



# European Platform and Support Services for Reducing Early Leaving from Education and Training

## Concept paper for the online ESL Portal for knowledge sharing and the Association for Dropout Prevention in Europe (ADPE)

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# Needs analysis

In the first phase of the project, the focus was on collecting, selecting, processing and structuring existing information. Mainly two areas have been researched:

- Finding and comparing already existing recently created printed and online ESL materials to reveal uncovered areas.
- Revealing explicit demands of the target group, and consequent developmental necessities.

In order to clarify the aims of the project, and develop the professional concept of the ESL Portal, we have reviewed all available policy papers, research reports, examined current good practices on already existing webpages, and the needs analysis elaborated by our project partners.

The needs analysis of the ESLplus project focused on revealing real needs and demands of expected users of the ESL Portal, as well as identifying the main target group before collecting and selecting good practices. This paper presents the theoretical foundation of the concept for the design of the ESL portal. We are confident that high quality implementation will determine the efficiency of the project in the next project phase.

## 1 Rationale

Pedagogical techniques and instructional strategies are traditionally considered to be a unique *know-how* with an endless number of peculiar variations of classroom applications. Therefore, our **original hypothesis** was that there are some pedagogical elements<sup>1</sup> that can easily be standardized, and it might be of some benefit if they are shared with other stakeholders. Our aim was not to provide ready-to-use ESL related pedagogical and educational solutions, but to create a collection of hands-on and inspiring practices. Since the European Union has put ESL in the centre of its educational strategy in Europe 2020, several collections of possible solutions (mostly at policy level) have been gathered already (see *Literature review in the next chapter*). Still, we think that the exchange of ESL related educational ideas should be **more straightforward**.

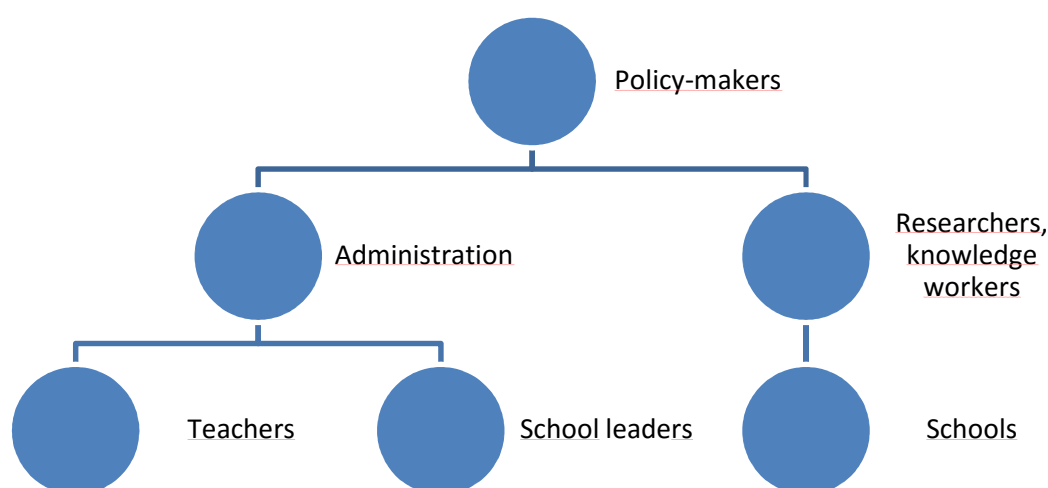
Our proposal is to create a platform with useful, *presumably well-tested educational solutions*, in order to inspire practitioners and improve the current European discourse on ESL (towards concrete and practical solutions). Our endeavour is not exceptional: there are several examples of practice-oriented educational portals with strong focus and visual services<sup>2</sup>.

### What is a good practice in ESL?

A good practice in ESL can be any full-fledged or **rudimentary** educational activity plan resulting in reducing ESL. The good practice is related to education, but it can be provided by non-educational actors, too, sometimes outside the school. The good practice can cover both interpersonal strategies of teaching and learning and the school level organisation and management of individual learning paths.

The description of the good practice is a **standardized product: the method** of the 'case' supported by text, sound, video and/or picture files, presentations and training materials. Based on the results of the needs analysis, a standardized form of case descriptions (representing good practice) has to be developed.

We can identify three levels of actors with six core players in ESL (see the Figure below). The **ESL Portal can cover several fields and multilevel players**, but the actual *Schwerpunkt* can only be identified after having shortly overviewed current European data collections.



<sup>1</sup> Pedagogical elements refer to both interpersonal strategies of teaching and learning, and the school-level organisation and management of individual learning paths.

<sup>2</sup> US-based [Edutopia](#) is a perfect example of this, but the [School Education Gateway](#) or the [eTwinning](#) portals are good examples, too. The concept designers of the ESLplus project had the chance to observe the development of a current ESL related portal carried out by CEDEFOP, which provided an excellent opportunity to determine our own unique direction of development.

