



POLICY PAPER ON EARLY EDUCATION LEAVING

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0. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Early education leaving is one of the biggest problems of the formal education system as one in 6 young people in Europe leave formal education without the necessary competences and qualifications to enter the labour market successfully and to be a fully active citizen. It is also a problem that affects more than just those young people who exit their education prematurely. As it is an issue of equity in education, it is a problem for society, the state, employers, the private sector, civil society, and local communities: consequently, cooperation is needed to tackle it.

In this paper, the YFJ duly outlines the concept and realities of early school leaving in Europe, and further proposes concrete policy measures for different actors to deal with the issue of early education leaving; and support measures to truly make young people owners of their education.

Youth organisations are assuming their share of the responsibility from preventing early education leaving and of reintegrating early education leavers into educational paths. Youth organisations will continue to do so, but state clearly that this should be a combined task and duly call on all authorities responsible for education to go beyond the narrow focus on early school leaving and begin a real discussion on what young people need from their education in the 21st century.

1. A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO EDUCATION

The European Youth Forum approaches education in a holistic way, looking at all learning and at all educational provision. A knowledge based economy needs a real lifelong and life-wide learning society, going beyond the traditional focus on formal education, but with a parity of esteem for formal education, non-formal education and informal learning.

Education is of vital importance for all citizens, but especially to young people who invest a serious amount of their time into their education in order to be prepared to enter wider society as autonomous citizens. Education policy is therefore a key part of youth policy and demands a horizontal approach connected to employment and social inclusion. Early education leaving, furthermore, is not only a personal decision but a result of various social and economic influences.

The last decade has seen an increase in attention to one specific issue within education: the reality of early school leavers. The European Union has realised that to achieve the Lisbon Agenda, education systems in Europe need to perform better. Within the EU Education and Training 2010 Programme, which is designed to improve these education systems, the issue of early school leavers stands as one of the five key benchmarks; and due to this focus, many countries have started to

look at the issue seriously. Early school leaving is also an element of the Millennium Development Goals on education and gender.

The European Youth Forum (YFJ) believes that the topic of early education leaving, comprising both early school leaving and early higher education leaving, fits very well within its holistic approach to education. In this paper, the YFJ duly outlines the concept and realities of early school leaving in Europe, and further proposes concrete policy measures for different actors to deal with the issue of early education leaving; and support measures to truly make young people owners of their education.

1.1 Equity in Education for an equitable society

The European Youth Forum believes in a society where everybody has the possibility to develop their capacities and personality. Such a society requires strong policy measures to be developed, including an equitable educational system. The YFJ also believes in young people as owners of their education and their subsequent right to pause or cease a certain educational path. This right also implies the right to restart education at a later stage in life, either resuming the same educational path, or beginning a new one, without prejudice.

Early education leaving is therefore also a matter of **access to education**. Young people have the right to receive an education in order to develop their capacities and participate fully in society; and this right to education is, recognised in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child, and in the constitution of most nations. In addition, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU recognises the right to equal access to education free of charge.

2. DIVERSE REALITIES BUT A COMMON PROBLEM

Europe is a very diverse place and the issue of early school leaving differs from region to region. Overall in the European Union, one in seven young people do not finish upper secondary education and are considered early school leavers. As a result of the policy attention from the European Union and measures implemented in the different Member States, the number of early school leavers has reduced over the last years. However, in the majority of the European countries, appropriate measures for dealing with early education leaving are yet to be found.

2.1 What are the causes?

Various studies have been undertaken into the causes of early school leaving and they all show that the reasons for leaving education early are very much specific to the individual and that there are a wide variety of determinants and a wide range

of influential factors. Four groups of explanatory factors are distinguished, however: individual, family, school and society.

Within those factors, the most common determinant regarding whether a child leaves school early is **poverty and the individual's socio-economic situation**, as not all children start on an equal footing, e.g. in terms of cultural capital, support from home and family, etc.

Moreover, school facilities and studying environments are often designed for bulk knowledge transmission, rather than genuine learning taking into account the students and their needs. The social climate in schools, as well as the pedagogical methods generally used, encourage a passive attitude which in turn prevents a feeling of ownership and leads to a diminished motivation and participation. Students seldom being able to have a say about their education furthers a sense of helplessness. This is particularly true for more vulnerable groups (e.g. ethnic minorities, migrant children, minority gender identities and sexual orientations, etc.).

2.2 What are the consequences?

The consequences of early school leaving vary widely between individuals, in different societies. For some people, leaving school early can turn out to be a blessing, as they have time to devote to their real interests or can start their career earlier. In some societies, the difference between being an early school leaver and being under qualified is insignificant.

Despite these examples, not a lot of people seem to benefit from leaving school early. The long-term social and financial costs of educational failure are high. Those without all the necessary acquired skills to participate socially and economically generate higher costs for health, income support, child welfare and security, and these costs are directly undermining the efforts to reach the Lisbon Agenda.

