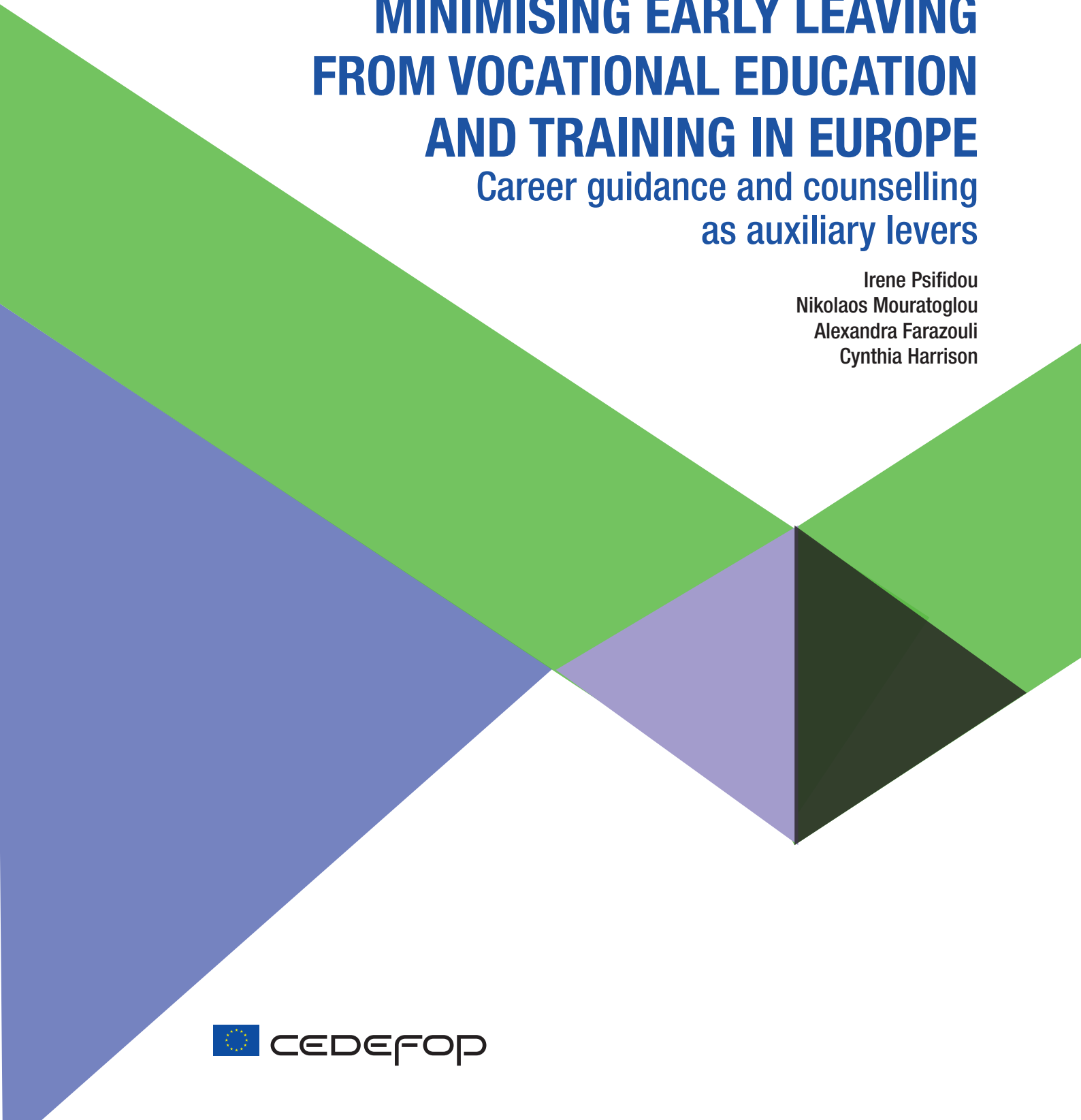




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# **MINIMISING EARLY LEAVING FROM VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN EUROPE**

Career guidance and counselling  
as auxiliary levers

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The **European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training** (Cedefop) is the European Union's reference centre for vocational education and training, skills and qualifications. We provide information, research, analyses and evidence on vocational education and training, skills and qualifications for policy-making in the EU Member States.

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# Executive summary

Young people live in a society in which creating sustainable career opportunities is complex; nevertheless, across the EU, all individuals are expected to have completed at least secondary education to ensure their employability. Given that early leaving from education and training (ELET) is highly associated with risk factors such as unemployment, poverty, health problems and social exclusion (Cedefop, 2016a; 2016b; European Commission, 2019b), reducing the number of early leavers is an imperative need that has been addressed as one of the target policies of the European strategic frameworks ET 2010, ET 2020 and ET 2030. Lifelong career guidance and counselling is one possible policy lever crucial to support motivated, smart career choices and to contribute to the prevention of ELET for several reasons.

- (a) Students or their families may give priority to general education over VET, even though VET pathways might very well be the best fit for a student's preferences, attitudes and learning style, allowing students to better explore their potential and take better advantage of career opportunities. Career guidance can alleviate the usual biases about learning pathways, putting the focus on personal skills and interests.
- (b) The vocational nature and often high level of specialisation in VET mean that there are many choices on offer within this learning track. Career guidance and counselling can help in navigating through the many options of VET and the often-complex application procedures.
- (c) Receiving adequate information about the VET programme in which a young person is enrolled or for the occupation he/she will be studying can contribute to a successful learning path. Such information may be about the working conditions, the technical complexity of the programme and occupation, or the jobs a programme can lead to.
- (d) Support during studies can also be key to a successful learning path. Such support may involve help with the choice of a specialisation, the transition to the workplace (e.g. for work-based learning), or networking into the occupational community.

One way that VET schools can help foster smart career choices and prevent early leaving is by providing career education and guidance at an early stage and promoting the development of career management skills. Career education can help identify and engage young people, especially those at risk of early leaving from education and training. It may be particularly useful to manage transitions and

it can help learners who are struggling with the programme they have just joined to continue successfully on their pathway or to find a new one.

Career guidance is also suitable to help re-engage early leavers from education and training. Career guidance services, employment services or social services are well placed to provide support to low-qualified young people (Cedefop, European Commission, ETF, ICCDPP, ILO, OECD and UNESCO, 2020).

The current study maps the existing career guidance and counselling policies and practices supporting learners at risk and early leavers in EU-27 plus UK <sup>(1)</sup>; it analyses the key characteristics of these policies and practices and identifies emerging trends and common partners in general education and VET; and finally, it identifies information and data gaps. To do so, the paper draws on data obtained through Cedefop research, Cedefop's VET toolkit for tackling early leaving, as well as Cedefop's EU+ Inventory of lifelong guidance systems and practices.

An exhaustive overview of measures that exist in each country is beyond the scope of the present study as the analysis addresses countries with diversified education and training systems and policies, governance systems, challenges and measures regarding ELET.

One of the key conclusions drawn is that for both early leavers and those at risk of abandoning their studies to be effectively and promptly supported, successful approaches should be based on:

- (a) a comprehensive strategy, in which career guidance and counselling should be integrated elements of policies and practices aiming to counteract ELET;
- (b) a strong multi-stakeholder collaboration so that different services and professionals may address individuals' diverse needs based on the former's qualifications and training. Involving stakeholders from either regional, local or provider levels allows for the contextualisation of broader challenges reflected in national systems, policies and measures for tackling ELET;
- (c) a mixed approach where generic career guidance and counselling are accompanied by individualised supporting measures to effectively address the diverse needs of individuals;
- (d) a case management approach that encourages collaboration with other services and professionals, including individuals' families and peers, to cope with complex needs.