## Who are our target groups?

Having studied the available European ESL-related literature, we managed to identify a market niche that could help us customize and configure our portal **on the practical level**. It includes revealing **interpersonal techniques of teaching and learning** and **organizing and managing individual learning paths in a reflective manner**. Consequently, our main customers are supposedly the following groups:

- The **primary target group** would be **teachers** and teachers' learning communities, since they are in the front line. They need methodology and tools to react, possibly at the stage of prevention.
- Beside teachers, the **second target group** would be **school leaders**, since they can influence the atmosphere of the school, and the methodology used, they can assist teachers in preventing ESL/reacting to drop-outs. They are a kind of intermediaries between teachers and service providers, and administrators. In our opinion, it is necessary to involve them as well.
- The **third target group** has an 'outside school' view: **local authorities, service providers** (this group includes local/regional child protection authorities, pedagogical service providers or other school developers), **municipalities** (owners, school-maintainers) and **related staff** at local/regional/national level depending on the country's system – **titled as administrators**.
- **Policy makers** are the **fourth target group**. They have been targeted by several working groups and documents, **researchers and knowledge workers** can certainly find material on other ESL portals based on their interest.
- **Parents** and **students** could be targeted only indirectly.

Although the **ESL Portal itself should reach out to several levels**, *we have to differentiate the task of setting up the portal and the task of collecting good examples*. Since policy papers, good examples are available at a European level (*see Chapter 3*), these can be compiled and shared via the portal as a first stage of founding it, and can be disseminated as a first result to the future association partners, members as well.

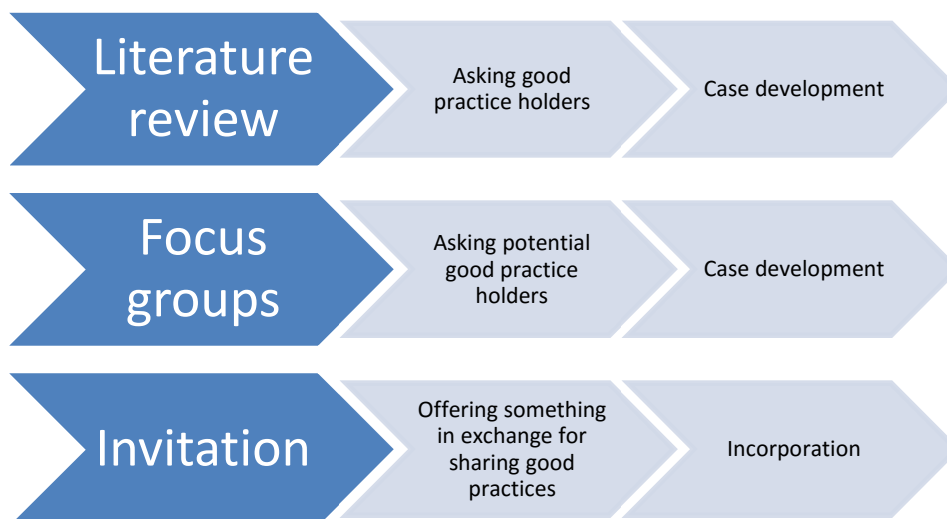
## How to classify good practices?

Classification (i.e. identifying criteria of collecting good practices) is a strategic issue; wrong or too abstract criteria of data collection can damage the quality of the portal. This threat could be easily illustrated by the above described survey of existing collections.

- The most practical way is to *create categories* directly coming from the learning path of students at risk. However, both learning paths and positive interventions may differ a lot in member states.
- The other option is to follow the standard EU classification: prevention, intervention and compensation, however, difficulties are described on the 10<sup>th</sup> page of this document. It might seem easy to upload the three areas of measures with the more or less *well-defined subtopics* (*see pages 6-7*), however, it would probably be a better solution if we used **categories and an open tag-system together** to make the good practice collection user friendly and easily-researchable.

## How to upload content to the portal?

Most portals struggle with continuous development and sustainability. The proposed part of the portal with good examples can be uploaded with content from three sources:



- **Literature review** means a systematic in-depth overview of existing professional literature on policy and school-level good practices tackling ESL.
- **Online questionnaire** and **focus group research** can provide more direct hints to practical solutions, good practices. This task must be fulfilled by the partners separately for each country.
- The most creative way to find good practices is **invitation**: i.e. to target practice holders directly and make them interested in the exchange. In order to make them interested, the portal should provide them with something tangible and useful.
- For those professional practice holders who want to export their know-how, the portal can provide valuable **marketing services**. For instance, most member states are well aware that the practice of Danish production schools (as a second chance, compensatory action) is valuable, but few of them are informed about the pedagogical and managerial practicalities of the school self. Consequently, the ESL Portal is planned to be equipped with features which make it easy to communicate with end users.