Research has shown that early school leaving can have serious consequences:

- Young people that leave school early are twice as likely to be unemployed as those that complete their education. (OECD 2007).
- Pregnancy, crime, violence, alcohol and drug abuse, and suicide have been found to be significantly higher among early school leavers. Most of these issues are also found to be causes of early school leaving.¹
- Early school leavers are more likely than other citizens to draw on welfare and other social programs throughout their lives.²

¹ Reducing the Dropout Rate, E. Gregory Woods, 1995

² Reducing the Dropout Rate, E. Gregory Woods, 1995

- Early school leavers have a life expectancy that is 9.2 years shorter than high school graduates.
- Early school leavers are eight times more likely to be in jail or prison than high school graduates.
- Only a quarter of early school leavers vote; while the corresponding proportion for high school graduates is one half, and for college graduates, three quarters.

Many of the undesirable consequences of early school leaving are interlinked. Poverty leads to a higher risk of early school leaving which again can lead to poverty and to lower life expectancy. It is clear that, on average, early school leaving aggravates the existing problems which a successful educational path alleviates: research shows that the additional lifetime income for a student who stayed at school for an extra year was more than €70.000.

2.3 A gender dimension

All stakeholders must take action for reducing early education leaving. It is more costly to do nothing, especially if a person never enters the labour market, than to put concrete efforts in place to motivate young people to finish their education. An educated society is more productive and in this time of economic turmoil it is important to keep economical competitiveness of the society at a high level.

The gender dimension of early school leaving is increasingly being recognised. When school achievement, individual schools and other factors are taken into account, the likelihood of boys leaving school early is about 1.9 times higher than for girls³.

The consequences are also different for boys and girls, with girls being subject to more disadvantages from early school leaving than their male counterparts. Women are still more at risk of not being employed after leaving school early in a majority of countries. In addition, teenage mothers run a higher risk of leaving school early.

The same pattern can be seen in higher education institutions, where men leave earlier, as compared to women.⁴

2.4 Migration

Increased migration poses new challenges for social cohesion in some countries, while other countries face longstanding issues of integrating minorities. There are clear problems with the rates of entry into education by young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as **migrant youth** in Western Europe; and if

³ DG EAC

⁴ JRT study

these young people do make it into higher education, they tend to leave much earlier than their non-migrant peers.

Fair and inclusive education for migrants and minorities is a key to these challenges: equity in education enhances social cohesion and trust. The language of instruction is a central issue in this respect and possibilities for young people, and specifically children, to use their mother-tongue during their education should be further developed.

All migrant children, including children with an irregular status, should be able to attend formal education; however,, no government should be able to request data from education institutions on individual students as part of a search for migrants with an irregular status. The issue of exit and re-entry into education - allowing an individual to start an educational path at one location and continue it at another, would specifically support the children and young people living in traveller communities.

3. SOLUTIONS FOR EARLY EDUCATION LEAVING

3.1 The right, the means and the motivation to be in formal education

Different approaches on all levels are needed, in conjunction, to address the complex issue of early school leaving: 'miracle solutions' do not exist. To be successful in improving the social and economic relevance and attractiveness of education - by e.g. revising the methods of teaching - policy-makers, schools, and families etc., should make a joint effort; and various other policy areas such as employment, social affairs and health need to be connected to this issue. A good example of just such cooperation is the Irish National Education Welfare Board⁵, where various stakeholders such as teachers, the national youth council, and different ministries come together to streamline efforts to work on the issue.

The most appropriate level at which to tackle this issue is that closest to the learner, the school and the community. To be effective on the local level, national and European policies and support systems have to be put in place. Making education a transversal issue can be done on the international level, while national and regional governments need to pursue thorough educational reform programmes, combined with the necessary economic support measures.

The general principle is that everyone should have the right, the means and or the support to enter, take part in or re-enter formal education.

The right to formal education

The European Youth Forum believes that everybody is **entitled to education**. Early school leavers should always have the opportunity to re-commence at the

⁵ http://www.newb.ie/young_people/links.asp

point where they left off, and obtain a secondary school qualification. There should be flexible ways of completing the education, especially at primary and secondary levels. Personal counselling and pupil-oriented programmes such as dual education should be strengthened. Everybody should have the right to enter higher education with the same possibilities for financial support as students coming from secondary education.

In this regard, the European Youth Forum proposes the introduction of a **Competence Certificate** system: this would allow every young person leaving formal education, at whatever point, to be entitled to a certificate outlining their educational path and stating all the competences they have acquired. Furthermore, this certificate should be integrated into national qualification frameworks. Young people should have access to alternatives such as training schemes, apprenticeships, volunteer certificates and non-academic qualifications.

The means to stay in formal education

Education should be **free of charge**. In order that the full autonomy of young people is ensured, scholarships and other types of financial support should not depend on parental means-testing. These scholarships and other types of support should include sufficient support for extra costs, such as those of educational materials, accessible housing, costs connected to practical engagements as a part or a curriculum, or travel for people from rural areas. Furthermore financial incentives for staying in education could be provided to young people or their families, in the case of children.