The main information and data gaps identified refer to:

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<sup>(1)</sup> The UK is included as at the time the research was carried out it was still an EU Member State. Beyond that, the UK continues to be included in the LLG Inventory, as well as other non-EU countries.

- (a) the limited evidence on the available training and continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities for professionals in relation to career guidance and counselling services explicitly for tackling ELET;
- (b) the underdeveloped evidence on the contribution of guidance and counselling to work-based learning and how learners' needs (especially for those more at risk) and aspirations in differentiated learning conditions and objectives are addressed;
- (c) the lack of evidence in the resources analysed on systematic monitoring and impact evaluation of policies and practices supporting learners at risk and early leavers in Europe, to prove the effectiveness of career guidance and counselling policies and practices or similar measures.

The study's findings and recommendations may bring up valuable insights for future research, policy-making and monitoring, to boost career guidance and counselling policies as stronger auxiliary levers for effectively supporting individuals at risk and early leavers in an evidenced-based approach.

## CHAPTER 1.

# Introduction

The 2011 Recommendation (European Commission, 2019a) designates early school leaving (ESL) as ‘those who leave education and training with only lower secondary education or less, and who are no longer in education and training’ (Council of the European Union, 2011). Similarly, Eurostat (2019) suggests the term ‘early leaving from education and training’ (ELET), referring to ‘a person aged 18 to 24 who has completed, at most, lower secondary education and is not involved in further education or training’ <sup>(2)</sup>. Given that ELET is highly associated with risk factors such as unemployment, poverty, health problems and social exclusion (Cedefop, 2016a; European Commission, 2019b), reducing the number of early leavers is an imperative need that has been addressed as one of the target policies of the European strategic frameworks ET 2010, ET 2020 and ET 2030. The latest benchmark set in the Europe 2030 strategy was to reduce early leaving to less than 9% by 2030 (Council of the European Union, 2020). According to Eurostat (2021), the ELET rate has steadily decreased from 17.0% in 2002, to 13.4% in 2011 and to 9.9% of young people (aged 18-24) in 2020. Of these, 11.8% are young men and 8.0% young women. Although there are significant differences across countries (ranging from 2.2% in Croatia to 16.7% in Malta), regions within countries, such as in Spain (Psifidou, 2017; Salvà-Mut et al., 2020), and within gender and specific population groups, such as people with a migrant background, reducing ELET has been the most successful of the strategic objectives of the ET2020 strategy.

To address ELET, countries have devised many different measures, which have been drawn together in Cedefop’s VET toolkit for tackling early leaving groups under 20 key intervention approaches. Given the wider role of career guidance and counselling in education and training sectors including VET, this paper maps the existing policies and practices for tackling ELET, which have

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<sup>(2)</sup> This indicator was previously named early school leaving (ESL); however, the main aspect implied in this indicator was leaving from school and did not recognise that young people can dropout from other forms of education and training. Additionally, the term dropout is not a synonym of early leaving, since it refers to interrupting a course in progress, is experienced by different age groups and does not necessarily lead to early leaving (Psifidou, 2021). Hence, not all early leavers are necessarily dropouts. In conclusion, the definition of ELET has its particularities and differences with other similar concepts, as well as its variations among countries. The authors use the term early leaving from education and training (ELET), unless stated otherwise in policy documents [e.g. early school leaving (ESL) and/or early leaving (EL)].

career guidance and counselling at their core for both general secondary education and VET. It aims to identify any emerging trends and patterns across these policies, as well as information and data gaps to inform policy-making and future research. To do so, it draws on data obtained through the Eurydice and Cedefop report *Tackling early leaving from education and training in Europe: strategies, policies and measures* (European Commission, 2014); Cedefop's VET toolkit for tackling early leaving and its successful interventions underpinned by extensive Cedefop research on the role of VET for tackling early leaving (Cedefop, 2016a; 2016b); the European Commission's final report on the assessment of the implementation of the 2011 Council Recommendation (European Commission, 2019a) and the EU+ Inventory of lifelong guidance systems and practices (Cedefop, 2020a).

### 1.1. European policy context on ELET and the role of career guidance and counselling

Career guidance and counselling as supportive measures for contributing to comprehensive strategies supporting learners at risk and early leavers from education and training are not a recent development in EU policy; they have been included in the ELET related policy agenda for approximately the last 20 years (European Commission, 2003; Council of the European Union, 2003). More recently, the Council Recommendation on tackling early leaving (Council of the European Union, 2011) acknowledged career guidance and counselling, either directly or indirectly, as supporting measures in prevention, intervention, and compensation policies <sup>(3)</sup>.

For preventing ELET, the Recommendation suggests strengthening the link between education and training systems and the employment sector to emphasise the benefits of completing education for future employability. This could be in the form of work experience placements or greater employer engagement in schools and colleges.

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<sup>(3)</sup> Prevention policies aim to reduce the risk of early school leaving before problems start by optimising the provision of education and training to support better learning outcomes and to remove obstacles to education success. Intervention policies aim to avoid early school leaving by improving the quality of education and training at the level of the education institutions, while compensation policies aim to help those who left school prematurely to re-engage in education, offering routes to re-enter education and training and gain the qualifications they missed (Council of the European Union, 2011).

Intervention measures, such as career guidance and counselling, support students' career choices and their transitions within education or from education to employment. Similarly, the 2011 Council Recommendation suggests that various routes back into mainstream education and training may be supported by transition classes, with a strong emphasis on guidance that helps to bridge the gap between previous school failure and re-entering mainstream education. Therefore, career guidance and counselling are directly accredited as auxiliary services in intervention and compensation policies, contributing to well-informed decisions based on individuals' personal traits and aspirations, as well as to the management of transitions between education, training and (un)employment in a smoother and more effective way.

Additionally, to support the development of comprehensive lifelong guidance policies and systems, the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network published a reference framework for the EU providing 18 concrete guidelines (ELGPN, 2015). Maintained by Cedefop within the lifelong guidance project and VET support policy area, with key contributions from CareersNet <sup>(4)</sup>, the structure of the EU+ inventory of lifelong guidance systems and practices (Cedefop, 2020a) is directly informed by the ELGPN guidelines, as well as the 2008 Council Resolution on better integrating lifelong guidance into lifelong learning strategies (Council of the European Union, 2008). CareersNet experts in lifelong guidance report on systems developments, policies and related practices or more detailed cases for each sector and target group. ELET is featured specifically in the ELGPN social inclusion guidelines under the young people at risk target group. Target groups reported on in the LLG inventory include early leavers and young people at risk. However, in approaching the whole lifelong guidance system and the role played by career support for young people more generally, other information on ELET can be found in other sections of the inventory.

Career guidance <sup>(5)</sup> may contribute to students' employability by cultivating career management skills (CMS) through career education programmes/

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<sup>(4)</sup> CareersNet is Cedefop's network of independent experts in career guidance and career development. The network was created to collect comparable and reliable information on a European scale in the field of lifelong guidance and career development with the aim of identifying evidence, gaps, and solutions beyond a snapshot of national guidance systems, providing access to harmonised, comparable evidence.

<sup>(5)</sup> Career guidance refers to a continuous process that enables citizens at any age and at any point in their lives to identify their capacities, competences and interests, to make education, training and occupation decisions and to manage their individual life paths in learning, work and other settings in which those capacities and competences are learned and/or used. Guidance covers a range of individual and collective activities

interventions (ELGPN, 2015) or by building bridges between the education institutions and the world of work, through information provision for work-based learning schemes that combine learning at schools and work. This is also highlighted by Oomen and Plant (2014) who noted that in preventing early leaving, policies are mainly concerned with providing career education and guidance, improving teaching and learning and developing individuals' CMS, while in compensation approaches, the focus is on second chance education by providing support for re-entering education and training and/or the labour market.