## 2 Literature review

### 2.1 Conceptual clarification

A significant number of European and national policy **reports have been** published since 2010 about the problem of ESL. The ESLplus project builds on those results, especially on the *Final Report*<sup>3</sup> of the preceding CroCooS project<sup>4</sup> which provides a summary of desk research on the most important aspects of the problem:

*‘Leaving school early as a phenomenon is in the spotlight of current educational policy all over Europe, and the world; however, it may refer to different aspects in each country. The EU28 ministries have accepted to achieve the goal of a level below 10% by the year 2020, while many member states have their individual national targets, along with national definitions. There are differences in the approach what is considered as the exact group of young people have to be dealt with and about the successful measures and interventions as well. It is at the same time more and more evident that early leaving is not only a status or educational outcome but usually a long-term process of disengagement that occurs over time and it can be predicted by different distress signals. The way we define early leaving from education is determinant to the policy and measures that will be applied. **When the focus is on the individuals’ labour market position and chances, for instance, interventions will target career orientation, school-workplace relationships and the transition from school to work. On the other hand, many policies try to understand the process of disengagement from education with its individual cognitive and psychological roots and processes. In the latter case, suggested solutions are rather based on individual support, inter-personal relationships in school and influences of the whole learning environment** [emphasis mine, ed.] (NESSE 2010 17.). (Final Report on CroCooS, p3)*

The *Eurydice report*<sup>5</sup> introduces a different terminology of ESL, used by European countries, and the above cited *Final Report on CroCooS* (2<sup>nd</sup> Chapter) gives a clear overview of the different approaches. There are differences not only in the definition but also in the age of the target groups, which determines the interest of policy measures in each country.

The definition of *early school leaving* according to the European Union rather focuses on the labour market approach:<sup>6</sup> early school leavers are a particularly vulnerable group on the labour market. It means that the emphasis is on qualification attainment which is considered well enough for some chances on the labour market. However, this indicator alone does not allow a deep insight into the problem. Another employment-focused terminology is “neet” which refers to young people between 15-24 who are no longer in the education system and not working or being trained for work. They are, for example, at the forefront of policy level interventions in some countries. Recently, a new term has been introduced for exactly the same phenomenon that ESL is used for: ELET, meaning *early leaving from education and training* (ELET). It makes it clearer that schools are far from being the one and only learning environment. General ELET indicators don’t provide information about the type of education and the programme from where the person dropped out, instead, they describe his/her current educational situation.

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<sup>3</sup> Judit, Juhász (2015): [Final Report on CroCooS - Cross sectoral cooperation focused solutions for the prevention of early school leaving project background research](#)

<sup>4</sup> [www.crocoos.tka.hu](http://www.crocoos.tka.hu)

<sup>5</sup> European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/CEDEFOP (2014): [Tackling Early Leaving from Education and Training in Europe: Strategies, Policies and Measures](#). Eurydice and CEDEFOP Report. Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

<sup>6</sup> 18-24 year old young people with a maximum of ISCED2 or ISCED3c short level of education, and currently not taking part in any education or training. Data collection is made by the European Union Labour Force Survey.

From the perspective of the institution and the individuals, the term “*dropout*” reflects to the fact that it refers to a process. Based on the experience of almost every country, dropping out of education has different rates as far as different types of secondary education are concerned, to the detriment of vocational schools. Reliable information about exact rates in different types of schools are not known in most of the countries, though. In most cases, the general problem with dropout indicators is that country level measures are not suitable to distinguish drop-outs (*measures of the non-retention or non-completion*) from cases of student mobility (*incidence of programme interruptions, continuation in another school*) – and for the secondary school programme, dropout indicators are the only available measurements (Final Report on CroCooS, p4-6).

## 2.2 Background factors

There are also many different typologies to classify students at risk or those who have already dropped out (*see the Figure below*). These approaches contribute to the preferable directions of policy measure improvements, and they make the optimal focus of intervention clear as they show who are mostly at risk, which subgroups might be ignored, and which can be supported with the greatest return on investment (Final Report on CroCooS, p9).

### Different classifications of early school leaving

<p><b>Classification based on the ‘actual working and schooling careers after leaving school’ (Dekkers and Driesen, 1997)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• successful unschooled manual worker</li> <li>• school returner</li> <li>• money earner</li> <li>• voluntary unemployed</li> <li>• enforced unemployed</li> </ul> <p><b>Classification based on the basis of individual characteristics (Janosz, 1994)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• maladjusted, who have poor grades and who behave poorly at school</li> <li>• underachievers, who just have poor grades</li> <li>• disengaged, who perform better than the maladjusted and the underachievers, but simply do not like school</li> <li>• quiet, who, other than having slightly lower grades, resemble graduates more than dropouts.</li> </ul> <p><b>Classification based on young people’s reasons for leaving school early (Dwyer &amp; PRC, 1996)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• positive leaver, making a positive career choice with employment or further training</li> <li>• opportune leaver, there is no definite career path, taking the opportunity to change life patterns</li> <li>• would-be leaver, does not leave but reluctant to stay</li> <li>• circumstantial leaver, forced to leave for non-educational reasons</li> <li>• discouraged leaver, interest and performance in education is low</li> <li>• alienated leaver, discouraged and non-compatible with school life.</li> </ul>
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Source: NESSE 2010, p16<sup>7</sup>

The strongest determinant of early school leaving rates is the intergenerational transmission of education attainment, which is correlated with socioeconomic status and home learning environment, since they have an impact on education opportunities and outcomes. It shows how complex a problem ESL is. The *Education and Training Monitor 2015*<sup>8</sup> points out some general reasons for ESL.

