability and opportunities to develop. School climate improvements such as learning communities are to encourage youth to continue education, help them regain enthusiasm for learning, and facilitate the route to further education and employment. The focus is on pupils' responsibility and accountability. Close follow-up on students' results and cooperation between schools and municipalities are requirements for this.

Public education is completely or partially financed by the public budget. Upper secondary, adult and higher education have different funding. A recent decrease in adult education funding has begun hindering opportunities to improve grades. Moreover, it is no longer possible to improve grades at all - students no longer have the possibility to retake subjects to improve their grades in these subjects. High dropout rates in vocational tracks gave room to upper secondary school reform focused on smoothing the school-to-work transition, facilitating youngsters' contacts with employers. The reformed education and training have deeper occupational and practical training to increase vocational upper secondary students' skills. Vocational no longer gives access to university but supplementary courses may allow one to meet the admission criteria.

The educational policies includes extended extra-curricular activities, tougher demands on study and career guidance, increased educational flexibility, special support, structured curriculum for Swedish as second language; expansion of adult vocational education, apprenticeships, and second chances with customised and flexible pedagogy and organisation. Target groups are students below age 20, lower academic performers, those with a native language other than Swedish, newly arrived immigrants, students without eligibility to enter vocational tiers, socially disadvantaged early school leavers, unemployed between ages 16-24 and unqualified adults, graduates from vocational tracks, and youngsters below 25 years of age that risk long term unemployment (Rudberg 2013).

Sweden: Local policy initiatives in one of the research areas: the municipality of Stockholm

In Sweden there are a number of local initiatives to prevent or compensate for ESL. Birgitta Lindgren is principal for a vocational upper secondary school in the municipality of Stockholm. In this school the students have many difficulties. None of them was successful in compulsory school, they generally have a lower socioeconomic status, and most of them have different neuropsychiatric diagnoses. The reason they chose to attend a vocational programme is precisely that they see themselves as failures and feel they cannot handle theoretical studies. Thirty-eight percent of the students attend the introductory program called Vocational Introduction, because they lack sufficient knowledge from compulsory school. The school has made extensive efforts to help these students and make it possible for them to complete their education.

The school has the highest number of teachers per student in Stockholm: more than 8 adults per 100 students. There is a counsellor that works 80 percent and the student health work is well-developed. Classes are small: in theoretical subjects the groups of students consist of 20 at most, and in vocational subjects the groups consist of no more than 12 students. Measure programs, individually adjusted changes in study plans, and truancy investigations have been implemented. The teaching has clear timeframes and a clear structure. Birgitta Lindgren says: "There is structure, there are short tasks, the teachers own the classroom". This is believed to facilitate the learning process for students with special needs and is part of a strategy to "give students all possibilities to succeed", says Birgitta Lindgren.

There are also a number of local initiatives outside of schools in the municipality of Stockholm. Some of these concern alternative learning. One such project is the Youth Centre. The Youth Centre was assigned to arrange education for youth below 20 years who do not proceed to upper secondary school or who leave school early (Fischbein and Folkander 2000). Other projects are designed to help early school leavers carry on with either studies or work. Since 2009 there is a project called Youth In (*Unga In*) in Fryshuset in Stockholm. The project is partly financed by Swedish municipalities and partly by the European Social Fund. Youth In is directed at youth aged 16-24 years who neither study nor work. The project aims at meeting them in their own arenas to motivate them and offer them an opportunity to change their situation and either go back to school or find a job (SOU 2013).

References

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Portugal

Trying to comply with EU knowledge-based economy and highly competitive knowledge society, **Portugal** has followed the EU mandates. Important milestones reached by 2009 were: the extension of compulsory schooling to 12 years, the provision of universal pre-school, and other policy measures including the endowment of financial resources to local authorities, the correction of the system's inefficiencies by optimising secondary school, reducing dropout rates and increasing skills (Fonseca, Araújo & Santos 2012; Macedo & Araújo 2013).

With the ideological turn in 2011, education social support takes on an 'assistencialist' mode, for instance in the provision of food and transport. There are high rates of unemployed young people, and high numbers of emigration known as 'brain drain'. Neo-meritocratic conservative features inform the reform of basic and secondary schooling, giving room to the rhetoric of individual and social responsibility.