Concurrently, the role of career guidance and counselling has been highlighted in recent policy developments such as the New skills agenda (European Commission, 2020a), the reinforcement of the Youth Guarantee (European Commission, 2020b), the Resolution on the Council Recommendation on vocational education and training (for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience (European Parliament, 2020) and the Osnabrück Declaration (German EU Presidency, 2020). For learners at risk and early leavers, guidance may be relevant in assisting individuals' upskilling, promoting individual learning accounts, gaining access to quality information, managing labour market transitions and validating prior skills and competences (European Commission, 2020a). In addition, the Youth Guarantee encourages Member States to improve profiling and screening tools and individualised action plans that consider individuals' preferences and motivation, barriers and disadvantages and reasons for being unemployed or inactive. At the same time, career guidance and counselling may address gender stereotyping and support youth employability and those at risk of becoming NEETs (not in education, employment and/or training). It may also contribute to the identification of individuals' preferences, motivation and barriers, as well as promote a holistic approach through referrals to other partners (i.e. education and training institutions) (European Commission, 2020b). Further, high-quality guidance may provide clear and user-friendly information on learning, career and validation opportunities in the EU, as well as increase the attractiveness of VET (European Parliament, 2020), which is often considered as a remedial measure in preventing early leaving. Additionally, the recent Osnabrück Declaration (German EU Presidency, 2020) on VET, as an enabler of recovery and just transitions to digital and green economies, highlights the importance of ensuring effective career guidance and access to quality education and training for all, and especially for vulnerable learners. Through guidance and tailored support, learners not only may acquire key competences to actively manage their

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relating to information-giving, counselling, competence assessment, support and the teaching of decision-making and career management skills (Source: 2008 Council Resolution).

education, training and employment phases, but also design their future learning and career paths.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted the learning process of all students (including apprentices), has amplified and reinforced the digital, social and economic inequalities that some students and their families were already facing. For career guidance and counselling services to respond to these unique challenges and support all learners, a rapid switch to online services provision took place (Cedefop et al., 2021). Support was provided online to young people and adults by making use of a range of online and non-digital tools (e.g. telephone) (Cedefop et al., 2020), while special emphasis has been laid on vulnerable groups such as those at risk of ELET. For instance, guidance has been well positioned to support individual wellbeing, providing emotional support, counselling and case management for individuals with multiple needs (Cedefop, 2020b). Additionally, preliminary findings from Cedefop's survey of ambassadors tackling early leaving <sup>(6)</sup> show that the timely provision of individualised and psychological support may prevent students' disengagement from learning during extended school closures imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Cedefop, 2020c, Psifidou, 2020).

## 1.2. Cedefop milestones and contribution

### 1.2.1. Tackling early leaving from VET

Cedefop's systematic work on tackling early leaving from VET (ELVET) since 2010 has provided Member States and the European Commission with new knowledge and evidence through research, policy analysis, cross-country and country-specific reviews, as well as with peer learning and knowledge exchange supporting the ET strategic frameworks over the last two decades.

In 2016, a major European study examining [early leaving from VET in Europe](#) (ELVET) was published, pointing to the important role of VET in preventing and counteracting this phenomenon (Cedefop, 2016a; 2016b). This study was the cornerstone of the evidence that VET can support both learners at risk of dropping out as well as early leavers, giving them an alternative VET pathway to qualify in upper secondary education. But the study also revealed high rates of early leaving from VET in specific VET systems and countries or regions and called for a unified

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<sup>(6)</sup> Ambassadors tackling early leaving are policy-makers, learning providers, experts and other key stakeholders involved in tackling early leaving at national, regional or local level in Europe. They help disseminate Cedefop's toolkit for tackling early leaving and enrich its resources by distributing good practice, news, publications and statistics.

effort at EU level to monitor this phenomenon and improve important identified data and information gaps.

In 2017, to provide policy-makers and learning providers with practical support, Cedefop launched the [VET toolkit for tackling early leaving](#). It is designed for young people at risk of becoming early leavers, to help them remain in, and qualify from, upper secondary education. It also aims to help early leavers reintegrate into education or training. An updated edition was launched in 2019, with new resources to support policy design, implementation and evaluation in tackling ELVET. The toolkit is dynamic and constantly enriched.

In this toolkit, Cedefop, builds the most common [profiles of learners at risk](#) enabling practitioners to detect early the signs of disengagement. It also provides the different profiles of early leavers, empowering policy-makers to monitor and better understand their conditions and needs and to intervene successfully. The toolkit users can then find tailored [intervention approaches](#) to these different profiles for prevention and intervention. Today, the toolkit contains more than [280 resources](#), including [reflection and evaluation tools](#) for policy-makers and VET providers who aim to adopt a comprehensive approach to tackling ELVET.

[Cedefop's ambassadors for tackling early leaving](#) <sup>(7)</sup>, a European community established by Cedefop since the launch of the toolkit, make their voice heard across Europe to support the fight against early leaving from education and training. During the COVID-19 pandemic that disrupted the education and training of an entire generation of VET learners, ambassadors supported Cedefop to produce new evidence on the challenges faced by learners at risk in having equal access to quality distance learning in VET. Those learners already at risk – from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, migrants and from ethnic minorities, learners with disabilities and special education needs – often find themselves out of school. With schools being closed for extended periods of time during the COVID-19 pandemic, they risk falling further behind, while further disruption to their learning is imminent if distance learning is not ensured. Examples of initiatives from European countries in Cedefop's [report](#) (Cedefop, 2020c) show the efforts made to ensure that learning continues for all VET learners, as well as to support VET teachers and trainers who had to convert physical classrooms and working places into digital learning environments overnight.

In 2022, Cedefop's work on inclusion was expanded by launching a similar new [VET toolkit for empowering NEETs](#) to raise the employability and social inclusion of young people not in employment, education or training. This Europe-wide toolkit has been inspired by successful VET practices and aims to help policy-

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(7) The community of ambassadors is available [here](#).

makers, practitioners and providers of support to young people not in employment, education or training (NEETs) to design policies and implement practices that will better address the needs of NEETs, helping them to reintegrate into education or training and the labour market.

Further, Cedefop's project on [the professional development of VET teachers and trainers](#) provides new insights into the role of teachers and trainers in supporting learners at risk and early leavers. A recent paper authored by Cedefop experts, points to the importance of putting VET teachers' and trainers' professional development at the core of European policy to promote inclusion in VET and concludes with reflections on the shaping of future policies (Psifidou and Pevec Grm, 2022). Cedefop's [29 country reports on VET teachers and trainers in a changing world](#) (Cedefop/ReferNet, 2022) and a comparative synthesis paper (Cedefop, 2022 forthcoming) examine the extent to which VET practitioners are prepared to promote inclusion and illustrate the efforts made by Member States. Further, the views of principals, teachers, in-company trainers and learners in initial VET on their role in enabling school success are collected in [Cedefop's feasibility study](#). A dedicated policy learning activity will take place in November 2022 to present their conclusions and engage stakeholders in a future pan-European population survey.

### **1.2.2. Lifelong guidance**

Cedefop has been working in the lifelong guidance policy field for over two decades, supporting cooperation, research on and development of career development support policy in Europe and prioritising guidance system development and quality, including better coordination among stakeholders in the youth and adult sectors <sup>(8)</sup>. Within a project on monitoring and evaluation in lifelong guidance, a volume of expert papers in the field has been published (Cedefop et al., 2022), underlining some key outcomes, including the ways that targeted data collection and feedback from and about guidance users can inform career practitioners' professionalism through continuous training to support client outcomes (Harrison et al., 2022b). Research in the LLG project has also focused on methodological standards for monitoring and evaluating career guidance systems and services at different levels, including specific indicators and outcomes (Cedefop et al., 2022).