<sup>7</sup> Network of experts in social sciences of education and training (NESSE) (2010): [Early school leaving. Lessons from research for policy makers](#). An independent expert report submitted to the European Commission

<sup>8</sup> [Education and Training Monitor 2015](#), European Commission DG EAC

## Early school leaving rate

- correlates strongly with equivalent education attainment rates of the parental cohort;
- is significantly higher amongst men than amongst women;
- is, on average, two times higher among those who are foreign-born as compared to those who are native-born, and it correlates not only with socioeconomic status, but also with immigration, i.e. with language barriers<sup>9</sup>;
- is probably higher among students hindered by a disability or, belonging to a minority ethnic group, however, there is an insufficient amount of comparable data and available evidence to support the presumption.

## 2.3 Policy context

The *Recommendation on policies to reduce the number of students leaving education and training early*<sup>10</sup> is a core document for the preparation of a comprehensive strategy to tackle early leaving from education and training. The *Recommendation* promotes a more collaborative approach involving all relevant areas, and it reflects on prevention, intervention and compensation levels as well. The document draws conclusions from the results of several international comparative analyses. The above mentioned *Tackling Early Leaving...* report by Eurydice and CEDEFOP (p57) itemizes several policy measures by countries for each area. Here is a list of them summarized in the *Final Report on CroCooS*.

### Prevention level

- Improving access to and quality of ECEC (early childhood education and care)
- Reducing grade retention
- Introducing desegregation policies
- Applying measures of positive discrimination
- Developing extra-curricular activities
- Increasing flexibility and permeability of educational pathways
- Including ELET materials in initial teacher education and professional training
- Creating access to education and career guidance

### Intervention level

- Providing individual support
- Supporting low achievers
- Supporting students with a different mother tongue
- Employing specialist staff to support teachers and students
- Identifying groups at risk of ELET
- Developing early warning systems for students at risk of ELET
- Managing absenteeism
- Networking with parents and other actors outside school

### Compensation level

- Carrying out a reform of second chance education system
- Identifying early leavers and measures to help them re-enter education and training

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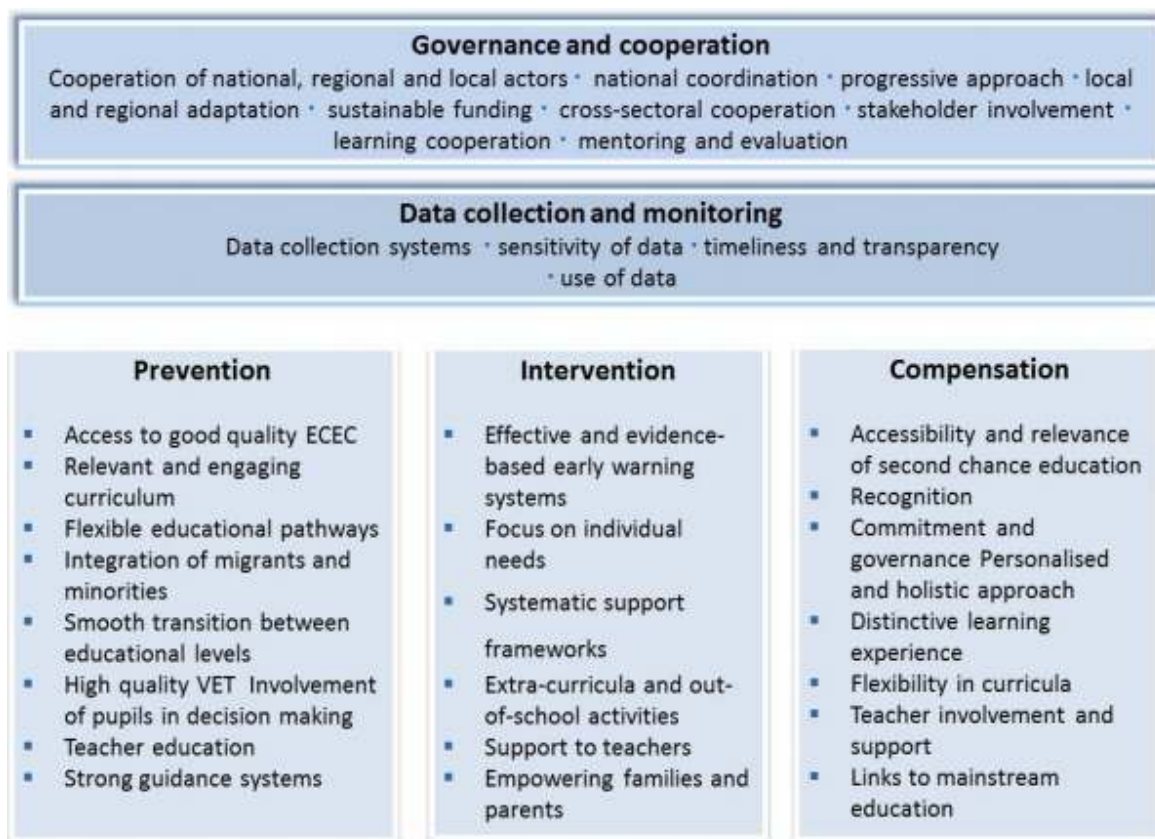
<sup>9</sup> The first-generation migrant 18 to 24 year-olds are a diverse group of individuals. Only students who had already reached compulsory school age before having arrived in the country where they currently live are at risk. Foreign-born students who arrived in the country towards the end of their compulsory school age or in the middle of their school education require most attention.