The focus is on measurable results and on the view of vocational education as the 'solution' for the 'less able'. Developing the economy and the insertion of individuals in the 'new' labour market act as legitimating tools for the introduction of early vocational tracks and the reinforcement of vocational training.

This increased articulation with the labour market is illustrated by joint measures carried out by various ministries and the involvement of other educational stakeholders in education (companies, entrepreneurial associations, and alternative learning arenas). This comes hand in hand with increasing attempts of privatisation of education, the reduction of state funding, the rationalisation of the educational structures and resources (mega-school clusters).

The current implementation and attainment of 12 years of schooling and the diversification of vocational offer, including early vocational tracking, are justified by the government with the need to introduce greater flexibility in the organisation of teaching (with increased teaching workloads). Apprenticeships and work-related programs have been implemented for ESLers and students with school failure.

The new regulations of registration and attendance systems in compulsory education, the expanded focus on assessment (to entrench the culture and practice of evaluation in education and training) are in close relationship with the school autonomy. Responsibility, accountability and evaluation include the appointment of external evaluators to integrate the external school evaluation teams. Areas such as *project work* and *citizenship education* have been considered as of minor importance.

The introduction of Centres for Qualification and Vocational Education accompanied the extinction of New Opportunities Centres (second chance and adult education). Labour policies have been implemented through state funds to make young people more attractive to employers. Target groups are lower performers, as young as 13 years old, as well as disadvantaged children and young people studying in TEIP (educational areas of priority intervention) (see Araújo, Rocha, Magalhães and Macedo 2013).

Education and ESL Policy in Portugal

In Portugal, early school leaving (ESL) was identified as a political issue early in the 2000s. Considering the on-going issues of year repetition and school failure, especially among the most disadvantaged groups (Araújo, Rocha & Fonseca 2010), ESL remains a social and educational concern despite the country having managed to reduce ESL rate from 44,2% in 2001 to 20,8% in 2012. The focus on ESL is not explicit in policy initiatives, but is transversal to the preambles and texts of many. However, the focus on raising the population qualifications, in line with the EU guidelines and in response to the Portuguese moderate results in international comparative assessments such as PISA has had positive effects on reducing ESL.

Between 2000 and 2010, there was growing investment in education in the vein of modernisation, Europeanisation and technological innovation. Several educational and social changes reshaped the field of education and paved the way for the concern about reducing ESL. In the mid-2000s, emphasis was put on the effectiveness of the extension of compulsory schooling in parallel with the implementation of measures to consolidate public schooling, such as financial support to low-income families, particularly to postpone children's entry into the labour market.

Meaningful examples are: i) improvement and expansion of upper secondary and post-secondary vocational education and training and providing skills for the labour market, by means of partnerships among schools, enterprises and other stakeholders; ii) New Opportunities Programme aimed at adult training and youth education, including certification and recognition of competencies; iii) National Reading Plan to respond to the high levels of illiteracy; iv) modernisation of school facilities; v) Technological Plan for Education (including 'schools' fast internet', 1st cycle minicomputers, e-schooling); and vi) introduction of free-of-charge curriculum enrichment activities in the 1st cycle (English language, music, physical education).

A milestone in education (in 2009) was the extension of compulsory education up to the age of 18 years, which went hand in hand with other political measures targeted at optimising secondary school, reducing dropout rates and increasing young people skills and qualifications. The provision of resources to schools, the correction of the system's inefficiencies, and the *Better School Success* programme (2010) supporting school projects and pedagogic diversification are other examples.

Since 2011, the worldwide 'crisis' has had a strong impact on Portugal: economic problems, political instability, volatility of labour, dilapidation of life quality, general impoverishment of the majority of the population, and a sharp rise in emigration. Budgetary reductions impacted the education and training systems, jeopardizing the universality and quality of public education, including higher education and scientific research.