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<sup>(8)</sup> Learn more about the lifelong guidance project and career guidance products, database, inventory, CareersNet expert network and publications [here](#).

CareersNet <sup>(9)</sup> guidance experts contributed papers to a dedicated volume on career practitioner professionalism in the digital context, relevant to adult as well as youth career guidance (Cedefop et al., 2021). Additionally, the online EU+ lifelong guidance inventory of systems and practices, drawn on for the current paper, was launched in 2020 with the support of CareersNet experts. This includes a dedicated section on career guidance for early leavers. Information on the lifelong guidance system includes career guidance and career education and development, informed by the content and structure of the ELGPN (2015) guidelines. The EU, EEA, EFTA and EU enlargement/accession countries (Cedefop, 2020a) have been included. Some inventory records were updated in 2021 and these are expected to be fully updated in 2022.

Taking into account the unprecedented conditions that the COVID-19 pandemic have brought, it has become evident that educational disruption and labour market turbulence <sup>(10)</sup> have posed several difficulties for all individuals, but it also forced systems to adapt and to widen access for some groups such as at risk young people. In this context, where career practitioners need better continuous training in online guidance to effectively support users, Cedefop has focused on careers practitioners' professionalism in the digital transitions, with the need for well-trained and qualified practitioners who have access to continuous professional development (Cedefop et al., 2021). Following Cedefop's note on lifelong guidance at the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions (Cedefop, 2020b), Cedefop, in cooperation with international partner organisations, coordinated a flash joint international survey on lifelong guidance exploring the response of career guidance policies and practices, including remote and ICT-based delivery services (Cedefop et al., 2020). From its tentative findings, the study drew attention to vulnerable young people, and underlined the need for increasing cross-sectoral collaboration, ensuring access, outreach and holistic support to all. In this regard, a recent Cedefop working paper explored the ways that ICT tools might contribute to the effective coordination of lifelong guidance and validation of informal and non-formal learning (Mouratoglou and Villalba-Garcia, 2022).

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<sup>(9)</sup> CareersNet (CNet) is Cedefop's network of independent experts in lifelong career guidance and career development supporting the Lifelong guidance project within the Department for VET and Skills (DVS). Further information may be found [here](#).

<sup>(10)</sup> In earlier years, Cedefop also developed the labour market information (LMI) toolkit, an online dynamic platform for practitioners on LMI and the use of ICT tools, a handbook for managers including innovative LMI and ICT practices accompanied by an interactive decision-making tool (DMT), as well as training modules for LMI and ICT addressed to practitioners and managers. The resources can be accessed [here](#).

### 1.3. Common guidance-related areas for tackling ELET

Table 1 summarises and illustrates the common areas where career guidance and counselling may contribute in relation to tackling ELET, as reflected in the European Commission's final report on the assessment of the implementation of the 2011 Council Recommendation (European Commission, 2019a), Cedefop's work (Cedefop 2016a; 2016b, 2017, 2019, 2020a) and the work completed by the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (ELGPN, 2015).

Table 1. **Guidance-related measures and intervention approaches for tackling ELET**

European Commission's final report on the assessment of the implementation of the 2011 Council Recommendation  (See European Commission, 2019a)	Cedefop's work  (See Cedefop 2016a; 2016b, 2017, 2019, 2020a)	Work completed by the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network  (See ELGPN, 2015)
Financial support for learners whose economic circumstances pose a risk of dropping out, including subsidies or schemes linked to social benefits	Building motivation to learn	Supporting pupils at risk of early school leaving, particularly in terms of motivation through career management skills curricula
Access to high quality careers advice and guidance for learners at risk of ESL	Developing employability skills	
	Guidance: supporting young people to manage their careers	Promoting career management skills acquisition in the curriculum at school; provide information on labour market opportunities and apprenticeships
Structures for networking between schools and external actors (health, youth and community services and civil society organisations)	Community involvement	Ensuring that lifelong guidance is part of community-based services in easily accessible guidance points (one-stop shops) targeted at early school leavers

European Commission's final report on the assessment of the implementation of the 2011 Council Recommendation  (See European Commission, 2019a)	Cedefop's work  (See Cedefop 2016a; 2016b, 2017, 2019, 2020a)	Work completed by the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network  (See ELGPN, 2015)
Access to targeted individual support for learners in challenging circumstances, through psychological/social, educational and financial support	Comprehensive support to tackle complex needs	Promoting a case management approach: individual action plans for young people with multiple obstacles that include cooperation with other services to cope with complex needs
Access to targeted individual support for learners experiencing academic, social and emotional or personal difficulties, incorporating one-to-one academic tutoring	Counselling to address barriers to learning	Helping young people at risk and potential/actual early school leavers to understand better their barriers to learning, employment, and active citizenship, as well as how they may take advantage of workplace learning to help them overcome these barriers and avoid dropout
Provision of pathways back into mainstream education for early school leavers, including options for combining education and work or caring responsibilities, and transition or bridging classes	Work-based learning and simulations	
	Practical application of theoretical courses	Promoting career management skills in the curriculum at school, including experience-based learning for those at risk.
Flexible curriculum choices and pathways, including measures to prevent early streaming and training options beyond the age of compulsory education	Flexible education and training systems	Publicly funded lifelong guidance services and products exist to serve citizens. Such services and products are accessible, without discrimination, in a flexible and secure manner allowing for the personalisation of services. Citizens have a key role in their design and evaluation.

European Commission's final report on the assessment of the implementation of the 2011 Council Recommendation  (See European Commission, 2019a)	Cedefop's work  (See Cedefop 2016a; 2016b, 2017, 2019, 2020a)	Work completed by the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network  (See ELGPN, 2015)
Early warning systems for pupils at risk of ESL, including those designed to monitor and take action where learners become disengaged from school or where behavioural or attendance issues arise	Identification of learners at risk of early leaving	Making use of community outreach measures (delivered where young people congregate) and working through significant adults that are in daily contact with these young people to provide lifelong guidance
	Monitoring early leavers	Supporting the collection of data on the education, training and work destinations of school leavers and of tracking mechanisms for such data (e.g. follow up)
Measures to ensure access to high quality VET provision, including the integration of VET pathways into mainstream education, and providing VET routes into upper secondary and tertiary education	Improving the image and attractiveness of VET	Providing high-quality information and guidance, enabling young pupils in compulsory education and their parents to become familiar with various vocational specialisations, progression and transfer pathways and career possibilities
Measures to strengthen links between schools and local labour markets, via access to high-quality work experience and employer engagement in schools	Inclusive work-based learning environments	Improving the ability to manage transitions and adapt to changes in the labour market and society for disadvantaged groups and early school leavers
Access to targeted individual support for learners experiencing academic, social, emotional or personal difficulties, through one-to-one academic tutoring, coaching or mentoring programmes and/or psychological support	One-to-one support through coaching or mentoring	Providing personalised and tailored advice so that they are able to understand clearly the relationship between their personal interests, abilities and circumstances, and educational and labour market opportunities
	Tailored learning pathways	

European Commission's final report on the assessment of the implementation of the 2011 Council Recommendation  (See European Commission, 2019a)	Cedefop's work  (See Cedefop 2016a; 2016b, 2017, 2019, 2020a)	Work completed by the European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network  (See ELGPN, 2015)
Provision of second chance education and other high-quality alternative education programmes for early school leavers, offering flexible and inclusive provision	Second chance measures	Ensuring that lifelong guidance is an integral part of second chance training programmes for young people at risk
Systems to support the recognition and validation of prior learning, including validation of competences achieved in non-formal and informal learning	Validation of non-formal and informal learning	Promoting and supporting the use of lifelong guidance in helping citizens to identify and have validated their competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning

Source: Authors.

