

Early leaving from education and training: trends, factors and measures in Estonia

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Summary

The definition of “early leaver from education and training”, previously “early school leaver”, used at EU level refers to a young person aged between 18 and 24 who leaves education and training with only a lower secondary education or less, and who is not in further education or training (Eurostat, 2016). As demands for high skills and qualifications are growing, upper secondary education is considered to be the minimum qualification for a smooth transition to further levels of education and for a successful entry into the labour market (OECD, 2016).

The aim of the current article is to discuss the trends of early leaving from education and training (ELET) in Estonia during the period from 2000 to 2015 and to describe factors influencing early leaving, as well as measures for tackling or contributing to reducing ELET. The meta-analysis of the data from the European Labour Force Survey (LFS), Estonian Labour Force Survey, Estonian Education Information System (EHIS) and Estonian Statistics was performed. Though the rate of early leavers has decreased over the years in most EU countries (Eurostat, 2017), it is still a topic of great importance and relevance. Reducing its incidence to 10% by 2020 has been one of the five headline targets of Europe 2020 Strategy (European Commission, 2011). Estonia’s national target is to reduce the share of early leavers to 9.5%. At the same time, the rate of early leaving from education and training (ELET) in 2015 was 11.2% (EU-28 average was 11%). Compared with other member states, there are more early leavers only in Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, Malta, Romania, Portugal and Spain.

Existing research and official data in the EU indicate that ELET is caused by individual, social, educational and systemic factors (Lyche, 2010) which interact with each other. It is typically more of a process than a single event and according to Rumberger and Lim (2008), for many pupils this process begins in early elementary school. Early leavers tend to work also more often in part-time or precarious jobs (European Commission, 2011), they earn less

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(OECD, 2010a), and more often are dependent on social assistance (NESSE, 2010). Early leavers from education and training are also less likely to take up further learning opportunities (OECD, 2010a), and thus participate less in lifelong learning.

In 2015, there were approximately 12,000 young persons aged between 18 and 24 in Estonia who left education with no more than a lower secondary education. Though the number of early leavers has dropped over the last decade, there are still too many pupils leaving school at different levels of education and at the school stage. Whereas the overall share of early leavers fell in the EU Member States by 2.9 percentage points between 2010 and 2015, the proportion of early leavers in Estonia remained relatively unchanged (- 0.2 percentage points).

The results showed that from 2010 the proportion of early leavers without a lower secondary education ranged between 10% and 12%. Thus, approximately 90% of the early leavers from education and training leave school during the transitions either from elementary to secondary school or during studies in upper secondary school. Whilst the number of persons in the age group 18 to 24 who participate in retraining, has decreased.

In terms of regions, a most early leavers from education and training are from the Central and Western Estonia and least in Northern Estonia. The results indicated that every fifth person aged from 18 to 24 from Järva, Lääne-Viru or Rapla County and every sixth person of the same age group from Hiiu, Lääne, Pärnu or Saare County, left school early.

There is also evidence that living in a rural area is a very strong ELET predictor in Estonia. In 2015, there were 14.7% of those young people aged 18 to 24 who lived in rural areas and were considered as early leavers from education and training. Compared with other Member States, only Bulgaria, Romania, Spain and Portugal have more early leavers from rural areas. The LFS statistics also showed that every fifth male person aged 18 to 24 living in rural area of Estonia is a early leaver from education and training. Whilst the rate of employed male leavers from rural areas is among the highest in the EU.

In most EU countries, boys are more likely to leave school prematurely than girls. In 2015 LFS statistics about Estonia showed that 13.2% of males and 9% of females in the 18–24 age category left school prematurely. Compared with other member states only Spain, Latvia, Malta, Italy, Portugal and Cyprus has a higher rate of male leavers than Estonia. It is also worth mentioning that those are the countries where the gap between girls and boys has been annually relatively high.

There is evidence that a low socio-economic background, as well as some aspects of education systems such as grade retention, socio-economic segregation

and early tracking is identified as having a negative influence on the rates of early leaving (European Commission et al., 2014). However, those are the factors which have less impact on early leaving in Estonia than in other EU Member States. The results also showed that young people aged 18 to 24 with only a lower secondary education or less are more likely at risk of poverty or social exclusion and experience more relative and absolute poverty. At the same time, their rate of employment is also lower compared with persons with higher education levels in the same age group.

According to the Council of the EU there should be a comprehensive strategy to tackle early leaving, which should include prevention, intervention and compensation (re-integration) measures. Though there is no comprehensive ELET strategy in Estonia, there are policies and measures in place that can help in reducing ELET. One of the most effective measures in tackling early leaving has been improving access to high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) and an education and career guidance system. Though many member states report that a guidance system has not been specifically developed to reduce the rate of early leavers, it has been an important support measure in combating ELET (European Commission, 2014). In Estonia, the participation rate in ECEC is high and a career guidance system is implemented at different educational levels. Nevertheless, different researches (Espenberg et al., 2012; Eesti Uuringukeskus, 2014) have showed that there is a need for implementing better quality career guidance systems more widely.

In tackling ELET, timely interventions are decisive. There is evidence that serious learning difficulties and behavioural problems appear after pupils begin their sixth-grade year (Naarits-Linn et al., 2012). Thus, if signs of stress and other problems are detected in time, there are more chances of retaining young people with relatively simple interventions, making it possible to get better results with fewer resources (Cedefop, 2016). According to Rumberger (1995, p. 618), “although schools cannot do anything about the demographic and social characteristics of their students, they can change their own practices that have a direct bearing on whether students remain in school”. Creating open and supportive learning environments which focus on the needs of individual pupils can be the key element in tackling early school leaving.

Keywords: early leaving from education and training, school dropout, social demography, measures, international comparison, lifelong learning.