Tensions between the normative prescription of compulsory schooling and the social and political capacity to ensure its effective universality became increasingly visible. Neo-meritocratic and conservative policies have emphasised measurable results rather than the learning process. Vocational education is presented as a 'solution' for low performers in mainstream education and an early vocational pilot program was launched in 2012 to provide work skills to students as early as 13 years old. The Programme Educational Territories of Priority Intervention (TEIP) was launched in 1996 and is in its third generation. It is a good political practice and example of positive discrimination in school and community in areas of greater socio-cultural disadvantage to reduce ESL, absenteeism and indiscipline.

The Netherlands

The **Netherlands** is faced with increasing cultural diversity resulting from immigration, leading to the need to promote shared cultural identity and build on cultural heritage by means of integration and qualification. The direct link between education/training to business/industry and work placements is aimed at enabling more pupils to achieve a basic qualification. Schooling is seen as increasingly important in the knowledge-driven economy as academic qualification informs individuals' economic welfare. There has been a growing concern about the lack of supply of well-educated employees and the high rates of early school leavers, making it a transversal topic of educational, urban, youth, social, national and local policies.

The extension of compulsory school attendance and basic qualification until age 18 (pre-college or two years at senior secondary vocational education) is a pertinent measure, together with the allocation of education numbers and the compulsory digital registration of school absenteeism to reinforce control of school attendance. The target groups are youngsters with motivational problems and learning difficulties, students up to age 16, students who have completed secondary school, young descendants of immigrants, and prospective young people in the labour market.

Almost all the EU 2011 guidelines to reduce ESL have been incorporated into preventive activities and decentralised programs to decrease truancy and the number of ESLers by means of provision of familiar environments, of teachers whom students already know, and the use of a single pedagogical and didactic approach.

There is an integrative approach to education that includes shared funding among regions and is based primarily upon increased collaboration among schools, municipalities and national government by means of regional agreements to note down the interventions towards policy goals, such as improved truancy registration, increased flexibility in changing education tracks, and so forth. There are joint actions per region (schools, municipalities, youth care workers, business and industry); intensified dialogue and monitoring; and local networks of key stakeholders that include policy makers, representatives of educational associations and social workers (Crul, Grundel, Keskiner and Stam 2013).

Comparative analysis of development and implementation of policies concerning ESL in the Netherlands

Reducing early school leaving has been high on the Dutch political agenda in the last couple of decades. A basic qualification has been introduced in 1993 to steer young people to achieve a minimum education level in order to successfully participate in the knowledge driven economy. With regards to the Lisbon Strategy, Dutch policy makers took notice of the EU ESL initiatives and even set the bar higher by aiming for a reduction of national ESL rates to less than 8 percent. The Netherlands pursues the missions of the EU in creating a knowledge driven economy in Europe.

In order to achieve this, ESL policy was decentralised by making registration of absenteeism and dropout within Registration and Coordination Regions mandatory by law. Regional covenants have been set up between the Ministry of Education, the Registration and Coordination Regions and schools. Furthermore, an Early School Leaving Taskforce was installed within the Ministry of Education to monitor the regions.

As a result, the Netherlands has the best early school leaving registration tools in Europe since 2006, where each student leaving education without a basic qualification is kept in record. Monitoring has become a crucial part of Dutch ESL policy and this tool seems to have enhanced early signalling in the process of dropping out. Moreover, close monitoring requires an integrative approach with close collaboration between various actors on the local level. In the municipality of Amsterdam, for example, the close cooperation between secondary schools and post-secondary schools by transferring information files and sharing knowledge about the students is considered extremely important. To facilitate a smooth transition between pre-vocational and senior vocational education, during which a lot of students risk dropping out, the municipality of Amsterdam forces students to register for senior vocational training before they receive their pre-vocational education diploma.

The experience of Dutch ESL policy shows that what enhances good practices is to have an integrative approach involving close collaboration between schools, youth care, youth departments of the municipality and business sectors. This way, there are no cracks for youngsters to fall through, leading to drop out. One way to establish this cooperation is to install social services within the school setting. An attendance officer within schools is another way. These good practices all indicate the importance of close cooperation between professional partners to accomplish early signalling and efficient redirection to relevant services. It also facilitates the transfer of information about youngsters between different professionals. Last but not least, in order to make a learning program effective for youngsters, schools should also collaborate with local business sectors.