## CHAPTER 2.

# Study methodology

### 2.1. Research aim

The scope of the present study is to inquire into the role of career guidance and counselling in practices and policies supporting learners at risk and early leavers implemented at European level since the Council Recommendation on tackling early leaving was adopted in 2011 (Council of the European Union, 2011) and as of the end of Education and Training 2020.

The main three objectives are: to map the career guidance and counselling policies and practices supporting learners at risk and early leavers in EU-27 plus UK; analyse the key characteristics of these policies and identify any emerging trends and common partners in general education and VET; identify information and data gaps to inform needs for future research.

An exhaustive overview of measures that exist in each country is beyond the scope of the present study as the analysis addresses countries with diversified education and training systems and policies, governance systems, challenges and measures on ELET.

### 2.2. Data resources

The study draws on data obtained through relevant resources at EU level, which were published during the period under examination (2011-20), as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Data resources

Eurydice/Cedefop report <i>Tackling early leaving from education and training in Europe: strategies, policies and measures</i> (2014).	The report monitors the developments in the design and implementation of strategies, policies and measures to tackle early leaving and support students' learning. Its focus is on prevention, intervention and compensation measures for learners at increased risk of early leaving. The report also examines the role of education and career guidance, governance and cross-sector cooperation, as well as the important role of VET in preventing and counteracting ELET.
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Cedefop study <i>Leaving education early: putting vocational education and training centre stage</i> (Cedefop, 2016a; 2016b) and its online VET toolkit for tackling early leaving launched in 2017, updated in 2019 and constantly enriched since then	Cedefop suggests 18 VET related intervention approaches that encompass all three types of the Council Recommendation measures (prevention, intervention and compensation) and several other resources, including good practices, tools and quick wins among which career guidance and counselling are either directly or indirectly involved.
European Commission's final report on the assessment of the implementation of the 2011 Council Recommendation (European Commission, 2019a)	This comparative study presents the ELET situation and trends both at national and European levels and provides examples of measures implemented in 37 EU and non-EU countries. The report discusses the findings of the study based on their relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability and offers recommendations for imminent implementation to tackle early leaving.
EU+ inventory of lifelong guidance systems and practices (Cedefop, 2020a)	The European Inventory provides information for current national policy developments and structures associated with career guidance, career education and career development. At the time, there were 29 country records published in 2020 including EU, EEA, EFTA and EU enlargement/accession countries. The Inventory has been developed by Cedefop in collaboration with CareersNet experts who gathered and analysed the information with the help of national and regional stakeholders.

## 2.3. Procedure

For mapping and clustering existing career guidance and counselling policies and practices deriving from the main European sources previously mentioned, we designed a framework of analysis, presented in Table 3.

Table 3. **Framework of analysis**

Level of implementation	The extent to which the career guidance and counselling related policies and practices on ELET have been designed and implemented for addressing provider, local, regional, national or European level challenges. As different levels of implementation reflect a different range of breadth and depth in the policies and practices, this is one of the key features analysed (Psifidou, 2019a).
Stakeholders	The main actors involved in the implementation of career guidance and counselling related policies and practices, such as national ministries, associations, agencies and social partners.

Type of policy	Three types of policy defined in the Council Recommendation (2011) to reduce ELET: prevention, intervention and compensation, which the European Commission and Cedefop has adopted for monitoring developments and progress made. This key feature provides insights about the goal and objectives of career guidance and counselling related policies and practices in relation to ELET, considering their contribution at a preventive, interventionist and remedial level.
Profiles of the beneficiaries <sup>(11)</sup>	These profiles demonstrate the different levels of disengagement and types of challenges that individuals may face, illustrating how different risk factors can interact and result in early leaving. These profiles derive from Cedefop's VET toolkit for tackling early leaving and have been adopted in the present framework, as they constitute a typology of the characteristics and needs of those at risk and early leavers based on Cedefop's study (2016a; 2016b). This key feature supports our understanding whether the policies and practices are tailored to individuals' needs.
Policy objectives <sup>(12)</sup>	These approaches have been the most comprehensive list of policy objectives related to ELET and synthesise and reflect well the policy objectives of other resources, such as the ELGPN European Guidelines (ELGPN, 2015). Even though they are inspired by VET, these policy objectives are applicable to general education too and derive from the 18 intervention approaches included in Cedefop's VET toolkit for tackling early leaving: the policy and provider responses to individuals' needs.
Type of career guidance and counselling	The approach of career guidance and counselling can be either generic or personalised. This key feature contributes to understanding the breadth and depth of services provision in the context of ELET.
Professionals	Professionals providing career guidance and counselling services in the practices reviewed or those professionals it is anticipated will be involved in career guidance and counselling provision in the ELET policies.
Resources and tools	Resources and tools included in the reviewed policies and practices that may support professionals in their work, such as techniques, toolkits, guides, platforms and frameworks specifically supporting learners at risk and early leavers (Psifidou, 2019b).

Source: Authors.

On mapping the content of the resources according to the analysis framework, we examined the relevance of the career guidance and counselling policies and practices specific to ELET and identified any emerging trends. The process consisted of four concrete steps: mapping, systemisation, juxtaposition and synthesis. First, we mapped the data related to career guidance and counselling policies and practices based on their relevance to ELET and those at risk of ELET. Later, the data were systemised at a country level to ensure data coherence and

<sup>(11)</sup> [Further information](#) on beneficiaries' profiles.

<sup>(12)</sup> [Further information](#) on the policy objectives.

to avoid potential repetitions among the various resources. During the juxtaposition, the data were explored and clustered based on the analysis framework and eventually were synthetically reviewed to identify emerging trends and common patterns.

## CHAPTER 3.

# Results

This section discusses the key features, identified for the paper, of selected career guidance and counselling policies and practices that address ELET through elements of the analysis framework.

### 3.1. Level of implementation and stakeholders

The data analysis provided evidence on patterns about the level of implementation of career guidance and counselling measures, as well as the stakeholders involved. The majority of the policies and practices examined have been designed and implemented based on national strategic plans addressing ELET and those at risk, while several countries have adopted either regional (e.g. Spain), local (e.g. Luxembourg) or local and provider approaches (e.g. Bulgaria). There are also countries, which have adopted a holistic and comprehensive strategy including all the implementation levels, such as Germany, France, Austria and Finland.

Of the stakeholders involved, the great majority of the career guidance and counselling measures addressing ELET are associated with the national ministries of education, labour and social affairs, as well as with national public employment, social and health services. Further, the European Union provides grants and funds for tackling ELET in various countries (such as Bulgaria, Estonia, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden and the UK <sup>(13)</sup>). At the regional and local level, vocational councils (Norway), local stakeholders in training and employment, including youth centres (Belgium), centres for education support and counselling (Greece), second chance education providers and education institutions (Finland), apprenticeship centres (Italy), voluntary services (France, Poland), are the main stakeholders providing counselling and guidance for tackling ELET. Cross-sectoral cooperation between education, training, employment, health care, law enforcement and social policy providers, is a key element in tackling ELET, and there are several examples of countries that manage to coordinate their activities either by issuing specific laws agreed between relevant ministries, agencies, councils and providers (Germany), or by creating associations of local and regional authorities (Sweden).

