

# **Preventing and re-integrating early school leavers - a meta evaluation of policies implemented in 7 European Member States -**

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## **“Abstract”**

At European level, early school leaving (ESL) affects more than one in seven young people between the age of 18 and 24, a dimension that implies not only an immense waste of the potential of young people, but also serious social and economic consequences for our societies.

The EU2020 headline target to decrease ESL rates to 10% has renewed the sense of urgency in fighting ESL and Member States have recently implemented a number of diverse policies which aim to tackle the issue. However, questions about their effectiveness and their success remain. Therefore, supranational syntheses are needed in an effort to learn from each other’s experiences and support and inform policy makers, practitioners and social partners to design and implement successful policies.

In this context, the aim of this paper is to present the findings of a meta evaluation of eight policies tackling early school leaving recently implemented in seven European Member States. While it will discuss the findings of the study, the paper will also serve as a vantage point to explore the practice of conducting meta evaluations in international organizations.

It finds that meta evaluations are a useful tool to explore common success factors and shortcomings, but international organizations face specific challenges when it comes to conducting them. For example, the case and country selection is often meant to achieve a balanced representation of countries and to include a broad range of initiatives tackling a specific policy issue rather than focusing on a specific type of policy. Finally, it encourages greater debate about how to conduct meta evaluations in international organizations in an effort to increase their capacities as knowledge brokers between the research and policy arena.

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## **Introduction**

5.6 million young people (18-24) in Europe are early school leavers. Without the shield from unemployment that is education (ILO 2012), these are 5.6 Million young people at heightened risk of poor participation in the labour market and social exclusion over their entire life course. Exposing 13.5% of all young people in this age group to this increased risk is not only an immense waste of the individual potential of young people, but also has serious social and economic consequences for our societies (Eurofound 2012a).

Hence, the reduction of early school leaving (ESL) rates ranks high on the European agenda. Recognizing the importance of education for individual and societal well-being, the European Commission has made a decrease of ESL one of the five headline targets of the Europe 2020 strategy (EC 2010). Until 2020, the share of early drop-outs is to be reduced to 10% on average across Europe. At the same time, many EU Member States have taken action to reduce the number of early school leavers and introduced policies which tackle the issue. As there is no single or simple approach to preventing ESL or reintegrating early school leavers, they have implemented a range of interventions, acknowledging that it is often a combination of problems with the existing mainstream education and complex personal issues that lead to school drop-out. But how effective are such policy measures and what do we know about their success? If Europe is to reach its EU2020 target, it is essential that Member States learn from each other's experiences and exchange good practices. While many member states are already monitoring or evaluating their respective policies on national level, it is supranational synthesis which can support policy learning beyond national borders. Here, international organisations can play an

important role as ‘knowledge brokers’ (Ward et al 2009, Meyer 2010), which aggregate insights from national level evaluations to support evidence-informed policy making on national level.

However, performing such meta evaluations as an international organisation is a challenging exercise. Researchers have to analyse national level evaluations of varying quality, provided by a multitude of societal and political actors, on diverse policies in countries that might not be comparable in the first place. Oftentimes, a variety of stakeholder demands requires to approach meta evaluation in a more pragmatic way than in a more academic environment. The question that poses itself under such complex circumstances is: How can international organisations conduct such meta evaluations to inform and support policy makers?

This article will present the findings of such an exercise conducted at the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound), a Dublin-based European Union agency. In the frame of the project ‘Youth employment: Challenges and solutions for higher participation of young people in the labour market’ Eurofound conducted an ‘evaluative study’ of policies aiming to increase the employability of young people and promoting higher employment participation of young people in Europe (Eurofound 2012b). In this context, special focus was placed on policies tackling the issue of ESL. This project will serve as a ‘case study example’ and vantage point to discuss the challenges of meta evaluation in international organisations more generally.

This paper is structured as follows: Firstly, it will sketch the use of meta-evaluation in international organisations with specific reference to youth policy. Then, a meta evaluation of ESL policies will be presented in the form of a ‘case study’, outlining methodological choices and challenges, followed by a presentation of the findings. This paper will close with a reflection

on what was learnt about how to conduct meta evaluations in international organisations during this study.

### **Conducting meta evaluations in international organisations**

In line with the general linguistic confusions in evaluation research, definitions of what constitutes meta evaluation are plentiful. Oftentimes the terms meta evaluation, meta-analysis and systematic review are used interchangeably to describe some kind of synthesis of primary evaluations (see e.g. Hakim 2000, Rossi et al 1999, Pawson/ Tilley 1997, Patton 1997). While some of these methodologies involve simply the aggregation of primary evaluations, others additionally aim to reflect on the quality of the evaluations under review.