Poland

In **Poland**, access to the EU and to structural EU funds enabling the implementation of major projects marked the political change. Educational changes were accompanied by the rhetoric that they were EU requirements. In the socialist period, school was a tool to maintain the social structure. There was an extensive segment of vocational schools to create and maintain a large industrial working class. The system was highly centralised and non-state education was practically non-existent. The major education reform in 1999 affected the curricula and school structure. The system was modernised and there was significant change in upper secondary education. ESL is not seen as priority but a 'European' issue, partially reflecting the low number of early school leavers.

95% of education is funded by local governments that receive subsidies from the state budget. Financial support is selective: social grants, allowances, reimbursement of food and travel costs. Educational policy is developed and carried out centrally. The administration of education and the running of schools, pre-school and other educational establishments are decentralised. Educational integration with the local community and the reproduction of its living conditions may contribute to deepening territorial inequalities. The promotion of cultural diversity and the improvement of employment opportunities have benefited from intercultural exchange, improvement of the quality of school life, education and educational support. Educational system level responses, preventive and reintegration policies and measures include school computerisation, scholarships, construction of pre-school facilities and so forth.

Poland: Local initiatives in Warsaw

As far as early school leaving in Poland is concerned, there are no national policies that are deliberately directed against this phenomenon, as it is not perceived as an issue on a legislative level. Although experts working with early school leavers on a daily basis see that the problem is significant, it seems to be neglected by the legislators, and there is therefore no national strategy for the prevention of early school leaving.

Looking at the context of Warsaw, there are many initiatives directed at the prevention of social and educational exclusion. Pre-school education and career guidance, which prevent dropping out of the education system at the higher stages of education, are essential elements of ESL prevention. Special attention is paid to those groups of students who are particularly at risk for early school leaving at every stage of education: immigrant communities, the Roma community and those at risk of social exclusion.

It is important to analyse this phenomenon, diagnose and prevent it using appropriate tools. Despite the fact that Poland is one of the leading EU countries as far as ESL rates are concerned, the ESL phenomenon should not be ignored.

(Local education authority representative)

Warsaw has various intervention programmes that aim, among other goals, to tackle the issue of early school leaving, both directly and indirectly. One example could be a big social revitalisation programme ("Blok, podwórko, kamienice – ożywiły się dzielnice") implemented in one of the districts of Warsaw. It involved various non-governmental organisations working with institutions like schools, psychological and pedagogical assistance centres and community centres. There are also, for example, various types of projects in those areas and schools where the Roma population is most concentrated. Maybe it is not a numerically significant problem in Warsaw, but it is a "litmus test" that shows gaps in the support for vulnerable groups.

As the number of foreign and immigrant children in the schools in Warsaw is growing, Warsaw, in cooperation with the city of Cardiff, carried out a project on the integration of immigrant students and their families through education ("Caerdydd – Warsaw Integracja"). In addition, there are also programmes designed to prepare teachers to work in a multicultural environment (e.g. "Inny w polskiej szkole"). There are also a number of programmes for non-governmental organizations as a regular component of work with immigrant/foreign children. Currently, the local government of Warsaw is creating a multi-cultural centre in Warsaw, which will strengthen and integrate various activities for working with the immigrant youth, especially when it comes to the groups at risk for social exclusion and early school leaving.

Despite the local initiatives, it is important to look at the ESL phenomenon in the context of the construction of the entire educational system.

This system must be designed in such a way that it should give a second and a third chance, as well as a variety of flexible learning opportunities to prevent individuals from dropping out of the labour market.

(Local education authority representative)

Careers are monitored by regional employment centres. Preventative system/structural measures include lowering the age to start compulsory schooling (from 7 to 6 years old against social resistance), extending compulsory education; curricular reforms at all levels of education and the introduction of core curricula for compulsory teaching.

The number of students' opting for vocational schools has decreased significantly. The far-reaching reform of vocational and continuing training builds on increasing the link with the labour market of vocational training in organisational forms.

Target groups are children and young people at risk of social exclusion, marginalised communities, young adults with learning difficulties, under-achievers, Roma students, foreign students, especially asylum seekers or refugees, and high school graduates from outside the European culture (Marchlik and Tomaszewska-Pękała 2013).