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<sup>(13)</sup> Information derives from the four countries: England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

### 3.2. Type of policy measures

The type of policy measures implemented in the European countries addressing ELET are systemised into three categories: prevention, intervention and compensation (Council of the European Union, 2011). Preventive measures are typically formulated at national and regional levels and aim to address risk factors that could have a negative impact on young people's motivation and desire to complete their studies. Most of the European countries include preventive measures in their strategies for tackling ELET, while several countries explicitly focus on taking preventive career guidance and counselling measures (European Commission, 2019a), such as Finland where youth workshops support young people under 29 years old in tackling issues related to education and training, working life and life management. The workshop activities are based on learning by doing through coaching and practical work, making individuals eventually believe in themselves.

Two types of intervention measures related to career guidance and counselling were identified. First, the early warning systems, which are designed to alert teachers and authorities to students who are likely to drop out, enabling them to respond rapidly. For example, in France the Ministry of Education manages and funds over 380 school dropout tracking and support platforms (*Plateformes de suivi et d'appui aux décrocheurs scolaires*, [PSAD](#)) to identify and follow up on students. Second, professional support, including counselling, guidance, mentoring and case management, aims to provide support to VET students on a one-to-one basis or by a team of professionals to ensure that at risk students are supported coherently and thoroughly to minimise the risk of ELET. The initiatives [VerA](#) and [Carpo](#) in Germany and Austria respectively, are concrete examples of such measures, offering one-to-one support from a professional coach or a volunteer mentor.

Compensation measures are implemented in most of the European countries, indicating that very few countries do not include these types of measures in their national strategies for addressing ELET, as the latter focus on prevention and intervention (European Commission, 2019a). One group of guidance-related compensation measures are the second chance comprehensive reintegration programmes, which provide a supported pathway back to learning, aiming to encourage dropouts to return to education and training and prepare them academically, socially and vocationally to reintegrate into formal learning or employment. In this regard, early leavers in Ireland are entitled to access the Adult Educational Guidance Services ([AEGS](#)) nationally. Further, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) has the responsibility of implementing the Youth Guarantee scheme through competence check-ups,

career guidance, work-based learning opportunities and cooperation with different stakeholders. The implementation plan foresees that young people under the age of 18, who have left the school system without completing secondary education and who have failed to find employment, will be provided with quality second chance education/training pathways outside the school system, such as [Youthreach](#), or will be supported in re-entering the school system.

### 3.3. Profiles of beneficiaries

Cedefop's study (2016b) identified six profiles of early leavers and learners at risk of ELET that we have adopted in this analysis. The categorisation of early leavers and learners at risk of ELET describes the different levels of disengagement and the diverse challenges they face, highlighting existing differentiations about their needs. Based on the resources reviewed, the career guidance and counselling policies and practices in Belgium, Denmark, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Malta, Austria and Finland address more frequently two profiles of learners at risk: learners escaping the system and learners disengaging due to difficulties adapting after transition. These two broad profiles cover several risk factors for ELET. The first profile of learners at risk refers to those whose education performance is average or below average and who have low future education aspirations, while the second profile refers to those who have difficulties in adapting to new work rhythms, have inaccurate programme expectations and do not mix well with their peers. Policies and practices designed specifically for early leavers, learners who had to leave education and training because of caring, parenting or working obligations and learners combining multiple disadvantages, possibly facing health and psychosocial issues, have been found, *inter alia*, in France and the Netherlands. Further, some practices target multiple profiles including both learners at risk of ELET and early leavers, such as the [Kein Abschluss ohne Anschluss](#) (KAoA – no school leaving without subsequent education) (Germany), the Relevant curriculum project, open education for all ([CRED](#)) (Romania), and the [Training for success](#) programme(UK).

### 3.4. Policy objectives

The following nine policy objectives were found to be associated with career guidance and counselling more frequently: (a) guidance: supporting young people to manage their careers; (b) developing employability skills; (c) counselling to address barriers to learning; (d) building motivation to learn; (e) comprehensive

support to tackle complex needs; (f) one-to-one support through coaching or mentoring; (g) second chance measures; (h) work-based learning and simulations; (i) validation of non-formal and informal learning.

In relation to career guidance for supporting young people to manage their careers, several measures and practices of the resources reviewed aim at enabling motivated and positive career choices, matching them with individuals' personal characteristics, including their strengths and learning styles. This policy objective relates to measures including career information and advice about education, training and work opportunities. Counselling and guidance are delivered by practitioners with psychological training, while career guidance is delivered by guidance practitioners. For instance, the German government approved in 2010 the [Bildungsketten](#) (Education chains) initiative to coordinate orientation programmes at local level with the aim of improving the management of transitions from schools and reducing early leaving. Further, the Luxembourgish [Local Action for Youth](#) organises short orientation traineeships for pupils in the final year of lower secondary vocational education to discover the world of work and establish a realistic professional project by participating in various workshops, voluntary services and discovery courses.

Other activities that assist learners in developing career management skills include assessing, sampling, teaching and mentoring and they are delivered by career guidance practitioners and education/transition coaches or other professionals, such as teachers and trainers working in education/training institutions and providers, careers services, public employment services or youth employment services. Some examples of these kinds of approaches were found in Denmark (Youth Guidance Centres), Estonia (Pathfinder centres, Foundation Innove), Germany (BOP: Vocational orientation programme, offered at vocational training centres; JBA: Youth labour employment agency) and Luxemburg (Guidance and professional initiation courses and professional initiation courses to diverse professions).

Another widespread policy objective to tackle early leaving is counselling to address barriers to learning. Several practices and initiatives aim to engage young people, who face difficulties in learning, through professional counselling. Barriers to learning may include health problems, caring responsibilities, housing, financial circumstances, anti-social behaviours or substance misuse. An indicative example of this approach is the [Carpo](#) initiative in Germany, which targets young people who are able to take on an apprenticeship, but who have had difficulties in finding or keeping apprenticeship placements after finishing compulsory full-time school. Similarly, the [Pathfinder](#) centres in Estonia provide careers information, career counselling, speech therapy, psychological guidance, socio-pedagogical guidance

and special education guidance for young people aged 7 to 26 and for parents and teachers.

Concurrently, the policy objective that refers to building motivation to learn includes the practices and policies that aim at helping all learners to build trust in their capabilities and interest in education and training. These activities are particularly useful to re-engage those who are highly disengaged from education and training, and for at risk students showing signs of low motivation. Such an example is the EXPAIRS project (in French-speaking Belgium) that aims to prevent early leaving by stimulating students, showing them that VET is interesting, and by finding new strategies to motivate learners to stay in education and training. Further, the Prince's Trust International Achieve programme in Malta has been successful in helping young people re-engage by developing a sense of achievement, focusing on personal development and employability skills.

Moreover, comprehensive support to tackle complex needs mostly targets early leavers and learners at risk of early leaving who have health, psychosocial, legal or housing problems. This kind of support has proved to be useful for all learners facing challenges in different areas of their lives and is particularly relevant for marginalised young people who may deal with multiple problems and have little or no contact with any support service. Examples of this approach were found in Austria (Youth Coaching Scheme), as well as in Germany, Portugal, Romania, Spain and the UK (Orienta4YEL). Several guidance-related practices within education include projects aiming to prevent early leaving by stimulating students, providing them with attractive information on VET and finding new strategies to motivate learners to stay in education and training. For instance, school guidance supports students in their personal development and study continuation, aiming to engage learners and inform them about their upcoming training and career options (Spain), while there are also programmes focusing on promoting and enhancing inclusive education (the Integrated pedagogical system in Hungary). The Educational territories of priority intervention programme in Portugal is a government initiative that aims at preventing and reducing early leaving and absenteeism, as well as minimising indiscipline and promoting educational success for all students.