<sup>10</sup> [Council Recommendation of 28 June 2011 on policies to reduce early school leaving](#) (2011/C 191/01)



As a result of the operation of the *ET2020 Thematic Working Group*<sup>11</sup> on *Early School Leaving between 2011-13*, a final report has been published. There is a table in it which shows the most important policies and measures on each level of action identified in different countries in Europe.

### Measures against ESL addressed in this report



Source: Reducing early school leaving: Key messages and policy support, p12<sup>12</sup>

Still, it is quite difficult to collect or classify all relevant measures or policy initiatives and possible areas of intervention from education, student and parental support services, social services and other policy subsystems. As the *Final Report on CroCooS* pointed out<sup>13</sup>:

*'In real practice these three levels are not obviously divided the some way or anyhow, as a measure can be preventive at one time and an intervention at another time. Some of the listed are quite widespread all over the European countries such as a form of early childhood education and care or education and career guidance; furthermore sort of an absenteeism management and second chance education possibility exist in many places. Nevertheless there is no such country where all of these measures together form a system. It is important to note that, the access for services is many times not equal and consistent, for instance often to the detriment of Eastern European countries or parts of a country and rural areas compared with urban locations, etc. According to the European level reports based on the analysis of many countries, the above detailed collection of measures and policy initiatives seem to be a convincing baseline for a common framework in forming an ELET strategy and tackling dropout.'* (p11)

<sup>11</sup> More information: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/expert-groups\\_en](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/expert-groups_en)

<sup>12</sup> [Reducing early school leaving: Key messages and policy support](#). Final Report of the Thematic Working Group on Early School Leaving. European Commission, November 2013

<sup>13</sup> In this report there is a brief summary of the USA and Canadian literature where is more emphasizes on the institutional and the individual approach. See page 11-18.

The outstanding OECD report, *Equity and Quality in Education*<sup>14</sup> also mentions a number of suggestions that could contribute to the improvement of the quality of education and the prevention of early school leaving. As it is cited in the *European report on Early School Leaving (ESL) policy context Europe* (ESHA 2016, ESLplus project), one of the main reasons for early school leaving is a lack of quality of the educational system itself. The OECD report has three main chapters. In the first one, *Investing in equity in education pays off*, the authors emphasize that avoiding school failure is a key challenge in OECD countries. Equity in education can contribute to economic competitiveness and social cohesion, so it is concluded that a strategy to improve equity and reduce school failure is crucial on the policy level.

The second chapter, *Tackling system level policies that hinder equity in education*, suggests five steps of action in a school supporting policy environment:

1. Eliminate grade repetition
2. Avoid early tracking and defer student selection to upper secondary
3. Manage school choice to avoid segregation and increased inequities
4. Make funding strategies responsive to the needs of the students and the schools
5. Design equivalent upper secondary pathways to ensure completion

In the third chapter, *Improving low performing disadvantaged schools*, there are recommendations how to raise students' achievement in low performing disadvantaged schools. The main conclusions are the following:

1. Strengthen and support school leadership
2. Stimulate a supportive school climate and environment for learning
3. Attract, support and retain high quality teachers
4. Ensure effective classroom learning strategies
5. Prioritise linking schools with parents and communities

## 2.4 Institutional context

Beside policy measures, the role of schools, and, specifically, the role of school leaders and teachers, in the process of a student becoming or not becoming a dropout, is emphasized, too. Institutional development has a wide range of literature, too. One of the most important recommendations to reduce dropout rate in schools is to build an early warning system. An interesting model by M. A. and D. J. Mac Iver<sup>15</sup> can serve as a good example of the concept of an early warning system. There have been a three tiered integrated model created for tackling dropouts at the school level (see the Figure on the next page).