Be motivated and be supported while in formal education

We must recognise the role played by unadapted and ancient educational structures and beliefs, too rigid to fit the needs of individual learners. Young people have to become the **owners of their education**. From as early as possible, young people should be encouraged to make educational choices and reflect upon them, in order to make their learning a joint project between the learner and the school. This also requires that the group size in schools is small enough to provide a pleasant learning environment. There are as many ways to learn as there are students in the classroom. To be fully inclusive, diverse pedagogical methods and assessment methods have to be used. Such empowerment of young people should be the aim of guidance, providing clear information on educational and career options. Improvements are needed in schools to develop a **good atmosphere** so that young people feel at ease and feel respected for who they are in their diversity; special efforts need to be made to prevent and address bullying and violence in school. Non-formal education methods that put the learner at the centre, allow schools to deal with the increased diversity of our societies. Connections between schools and the families of students, and local communities, need to be reinforced. Having the right to participate in decision-making processes highly motivates students to stay in educational institutions, in addition

to providing them with genuine ownership of their own education. This is achieved not only through democratic structures but through a continuous dialogue about the shape and content of their education.

3.2 The role of youth organisations

We recognise the key role that youth organisations play in preventing and addressing early education leaving. As early school leaving is mainly a problem connected to formal education, most youth organisations do not have early school leavers as a target group. However the work of youth organisations does contribute to both the prevention of early school leaving as well as to the reintegration of early school leavers into education paths.

The strongest contribution that youth organisations bring, is through prevention. Youth organisations, as the main providers of non-formal education to young people, give their members an increased sense of self esteem, and of responsibility for one's life, an increased social circle, and various competences useful in formal education. These competences complement those acquired in formal education, or compensate for those that formal education fails to foster: all of which are factors increasing the chance of an individual staying in school.

Youth organisations, furthermore, bridge formal and non-formal education by bringing non-formal education programmes to schools; with approaches that put the young learner at the centre of the learning, schools can be more attractive. Student unions in schools offer young people a chance to develop their citizenship within schools but also make schools more youth-friendly, and more aware of the issue of early school leaving.

Various youth organisations also work specifically with young people at risk of becoming early school leavers: through different programs and projects, they work on essential competences and the re-entry into education of, for example, teenage parents and young offenders .

Non-formal education, due to its voluntary nature, cannot be expected to make up for the failures of the formal education system. However, a better recognition of the value of non-formal education by the formal education sector, and a corresponding increase in support, can help schools to become more learner centred places, connected to their communities.

4. EARLY HIGHER EDUCATION LEAVING

A sizeable proportion of young people that start higher education do not finish it⁶. Despite the limited policy attention to this issue, there are serious **consequences**

⁶ OECD, Education at a glance, 2007

connected to the current situation in terms of wasted human potential, wasted state resources, and of young people who invest a year or two of their lives and don't get a return.

The European Youth Forum believes that higher education should be accessible to all and that nobody should be hindered by **economical and financial constraints**. The current trend to raise tuition fees, one promoted by the European Commission⁷ among others, is the wrong direction in which to proceed.

More attention needs to be paid to better **guidance** so that students begin educational programmes based on realistic expectations and a realistic judgement of their own wishes. Most importantly, self reflection about learning and educational choices should already be a natural competence by the time a student reaches higher education. This has to be complemented by guidance systems that start as early as possible (e.g. during primary education) and that combine the dual aspects of educational and career guidance.

The second strand is more and tailored **support** by the higher education institution and peers such as student organisations. The student support system in higher education institutions should aim to adequately support students through counselling and reduce the number of early leavers, whilst recognising that in some cases leaving higher education is the best option for the student involved.

Student organisations and student unions also have a role to play and are already contributing to limiting the number of early education leavers. An unravelling social fabric and limited social integration are important reasons for students leaving higher education. Students themselves are contributing to the prevention of early leaving by building networks, organising study groups, mentor projects and most importantly, by actively involving early higher education leavers in student organisation, and policy debates. This work needs to be stepped up, and higher education institutions should provide student organisations with sufficient resources to do this, and to recognise the work student organisation are doing.

5. CONCLUSION: A TASK FOR ALL

Early education leaving is a problem that affects more than just those young people who exit their education prematurely. As it is an issue of equity in education, it is a problem for society, the state, employers, the private sector, civil society, and local communities: consequently, cooperation is needed to tackle it.

Youth organisations are assuming their share of the responsibility from preventing early education leaving and of reintegrating early education leavers into educational paths. Youth organisations will continue to do so, but state clearly

⁷ Efficiency and Equity, 2007

that this should be a combined task and duly call on all authorities responsible for education to go beyond the narrow focus on early school leaving and begin a real discussion on what young people need from their education in the 21st century.