Spain

In **Spain** the changes in central and autonomous governments over the years have influenced education very much. Since the mid-nineties, four education reforms have been elaborated and passed at the state level, although core education competencies are transferred to regional institutions. The former social-democratic government's focus on comprehensiveness and the preservation of social cohesion is currently being substituted by an emphasis on assessment and early streaming of students towards VET programmes before the end of compulsory education.

In Catalonia, the progressive coalition policies promoting intercultural schemes, and the joint work of schools and local communities has also been restricted since 2010. The absolute majority of the conservative party and the austerity measures implemented to struggle against the economic crisis have resulted in new moves to recentralise as well as the reduction of educational budgets and grants. Up until then, education had large budgets and there was a strong emphasis on retention and prevention policies.

The economic crisis affected business. Youth unemployment is very high despite there being incentives for employers who hire young people and measures to promote youth entrepreneurship. Municipalities have become instrumental in implementing alternative training through agreements with regional educational administration and with labour departments or other agencies.

Young graduates are inspired to emigrate, while a significant number of immigrant and minority youth is affected by higher rates of school dropout and unemployment. However, education is expected to adapt to the needs of the labour market with emphasis on skills for lifelong learning and employability. The on-going reform is expressed in the throwback of flexibility and decentralisation and the emphasis on a model of development and competitiveness in the European knowledge economy.

There are two post-compulsory tracks (academic and professional) and increased curricular diversification in vocational and professional training, provision of initial professional qualification, among others. Vocational training is seen as necessary to overcome the crisis and combat high rates of ESL but currently has the highest dropout rate (Pérez Benavent, 2013). An important emphasis is made in new VET models to acknowledge skills acquired in the workplace or in non-official training and specific courses, with the aim to ease the access to initial and higher official VET stages that, in the long run, can lead to higher education.

Spain: outrageous polarisations among youth

The ESL rate in Spain was already 26,5% in 2011 -- double of the EU average ESL rate (13%). However, there is still very little research on ESL in Spain to date. Only as part of larger projects on school failure and dropout is the fact of 'leaving school early' ever mentioned as a concern, and even then, usually not in the conventional meaning adopted by the EC (young adults in the age group 18-24 not in formal education nor in alternative learning areas), but rather as what has become popularly called the 'Ni-Ni generation' (NEET), which refers to young boys and girls over 16 who do not engage in any kind of post-compulsory education or training and are not employed. It has to be taken into account that the first education law that expanded compulsory education until 16 was passed and implemented only as recently as the mid-nineties (LOGSE) and, since then, political and pedagogical debates arise over the very unsatisfactory graduation rate obtained among students at the end of compulsory education, questioning the equity, efficiency and excellence of the Spanish/Catalan education system (Ferrer, Valiente, Castel, 2008).

Many of the efforts made in Spain to retain students in post-compulsory education are addressed to those between 16 and 18, who can follow two official post-compulsory tracks if they graduate from ESO, one academic (*Bachillerato*) and one professional (initial VET or *CFGM*) and follow to higher education after them (University or *CFGS/University*, depending on the track they have followed). But much of the conventional debate over education is about whether 15 year-olds considered to have higher difficulties or lower interest in education, although they may have been forced out by direct and indirect school organization strategies (Carrasco, Pàmies et al., 2011), should be allowed to complete official compulsory education out of schools in initial VET programs that lead to a rapid incorporation to the labour market. However, the EU Commission recently declared the Spanish rate of youth unemployment to be outrageous, urging the Spanish authorities to intensify their actions to reduce it.

Therefore, the concern about ESL starts earlier (when students are 15 or 16) but the relation between ESL and youth unemployment in Spain is paradoxical. A summary of the situation experienced in Spain in the last six years should start by acknowledging the weight of pull factors from a labour market demanding increasing numbers of unskilled workers that contributed to the very high ESL rates. By the end of this period of economic growth, the expansion of programs and measures devoted to combat school failure, dropout and ESL had started to be integrated and had developed in parallel with progressive policies that favoured decentralisation processes and allocated significant amounts of resources. In a very rapid shift, the context of economic recession brought about not only important cuts that challenged the survival of those programs but also major recentralisation strategies and other changes regardless of the previous programs' outcomes assessed, making it more difficult for schools and local councils to maintain consistent and successful interventions. Finally, the virtual disappearance of public (subsidized) prices in VET programs and the reduction of grants have to be taken into account. It seems quite clear that these changes contribute directly to a higher selection of students by social class in post compulsory educational stages and, as a consequence, to the rise of the overall ESL rate. The Spanish education policies seem to be designed against the 2020 recommendations and goals.