For young learners with a higher level of disengagement and complex barriers to learning, one-to-one support through coaching or mentoring may support them at transition points, such as from general education to VET, from one education level to the next or for their reintegration from dropout status back to education and training. For instance, Youth coaching in Austria focuses on prevention, intervention and compensation through the provision of career counselling, access to information about education and career options, vocational counselling and

career guidance support, as well as longer-lasting career coaching programmes. Additionally, the VerA prevention of training dropout (Germany) is another initiative, which targets those at risk of not completing their apprenticeships and those facing multiple challenges within their families or have an asylum-seeker background. Coaching is provided by retired trained professionals voluntarily and its focus is on learning, as well as on other issues that learners may face irrespective of their apprenticeship, such as personal problems, disputes with colleagues/bosses, reflecting on their choices and preparation for exams.

In respect of work-based learning and simulations, a limited number of explicitly career guidance and counselling related practices has been designed and implemented. For instance, the Apprenticeship coaching in Austria aims to prevent dropout due to misunderstanding or conflict between apprentices and in-company trainers, increase the completion rate and improve the quality of training. Similarly, the Stay tuned project, addressed at apprentices and trainees, attempts to prevent dropout and supports those who are either graduating or are experiencing difficulties in their transition to working life. Similarly, the *Einstiegsqualifizierung* in Germany includes guidance measures to ensure that training may be continued and that dropout of young people will be prevented. Additionally, in Malta the Personal social and career development programme (PSCD) is a career management skills programme aiming to improve the emotional, communication and social skills of students. The programme is complemented by external resources with job shadowing activities, career orientation visits, talks by employers, careers fairs, visits to post-secondary education institutions and one-to-one career guidance sessions targeting learners at risk, low-achieving students and/or students with individual education needs. Another example is the Philips employment scheme (WPG) in the Netherlands offering early leavers work experience for a period of one year; those who successfully complete the company programme are provided with a nationally recognised certificate. Participants who follow the learning/working route (initially unskilled with no VET education) receive counselling or coaching from the reintegration service during the training programme.

Second chance measures may cover a wide range of diverse forms, including practices leading towards the acquisition of a formal qualification until support is provided to return to formal learning or to move to employment. For instance, the German second chance programme *Berufsvorbereitungsjahr* (Vocational preparatory year), which is legally anchored in the Social Code, combines class lessons with practical exercises and internships to test several occupational fields, while the *Zukunftsstarter* provides workers and the unemployed, who are early leavers or returning from inactivity, with the opportunity to receive financial support

from a second chance programme. Further, the Guze' Ellul Mercer 16+ initiative in Malta targets students who leave compulsory school without formal qualifications, but would like to have another opportunity to take up an academic route. This initiative provides an alternative curriculum composed of a limited number of academic subjects and prepares students to retake the SEC exams. Moreover, the Matosinhos Secondary School Opportunity is addressed at low-skilled, at risk young people aged between 15 and 25 living in Matosinhos and other municipalities in the Porto Region.

Based on the analysis of the data, a few policies and practices were identified concerning validation of non-formal and informal learning, with indicative examples from Austria (contact points for people who gained professional qualifications abroad), Belgium (Certification per unit), France (second chance schools), Ireland (Leaving certificate applied) and Norway (Certificate of practice). This approach aims at re-engaging learners at risk of early leaving as well as early leavers, through skills identification and recognition. Practices oriented towards this goal include measures that assist the process of finding opportunities to enable early leavers to identify and recognise all prior learning that takes place outside of formal education. Validation may contribute to boosting individuals' confidence, which may be considered as the initial step for returning to formal learning, finding a pathway to employment or gaining an understanding of their own competences and capabilities.

### 3.5. Type of guidance

As has been already illustrated in the practices and policy measures described above, the type of guidance offered might be either personalised or generic. Based on the analysis of the resources, it is evident that many practices and policies adopt personalised counselling and guidance interventions for early leavers and those at risk of ELET and less generic approaches. Some examples of such interventions target the development of skills for low-educated and unqualified young people and the transition from education to the labour market (Belgium), as well as the provision of systematic and personalised support for early leavers through effective training and lifelong learning programmes (Greece). In Luxembourg, students from secondary schools and early leavers under 18 years of age have access to a one-year *Classe d'initiation professionnelle (CIP)* (Professional initiation class) that provides personalised education, meaning that the teaching is adapted to learners' needs. Moreover, in the autonomous city of Melilla (Spain), the activities and training programmes developed in relation to guidance and monitoring of early leaving focus on supporting individuals that are at risk of exclusion. This support is

manifested through information provision on the different training and support options to re-join the education system.

Conversely, generic guidance, which is, however, often accompanied by individualised supporting measures, may include career management skills (CMS) development (e.g. Mijn Loopbaan: a VDAB tool for strengthening CMS) and curative actions addressed at low-educated and unqualified young people, so their chances on the labour market increase and mismatches are tackled (Belgium-fl). Additionally, in France the provincial networks Together against early school leaving are involved in information/study days for young people and their parents. In Cyprus, the implementation of the Youth Guarantee scheme includes a blended approach of generic and personalised support: initially, general support is provided in group sessions focusing on information about education and job opportunities, followed by individual support through interviews that aim to identify the challenges individuals face when pursuing an education programme or looking for a job.

In one-to-one/personalised approaches, the career counselling interview is the prevailing method for offering support to individuals, while in group-based approaches, longer-lasting career coaching/counselling programmes and career education programmes are in place. The content of these programmes may include information provision about education, training, careers, counselling and guidance on individuals' characteristics, strengths, preferences and interests, counselling with case management approaches, competence profiles, the personal development (or education transition) plan, reports and referrals (e.g. in Denmark, Germany, France and Austria).

### 3.6. Professionals and resources/tools

As regards the professionals involved in the counselling and guidance activities pertaining to ELET, the main trend showcases that educational/school psychologists, career/employment counsellors, coaches and guidance practitioners, as well as teachers/pedagogues, are the main professionals in services provision. This is the case for all countries (e.g. Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden and the UK). However, some distinctive differentiation in some practices includes Roma assistants as mediators in schools (Bulgaria), social pedagogues and speech therapists (Croatia), social workers for outreach (Finland), youth workers for getting in touch with young people in their social environments (Luxembourg), transition counsellors (Germany) and school doctors and nurses (Sweden).

To be able to provide their services efficiently, the professionals involved in career guidance and counselling provision need to be further supported by resources and tools. For instance, in Portugal, My E20 offers good practices and resources on a website for professionals, young people and policy-makers. In Greece, Spain, Italy and Romania the European Guiding Cities project resulted in the creation of guidelines for teachers, a quality framework for career guidance, a web map device and a career guidance App, while in Sweden, the PlugInnovation project offers a central digital knowledge platform for people working in the area of early leaving, providing them with information, guidelines, methods, checklists, questionnaires and case studies. [CareersPortal](#) supports professionals working with early leavers and people with disabilities by offering legal and institutional support information, as well as information on special pathways to learning and employment (Ireland). The European Orienta4YEL project aims to develop a training handbook for educators to support young early leavers or those who are at risk of early leaving through orientation and tutorial actions (Germany, Portugal, Romania, Spain and the UK), as a response to the need to support professionals' work.

## CHAPTER 4.

# Concluding discussion

The trends identified above provide insights about the ways that career guidance and counselling may feature as auxiliary and/or integrated measures in policies to tackle ELET, as well as to offer some critical standpoints and recommendations that can inform future policy developments and promote further research in this field.

Given that most of the European countries have well established national strategic plans addressing early leavers and those at risk, the study shows that career guidance and counselling constitute transversal supporting measures in all three types of ELET policy: prevention, intervention and compensation. Career guidance and counselling are conceptualised as crucial measures in holistic and comprehensive strategies and practices that may contribute to preventing learners from dropping out, empowering individuals to remain in education and training and supporting them in re-engaging into mainstream education and/or training.