- *'The primary stage, or foundation, of the prevention model involves district- and school-wide reforms aimed at providing high-quality instruction that promotes engaged learning and successful high school completion for every student. This stage includes a whole-school approach to encouraging regular attendance and other positive behaviours. These primary prevention strategies alone often succeed with a large majority (2/3, 3/4) of students.*
- *The secondary stage targets interventions on small groups of students who need additional supports beyond the school-wide reforms to address attendance, behaviour, or academic struggles.*
- *The tertiary stage provides intensive intervention (often delivered one-on-one to students by specialists in social work, mental health, and so on) for the five to 10 percent of students who need more clinical support.'* (Iver, M. A., Mac Iver, D. J. 2009 p10-11)

<sup>14</sup> OECD (2012): [Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools](#), OECD Publishing

<sup>15</sup> Iver, M. A., Mac Iver, D. J. (2009): [Beyond the indicators: An integrated school-level approach to dropout prevention](#). Arlington, VA: The Mid-Atlantic Equity Center, The George Washington University Center for Equity and Excellence in Education

### Three-Tiered Dropout Prevention Model for Districts and Schools



Source: Iver, M. A., Mac Iver, D. J. 2009. p11

The basis of their thread is the so called ABC of dropout (*see the Table on the next page*) which has to be followed up and monitored on all levels.

#### Focus of interventions concerning the ABC of dropout

Type of Intervention	Focus of Intervention (ABCs)		
	Attendance	Behavior	Course Failures
<b>School-wide</b> (all students)	Every absence brings a response  Create a culture that says attending every day matters  Positive social incentives for good attendance  Data tracking by teacher teams	Teach, model, and expect good behavior  Positive social incentives and recognition for good behavior  Advisory  Data tracking by teacher teams	Research-based instructional programs  In-classroom support to enable active and engaging pedagogies  Data tracking by teacher teams
<b>Targeted</b> (15 to 20 percent of students)	Two or more unexcused absences in a month brings brief daily check by an adult  Attendance team (teacher, counselor, administrator, parent) investigates and problem solves (why isn't student attending?)	Two or more office referrals brings involvement of behavior team  Simple behavior checklist students bring from class to class, checked each day by an adult  Mentor assigned	Elective extra-help courses—tightly linked to core curriculum—preview upcoming lessons and fill in knowledge gaps  Targeted, reduced class size for students whose failure is rooted in social-emotional issues
<b>Intensive</b> (5 to 10 percent of students)	Sustained one-on-one attention and problem solving  Appropriate social service or community supports	In-depth behavioral assessment (why is student misbehaving?)  Behavior contracts with family involvement  Appropriate social service or community supports	One-on-one tutoring

Source: Iver, M. A., Mac Iver, D. J. 2009. p23

In the latest ET2020 Schools policy report, *A whole school approach to tackling early school leaving*<sup>16</sup> also focused more on the challenges at the institutional level and used the concept of a *whole school approach*, where all members of the school community (school leaders, middle management, teaching and non-teaching staff, learners, parents and families) feel responsible and play an active role in tackling educational disadvantage and preventing drop-out. According to their recommendation

*‘... policies to reduce early school leaving should be embedded in an overall inclusive learner-centred vision of education, in which high quality education is accessible to all. (...)*

*Because of the multi-faceted nature of the issue, schools cannot address early school leaving and educational disadvantage alone. Different stakeholders and services, inside and outside the school, need to collaborate and integrate efforts. The school is the logical site to initiate community collaboration. (...)*

*A ‘whole school approach’ also implies a cross-sectoral approach and stronger cooperation with a wide range of stakeholders (social services, youth services, outreach care workers, psychologists, nurses, speech and language therapists, guidance specialists, local authorities, NGOs, business, unions, volunteers, etc.) and the community at large, to deal with issues, which schools do not (and cannot) have the relevant expertise for.’ (p8-9)*

Key conditions have been organised around five interconnected thematic areas which should be considered on a European level:

1. School governance
2. Learner support
3. Teachers
4. Parents and families
5. Stakeholder involvement

An online *European Toolkit for Schools*<sup>17</sup> as a unique resource platform offers examples of effective practices and measures for policy makers and practitioners to promote educational success and prevent early school leaving.

## 2.5 Conclusions

**Equity in education is a precondition for equity in society;** without an equalising school system, society would never become more equal, either. A natural question then arises: how systems and professionals can handle those who do not fit into the mainstream: people in poverty, migrants, ethnical minorities (e.g. the Roma), those undermotivated to learn, or the disabled, therefore the policy makers and school developers have to reflect the relationship between these individuals and institutions.

**Early school leaving is a complex problem.** Different research teams have examined it from different points of view (individuals’ labour market position, socio-economic status, education opportunities, etc.) using sometimes different definitions of the problem. Their reports emphasize different aspects of the problem and of course make suggestions from their point of view. Reading all of them gives an overall picture of the problem and shows its complexity well.

**Aligned policy cooperation is a key to success.** As ESL is a complex problem, tackling it can be successful only by horizontal (cross-sectoral – education sector, social sector, medical sector), vertical

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<sup>16</sup> Education & Training 2020 Schools policy report: [A whole school approach to tackling early school leaving](#). Policy messages. European Commission, 2015

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/en/pub/resources/toolkitsforschools.htm>

(from policy to local level) and institutional (within school where the symptom itself appears) cooperation of concerned actors. Though the problem appears in schools, they can't address ESL alone. A whole school approach and building an early warning system are the two key suggestions of international literature.