After VET or PQPI, students who have become car mechanics...they have to work in the lowest clerical posts in stores... The selection and the effectiveness of the training received does not affect job opportunities later.

(Focus Group participant. Educator)

In Catalonia the introduction of ESL reduction measures has been implemented through successive government plans. Reinforcing the culture of (self-) assessment and autonomy plans in schools through strategic projects to reduce school failure and drop out, in collaboration with municipal programmes that target students at risk of ESL are some of the features in the autonomous regime. But apart from programs supported by the European Social Funds that tend to target *Gitano/Roma* youth, the focus of intervention have not been specific population sectors but rather, underprivileged neighbourhoods and high schools especially affected by unemployment and educational failure (Carrasco, Narciso, Pàmies and Pérez 2013).

Hungary

As member of the EU, **Hungary** plans to reduce ESL in order to better monitor educational performance. The main causes of school failure, which reflect the failure of the entire school system, are poverty and the housing and employment problems that go hand in hand with it. These are exacerbated by regional disadvantages, which are especially evident in the regions with high concentrations of the Roma people. Parental educational choice is blamed for the increasing segregation of the Roma as well as the marginalised non-Roma children.

More or less liberal educational policy and curriculum centralisation aim to confront the country's poor PISA results due to the educational system's selective character. Roma *educational failure* and the intergenerational reproduction of low schooling and lack of qualifications led to policies for inter-ethnic integration and reduction of segregation in primary education. Desegregation and support measures through multi-ethnic education and pedagogic and methodological innovation attempt to address the deterioration of skills. However, a consistent policy of equality, quality control and accountability cannot be implemented due to the lack of institutional guarantee for schools educating the most deprived children.

In 2010, remedial education and talent support became the focus. While rhetorically not contradicting EU principles, dual centralisation was manifested to gain control over schools, eliminating their autonomy. The current right-wing government has refrained from forcing integration. Focusing on "social demand", it has made massive investments and reforms in education for economic performance: compensatory courses to primary school, and in vocational education, vocational training, secondary provision of qualifications, reduction of school failure, and improvement of the accessibility of cultural values in small municipalities and equal opportunities. The involvement in informal learning of cultural institutions and entrepreneurial stakeholders is illustrated by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry's increasing role in shaping VET policy.

Contrary to all other partners, Hungary plans to reduce compulsory school age (18 to 16), compensating for it by the expansion of secondary education through free-of-charge full-time first vocational qualification, reestablishment of the 'dual VET model', training and work experience, VET and adult training development, counselling services, and the development of a core curriculum and examination procedures for the majority of blue-collar job qualifications.

Hungary: Relationship between EU recommendations and country-specific ESL policies and initiatives

The ESL policies and practices are characterized by a good deal of ambiguity. On the one hand, Hungary as a member state of the European Union subscribed to the goal of reducing the ratio of ESL-youth to below 10 per cent by 2020. In line with this goal, measuring the ratio of early school leavers in the 18-24-year-old age group has become part of the yearly statistical reports on education and has also been developed as one of the core indicators for monitoring the country's educational performance, providing a yardstick for the elaboration of country-specific targets in EU-level OMC on education and training. On the other hand, a strange duality has evolved: while occupying an important aspect in external relations, the concept of ESL is entirely missing from the domestic policy-making and also from the public discourse on tensions and problems in education and training. Instead, there are two clusters of concepts that navigate the evolving policies and programs with direct relationship to early school leaving.

Firstly, it has been widely recognised by experts and teachers alike that *dropping out* in the last phase of compulsory education (affecting mainly the 14-17-year-old population and relating to structural problems in vocational training) has been on an increase; secondly, the complexity of factors behind the *educational failures* of Roma youth manifesting itself in the intergenerational reproduction of low schooling and the lack of qualification are considered as a prime area for policy and action for reducing educational inequalities and exclusion from quality schooling as well as for moving toward inter-ethnic integration.