To maximise the effectiveness of career guidance and counselling policies and practices, these should consider the different profiles of early leavers and learners at risk, enabling the provision of personalised and tailored support in response to individuals' diverse needs. Several of the practices analysed reflect personalised approaches for early leavers and those at risk of ELET and less generic approaches. Even practices offering generic career guidance and counselling were often accompanied by individualised supporting measures, including career management skills (CMS) development and one-to-one support in the later stages of the career guidance and counselling process.

Therefore, for both early leavers and those at risk to be effectively supported, the present study shows that successful approaches should be based on:

- (a) a comprehensive strategy, in which career guidance and counselling should be integrated elements of policies and practices aiming to counteract ELET;
- (b) strong multi-stakeholder collaboration so that different services and professionals may address individuals' diverse needs based on the former's qualifications and training. Adopting a distributed and decentralised approach that involves stakeholders from either regional, local or provider levels allows for the contextualisation of broader challenges reflected in national systems, policies and measures for tackling ELET;

- (c) a mixed approach where generic career guidance and counselling are accompanied by individualised supporting measures to effectively address the diverse needs of individuals;
- (d) a case management approach that encourages collaboration with other services and professionals, including individuals' families and peers, to cope with complex needs.

#### 4.1. Limitations of current practices

The present study has also identified information gaps and scarce evidence in relation to three main areas.

The first area refers to the contribution of career guidance and counselling to work-based learning. Referring to learners at risk, guidance in work-based learning may prove a rather beneficial measure in terms of enhancing individuals' motivation through the development of career management skills, assisting them in understanding better their barriers to learning and/or employment and in identifying ways to overcome these barriers and avoid dropping out. Some indicative ways that derive from the practices reviewed include information provision for alternative and less-known options such as second chance schools, validation of non-formal and informal learning, as well as for labour market opportunities and apprenticeships. Considering the distinctive features of work-based learning, in comparison with those of school-based VET and general education, it becomes evident that learners' needs and aspirations may differ due to their differentiated learning conditions and objectives. Therefore, career guidance and counselling may provide tailored support in a preventive way to tackle emerging difficulties and misconceptions and eventually support individuals in planning their future life and career plans in a more meaningful and feasible way.

Second, although the aim was not to review training and CPD of different types of professionals (not career practitioners), based on the resources reviewed, there was limited evidence on the available training and continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities for professionals in relation to career guidance and counselling services explicitly for tackling ELET. Such training and CPD offers should focus not only on identifying those at risk of ELET and preventing them from disengaging, but also on guiding and integrating early leavers back to education and/or training. This need is highly associated with the variety of professionals involved in the career guidance and counselling process, as identified in the present study. In the career guidance field itself, Cedefop's work in the lifelong guidance project has identified CPD and specialised training pathways for career practitioners as an area in need of development (Cedefop, 2009, 2021, 2022). In

the specific area of career practitioner professionalism, including career guidance and counselling across education, training, employment and youth sectors, Cedefop (2021) took steps to update its work at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, through publishing a collection of papers on the topic of training and education pathways, set in the context of digital transitions in the field and in society and the labour market.

The third area with infrequent references in the resources reviewed regards the type of resources and tools explicitly used for early leavers and those at risk of early leaving. The extent to which such resources are available and accessible to all the professionals involved in supporting early leavers and those at risk of ELET remains unknown, even if trained career practitioners or career educators were the main professionals involved or in charge of career guidance and counselling activities. As counselling and guidance are highly contextualised and, therefore, adapted to the specific needs of the end users (e.g. students from general and vocational education, the unemployed) and the characteristics of the sector (education, training, employment), various transversal resources and tools may be utilised in career guidance and counselling provision to support both the professionals and the beneficiaries. In the policies and practices analysed, however, there were limited references to the type of resources and tools explicitly used for early leavers and those at risk of early leaving. Considering that the unprecedented COVID-19 conditions led to online career guidance and counselling services provision, these resources should become more widely known and accessible to all who are trained and qualified to participate and to their relevant beneficiaries. Emphasis should be also laid on the operationalisation of digital tools as well as on professionals' and beneficiaries' broader digital competences that allow access to and continuity of guidance services, ensuring and safeguarding their participation in the learning process.

#### 4.2. Monitoring and evaluation

The current study also pointed out another crucial aspect which seems to set obstacles with regards to the uptake of career guidance and counselling in the context of policies and measures aiming to minimise early leaving. Specifically, based on the review of the resources analysed, it became evident that there is a lack of systematic monitoring, impact and follow-up evaluation which delimits the capability of measuring the effectiveness of such policies and practices. However, it should be noted that some of the policies and practices analysed, especially all those drawn from the VET toolkit, have been evaluated, although based on different indicators, to measure their impact. As a result, this diversification does

not allow for a comparative analysis of policy impact across the policies analysed. Monitoring and evaluation should instead be considered as an integral part of policy-making since it can provide valuable insights and targeted feedback contributing to well-informed and evidence-based policies.

Cedefop's VET toolkit for tackling early leaving provides resources, which may assist both policy-makers and VET providers in relation to monitoring and evaluation. Based on those resources, along with the results of the current study, it could be envisaged that future endeavours could and should entail the following steps.

- (a) Define the scope of the monitoring/evaluation process.
- (b) Translate the objectives of the policies/practices in concrete items which can be monitored and evaluated.
- (c) Identify the specific characteristics of the target group that the policies/practices address (e.g. early leavers, NEETs).
- (d) Formulate monitoring and/or evaluation questions to be addressed.
- (e) Develop a monitoring framework or an evaluation process by:
  - (i) specifying the indicators (e.g. context, inputs, process, outputs, results, impact areas, structural indicators);
  - (ii) determining which sources of information are useful and relevant for the monitoring/evaluation;
  - (iii) agreeing on the data collection techniques and tools to be used.
- (f) Collect and analyse data and interpret results.
- (g) Prepare a brief report including reflections.
- (h) Communicate the outcome to relevant policy-makers, providers and professionals.

Further, in Cedefop's work in the lifelong guidance project, the recently published collection of expert papers (Cedefop et al., 2022) and linked workshop reflected on appropriate methodologies and indicators for monitoring and evaluation suited to the field and the need to promote professionalism among career practitioners, thereby improving the quality of services.

The current study has attempted to map the existing career guidance and counselling policies and practices supporting learners at risk and early leavers in EU-27 plus UK, to analyse the key characteristics of these policies and practices and to identify emerging trends and common partners in general education and VET. It is envisioned that the study's findings and recommendations will bring up valuable insights for future studies and highlight aspects that should be considered early during policy/practice development and implementation to be able to assess their impact and effectiveness. In this way, as emphasised in the ELGPN guidelines (2015), career guidance and counselling will not only feature in the

European and national policy discourse as auxiliary measures, rather, they will function as auxiliary levers for effectively supporting individuals at risk and early leavers in an evidenced-based approach.

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# MINIMISING EARLY LEAVING FROM VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN EUROPE

## Career guidance and counselling as auxiliary levers

Career guidance and counselling are key features of comprehensive strategies aiming to reduce early leaving from education and training. They may assist students, not only in terms of decision-making but also in managing their transitions within education and training pathways or from education to employment. Minimising the risks of either insufficient information or unrealistic expectations, career guidance and counselling may support learners in making informed decisions based on their interests, talents, and future job aspirations, as well as preventing dropout and early leaving. For those who have left education and training early, career guidance and counselling may assist them to return to, and qualify in, upper secondary education. This paper examines how national policies and practices in career guidance and counselling in EU Member States may support learners at risk and early leavers from education and training. It identifies common patterns and existing information gaps, and sets out future prospects.

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