**A complex and comprehensive early warning system** should include elements on the individual, the institutional as well as the local levels, and it should also indicate the need for an inter-sectoral cooperation among teachers and all other joint professionals. Policy support is also necessary in order to improve school systems.

To be able to compare ESL and dropout situation among countries, or, even more, to initiate relevant policy measures or institutional development processes, or, to design training programmes to improve school staff and non-school worker competencies, it is not enough to know either the indicators (including ESL rate defined by the EU) or the so called good practices. Developers must consider not only the characteristics of the educational system, and of students at risk, but also the contextual factors of the institutions that all have influence on the perceived and realized impact of the measures.

### 3 Methodology of needs analysis

Having accepted that supposed main target groups are practitioners (teachers, school leaders, administration), their needs were examined thoroughly with the help of an online questionnaire and focus groups meetings, discussions. The prepared online questionnaire helped the partnership to analyse the possible target groups' needs regarding the planned ESL Portal.

The preconditions of the needs analysis were:

- teachers, teams of teachers and core groups from 'frontline'<sup>18</sup> schools – min. 50 filled in questionnaires / country
- school leaders of 'frontline' schools – min. 20 filled in questionnaires / country
- service providers – min. 20 filled in questionnaires / country

Beside the questionnaire, focus group discussions were suggested as well. Focus group research required to create three focus groups (*minimum* 6 persons per group) in each participating country:

- a homogenous group of teachers and core group around them (where relevant) coming from schools where the problem of ESL occurs due to the level of dropout
- a homogenous group of school leaders coming from schools where the problem of ESL is relevant due to the level of dropout
- educational administrators, service providers with a mix of policy-makers (national, regional or local) where relevant, depending on the country's ESL-tackling system

A wider sample of the three main target groups filled in the online questionnaire from which focus group members were selected and invited to a facilitated, informal discussion where they discussed/explained their choices and the results of the questionnaire.

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<sup>18</sup> Frontline refers to those schools who tackle with ESL regularly



## 4 Results of the needs analysis

There were inequalities in filling in the questionnaires among partner countries (Hungary is overrepresented, Sweden and Germany had appreciable number of questionnaires filled in and also had focus group discussions, but there is a lack of data from Romania and there is no data at all from the Netherlands; however, we have also had taken into consideration a European market research made by ESHA as a focus group discussion among school leaders). Therefore, the results can be taken into account with limitations; they do not represent the views of a wide range of target groups in Europe. Still, the importance and the relevance of the conclusions are obvious.

### Target groups and the services of the ESL Portal

Both the questionnaires and the focus group discussions have provided important information about target groups identified in the rationale (*see page 15*).

In the case of the Hungarian needs analysis, the order of those mainly responsible for the dropout problem was: *parents / teachers / decision-makers / student health services*<sup>19</sup>. This order was almost the same in the Romanian result and was also in line with the outcomes of the German questionnaire, except for one point: they put heads of schools on the 2<sup>nd</sup> place in the row (instead of decision-makers). Sweden shares a different point of view, since the main responsibility was placed on schools (especially on school directors and principals and professionals). But decision makers and professionals in the municipality were named as well. Parents were not mentioned in the Swedish questionnaires.

The focus group discussions also added new information and broaden the circle of the possible target groups:

- The target group of schools has to cover both primary and secondary (VET) level. Teachers' education level was mentioned as well, since ESL is not part of teachers' training.
- Since dropout is a problem mainly in VET, the role of employers and companies cannot be avoided.
- Policy-makers – especially local governments – were considered to be important as well.

All in all, the **relevance of listed target groups was validated by the questionnaire and the focus group discussions**, too. The importance of the first three target groups was out of the question.

*Some noteworthy comments:*

- *Parents and students as target groups:* since the role of parents was emphasized several times, it can be suggested that they should not be left out from the target groups.
  - Germany and Sweden argued the level of responsibility of the parents; they also suggested that parents take on this responsibility. Still, they think parents couldn't be held accountable in most of the cases, simply because of their lack of education or social security and stability.
  - Though schools and teachers struggle to involve parents as well. Still, cooperation happens more on a personal or school level than on an EU project level. That is why we suggest that parents should be targeted by the portal as well, but indirectly. We should dedicate a separate topic for them as part of the good examples, and other options should be considered.
- *School- level needs:*
  - how schools can facilitate favourable home–school relations
  - how schools/teachers know more about the learning demands of their students

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<sup>19</sup> Education and career counsellors, counsellors, special education teachers, school psychologists etc.