It follows from the indicated duality of the concepts and approaches that neither the target groups nor the policies for reaching out are harmonized between the European and the national/local levels. While Hungary's yearly reports on ESL recurrently show relatively low rates (around 11.5 per cent) of ESL among the 18-24-year-old cohort, these favourable figures leave in the dark the worsening trends of falling enrolment and increasing drop-out rates in vocational training, and do not address the intensification of harsh segregation of Roma children in primary education (and the consequential deterioration of competence indicators, class repetition and early leave) either (Kertesi-Kezdi 2010).

The departure between the external and internal framing of the problem induces a rather disturbing divergence in policy-focuses and also in the recommended means for improvement. From a European-level approach to ESL, it is issues of higher education and the various forms of continuation of vocational training that are the domains where schooling for the 18-24-year-old group should be meliorated by various means.

At the same time, the complexity of problems ranging from poverty and segregation to being deprived of the right to continued education are affecting the younger group of youth (the 14-17-year-olds), especially the Roma among them. The national- and local-level policies and measures that are recommended emphasise the primacy of early childhood education and care, and thus focus on preschools and primary education.

In addition, these latter policies can establish a bridge toward understanding ESL: in accordance with the invigorating European-level expert debates about the phenomenon, interest in early childhood education and in complex measures against poverty and social exclusion has been on a rise in domestic research and planning (in accordance with similar developments across Europe).

Target groups are socially, culturally or economically disadvantaged students, Roma and marginalised non-Roma, 14-17 year-olds (in particular those who are 15 years old), children with major skills deficiencies, and young people without education and training who face unemployment and poverty (see Szalai and Kende 2013).

Austria

Austria is affected by the transformation of industrial society into a knowledge-based society and has not only followed but even furthered the European Commission recommendations because of the concern for the strong impact of the socio-economic background upon educational success and on its lower-than-EU-average national PISA results.

The employment situation is rather good in Austria when compared with other partner countries and the EU average. The integration in the labour market of qualified 25-54 years old is high but is more difficult for unqualified and older employees and especially hard on less qualified school leavers. This is aggravated by the economic crisis and the increasing differences in income according to social groups. To integrate persons with low qualifications into the labour market, the national-federal initiative in adult education, which offers the chance to complete education free-of-charge, has been introduced.

Socio-economic changes also affect young persons' transition from school to work. There are increasing demands for basic qualifications, comprehensive knowledge of ICT and special qualifications in the occupational field. These developments make it especially hard on less qualified school leavers to become integrated into the labour and training systems. Despite increasing demands on young people moving from school into vocational training, youth unemployment in Austria is, when compared with the EU-27 average, the second lowest after Germany.

The relatively low youth unemployment rate in Austria is considered to be primarily due to the dual system and the integration of young people into different school and training programmes that have been implemented; e.g. apprenticeship training guarantee, supra-company apprenticeship, coaching for apprentices, apprenticeship with upper secondary school leaving certificates, modular apprenticeship training, and production schools and integrated vocational training for youth with special educational needs, to mention some of the most important measures.

The implemented measures at ISCED Level 0-2 also aim to affect socio-economic changes and to prevent ESL: a compulsory, free-of-charge kindergarten year, language skills assessment and individual assistance at kindergarten level, more childcare facilities, competence-based instruction, more efforts towards full-day care in schools, youth coaching, and social work at schools and new middle schools. Following EU guidance, the new secondary school is achievement-oriented and based on individual assistance.

The investment in the quality of general education goes hand in hand with an emphasis on basic competences and re-integration into the primary labour market. This is aimed at bridging the worlds of school and labour and preparing students for tertiary education, by means of effective planning of education paths implemented on the basis of autonomy and personal responsibility.

Research on Early School Leaving in Austria

Early school leaving has serious consequences for the individual and for society. While its effects have not been sufficiently examined by Austrian studies so far, and the available data are often not detailed enough to draw valid conclusions, the following aspects are addressed.

Impact on individuals

The most frequently discussed effect is the *employment effect*, i.e. the consequences with regard to chances on the labour market. Early school leavers are 3.5 times more likely to be unemployed than people who have completed secondary education (ISCED 3-4). If they do find jobs, these are mostly dull and low paid. Studies show that the situation deteriorated considerably from 2004 to 2008, and poor labour market opportunities are inevitably linked with a higher *risk of poverty*.

Labour market marginalisation is viewed as an *exclusion experience* with severe consequences, which can reach into other essential areas of life and can include unsatisfactory housing, limited autonomy, dependence on parental and/or other assistance, or insufficient resources to become independent or start a family.

Studies of early school leavers' habitus report on the *stigma experience* and reconstruct six different coping strategies, describing these as six habitus types with a common stigmatisation thread. Their everyday experiences remind these people of their poor positioning in the social space and can lead to social withdrawal (Nairz-Wirth 2011). One study describes the relevance of close social relationships as prerequisite for life satisfaction, which is significantly lower for dropouts or young people with only compulsory education than for their better educated counterparts. It also shows that job/profession and housing situation have the strongest influence on general satisfaction. These factors are rarely satisfactory for early school leavers, reinforcing the close connection between life satisfaction and education. Other studies examine the *mental consequences* of early school leaving and show that failure at school reduces self-esteem, which can, in turn, affect well-being and health.

Impact on society

The EU's Lisbon Strategy 2000 emphasises the importance of education, knowledge, research, and development. A high proportion of low-skilled workers and early school leavers is costly and has negative effects on economic growth. While there are no figures available on the monetary costs of early school leaving, the 2012 Austrian Education Report maintains that annual GNP growth could be raised by half a percentage point if all students had at least minimal competences (400 points in the PISA test). This alone would increase national income by 976 billion euros by 2090.

Other studies present the costs of early school leaving, and show that almost half of early school leavers (ISCED 0-3c) in Austria need over two years to join the labour market. In comparison, only 10% of students who have completed at least minimum secondary education (ISCED 3a-4) take so long to find work.

A further study of the costs of early school leaving emphasizes that these cannot be measured in monetary terms alone. The full impact of the inadequate integration of young people into the education and employment systems could entail a number of *socio-political risks* and could, for instance, threaten social cohesion, reproduce social inequalities, reduce confidence in society and its institutions, curtail political participation, erode democracy, increase right-wing tendencies and give rise to increased crime. These risks have, as yet, not been examined systematically in Austria. (Nairz-Wirth/Meschnig/Gitschthaler 2011).

Educational opportunities, especially for disadvantaged populations and low achievers from migrant backgrounds, are meant to improve social permeability, education levels and access to the labour market, and require the involvement of several stakeholders.

Target groups are young people without compulsory or lower secondary schooling, young persons leaving education at the end of compulsory schooling, dropouts from upper-secondary education, early school leavers, young people with low competencies in reading, writing and mathematics, young persons (15- to 24-year olds) outside the education and employment systems, adults whose educational capital and job-market qualifications are below the required standard, 9th graders (i.e. students in their last year of compulsory schooling) and youth with special needs who are difficult to employ (see Nairz-Wirth, Gitschthaler & Brkic 2013).



Conclusion

The political shift from 'left wing' to 'right wing' governments has been experienced in some of the selected countries during the period under consideration, notably in Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom, Sweden and Hungary. This political shift has been, in some cases, translated into a move from the concern about inequalities and social exclusion to the implementation of reforms concentrating mostly on the relevance of the link between education and the labour market.

In line with the EU 2020 general and country specific targets and recommendations, the linkage between education and the labour market seems to be the most favoured strategy to deal with youth educational problems and their labour insertion and social inclusion in the countries surveyed. In general, policy measures have been taken to frame the educational mandate to produce employable subjects, sometimes reducing the price of labour and lowering salaries, and on reforms of vocational training.

In this matter, one side of the educational debate consists of the proponents of non-academic vocational tracks, who stress that not all pupils want to pursue university and maintain that they must have the opportunity to attend educational tracks that interest them; they also argue that the reform will probably increase the completion rates. The other side of the debate is represented by the critics of the reform, who argue that it might result in weaker knowledge in academic subjects, decreasing students' possibilities to continue to higher education.