- *Too much burden on teachers:* teachers have to mentor students and parents as well, and these tasks put too much liability on them. They are overloaded, and they lack not only the capacity but also the methodology to deal with the problem, together with the school directors. Hence, ESL is a complex, overall problem, a whole school approach is necessary – all actors should share the responsibility.
  - Student-focused teaching methods are useful.
  - Teacher competence developing materials, especially in the field of mentoring and counselling, are important.
  - We have to bear it in mind when drawing conclusions that the needs analysis was not representative, but we can see that in Hungary, and probably in other Eastern European countries as well, there is a lack of support: teachers are mostly abandoned when combating ESL. German and Swedish feedbacks show that there is a system supporting them there, but it should be better used and improved. In both cases cooperation and/or enhancing cooperation is necessary.
- The developers of the ESL Portal should also take into consideration some hot topics that influence/shape education in Europe: such as the **education and training of refugees and migrants**.

### Habits of potential users

The feedbacks of target groups regarding the planned services of the ESL Portal and the comparison of it to their use of the internet were a bit contradictory.

All countries, regardless its ESL situation, confirmed that face-to-face cooperation, trainings and personal information exchange is the source of information and those help their needs.

Online, individual learning was popular among less than 10% of the respondents, but, at the same time, the target group is eager to look for and download good practices.

As a result of the focus group discussions it was revealed that there is an urgent need for networking systematically and on a regular and steady basis. So participants would benefit from working together closely with clearly defined ways of communication, networking with other stakeholders and institutions.

All in all, we have to admit that **at the moment the respondents prefer a static use of the internet: downloading, reading/using good examples instead of being active** (participating in online courses, writing blogs, commenting). When they use the internet **for professional use, they do it mostly on their own language**. Foreign language also hinders them from active use – their language knowledge (or as they feel it) is only suitable for passive roles on the internet.

Most participants in the questionnaire are not yet familiar with online courses, blended learning courses or MOOCs. At the same time, they are interested in contacts to experts and institutions that deal with ESL, and social networking was rated important for them, too.

### Our results have led us to the following conclusions:

- **It cannot be overemphasized that the focus of the ESL Portal should be cooperation.** That is what the target group mostly needs. There is an obvious demand for in-person meetings, however, possible ways of replacing part of those with online communication should be examined (marketplace, learning space, etc.).
- **Good practices in cooperation** should be **promoted** as well.
- Most of the members of the target groups are practitioners. It is clear that they rather need practical solutions than scientific studies – however, there are other target groups (i.e. policy makers) that prefer the latter. That is why it is important to **put practical information in the focus**, and not forget about background studies and researches either.



- Responds have showed that **target groups are interested in trainings**. We must examine how to draw their attention to online trainings and change their attitude towards digital communication. If the topic of the training is a niche in the field of ESL, there is a higher chance to attract the target audience.
- In order to convince our target groups to use the ELS Portal, it is imperative that **the online content be of very high quality: verified, approved cases**, and real experts should be available on the portal. Hence, very strong quality assurance is necessary before uploading cases to the portal.
  - It is worth considering involving respected, acknowledged institutions, authorities, as the Swedish colleague wrote: *The focus group participants also stated that school professionals are reluctant to put theory into practise/use and implement interventions/materials/ideas, etc., unless it is distributed from national authorities in their field such as the Swedish Agency of Education, universities or other 'trusted agents'.* They could become our partners, and/or they could verify/approve the cases, or use those cases in other roles and make them visible.
- In order to reach that objective, **we must identify good practice holders, sharers and pioneers** who are familiar with the ESL problem, and are computer literate, comfortable teaching and solving problems in the online space, and using online tools, and apps.
- In order to find as many good practices as possible, an award should be created – **a prize to give recognition not only to individuals, but also to teams**. In the selection process, we could focus on cooperation, and promote cross-sectoral cooperation.
- **Cases sharing a similar context can inspire each other** (local conditions, challenges, organizational culture, etc.).

In order to facilitate communication among parties in a foreign language, a **glossary of professional terms** was recommended to be created in the Swedish country report.

## 5 Key messages

- **However ESL is a common problem** in most of the European countries, the **composition of reasons and the necessary interventions have to differ** according to contextual facts.
- **ESL Portal's main target groups** are:
  - **policy makers** (from country context)
  - **practitioners** (from environmental and local context and school context)
    - teachers
    - school leaders
    - administration staff (service providers, local authorities and non-teaching school staff)
- **Good practices' main target group** is **practitioners** who need practical solutions.
  - **Cooperation** has to be the **focus of the good practices**.
  - **Good practices can't be interpreted without knowing their contextual background**.
  - **Adaptability of a good practice** depends on the educational system, the institutional circumstances and school leaders' and teachers' competencies as well as the teaching methods commonly used in local cases.
  - **Standardized form for good practices** is essential.
  - **Personal invitation** is the most effective way to find good practices and to build a network.
  - In order **to do proper adaptation, good practices on the ESL Portal should be linked** by tags to the relevant country profile, ESL Library materials, etc.
- **Defining categories and tags is a challenge** – let's be flexible and start with an initial group of tags, later amend them considering experience.
- **Language barriers** have to be handled somehow.