Following the latter approach, this paper uses the term meta evaluation to describe a “systematic summary of the results from a number of different evaluations of the same kind of programs” (Weiss 1998: 48), while allowing for the analysis of the quality, strength and weaknesses and the appropriateness of the conducted individual evaluations (Patton 1997, Stufflebeam 2001, Fitzpatrick et al 2004, Stufflebeam and Shinkfield 2007). It includes both a conclusion on the ‘success’ of the type of policy under review, as well as a reflection on the quality of the evaluations under review.

Meta evaluations are widely used in international organisations, as choosing to synthesise primary evaluations and enable mutual learning can be a powerful ‘tool for learning’ (Uusikylä/ Virtanen 2010) in line with their mandate and multinational nature. Moreover, given their limited resources, international organisations have identified meta evaluations are a feasible option when primary evaluations prove too resource intensive.

Although much is written on how to conduct primary policy evaluations or meta evaluations, there is less specific knowledge on how to do meta evaluations as an international organisation. This is surprising, as researchers in international organisations do face a number of specific challenges different from those of an academic environment. For instance, some academic meta evaluations on ESL policies end up including mostly Anglo-Saxon research literature (see e.g. Wilson et al 2011) as these countries do have a more established evaluation culture and primary evaluations are more likely to meet criteria of scientific quality. This is an unfeasible solution for international organisations, where case and country selection is often driven by considerations of balance and representativeness as well as stakeholder interest. International organisations are therefore faced with the difficult task to synthesise national level evaluations of varying quality covering numerous languages and countries, provided by a multitude of societal and political actors, on diverse policies in countries that might not be comparable in the first place.

Consequently, where meta evaluations are conducted in international organisations, they often clearly acknowledge their limitations. In the field of youth unemployment policies for example, the Worldbank (IEG 2012) conducted a systematic review of 38 impact evaluations of the Banks and IFC funded projects. They found that only very few provided useful data to draw conclusions about effectiveness. Given the scarce evidence base, the authors called for improving the capacity for evaluations on national level. Similar recommendations come from an earlier Worldbank study (Betcherman et al 2007) reviewing 289 studies of interventions to support young workers from 84 countries. Betcherman et al (2007) concluded that the level of program evaluation was weak (as little as one quarter of the programs give an estimate of the net impact), while noting that program benefits were likely to be overestimated in the absence of credible

evaluations. Consequently, they emphasized the need for better quality primary evaluations of youth employment interventions.

This goes to show that those international organisations which conduct meta evaluations in the field of youth policies face similar challenges, but there is a lack of structured debate on what those challenges are and how they can be tackled. Therefore, this paper aims to draw attention to some of the specific challenges faced by IOs conducting meta evaluations. Those challenges will be illustrated in the following by sharing experiences of a case study of a meta evaluation of ESL policies.

### **Case study**

The goal of our study was to support the efforts of policy makers, practitioners, social partners and researchers across Europe in the conception, planning and implementation of policies designed to improve the labour market situation of young people (Eurofound 2012b). This was pursued by means of a meta evaluation, where we would synthesise the findings of primary evaluations with the specific goal of identifying success factors and challenges in order to inform policy-making or programme development. Given the importance of education as the cornerstone of any successful pathway into employment, and the EU 2020 headline target of reducing ESL leaving rates, special attention was paid to policies tackling ESL<sup>3</sup>.

### *Country and Case Selection*

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<sup>3</sup> The here presented meta evaluation on ESL policies is part of a larger scale study covering 25 policies measures aimed at 'increasing the employability and to promote a higher employment participation of young people in Europe' (Eurofound 2012b). In addition to policies tackling ESL, the study reviewed policies facilitating school to work transitions, measures to foster the employability of young people and measures targeted at groups with a specific disadvantage in the labour market. The fact that the ESL study was embedded into a broader project on youth unemployment has important methodological implications, especially for the issue of country and policy selection.

Dealing with a number of resource constraints, it was not possible to cover all Member States of the European Union. It was decided that nine countries should be included in the study with the aim was to ensure a balanced selection taking into account country characteristics (e.g. geography, size, welfare state regime type) and contextual factors (e.g. level of youth unemployment, ESL, NEET rates). This was meant to represent the broad variety of experiences throughout the European Union. In order to ensure the availability of primary evaluations and evidence, special attention was paid to the existing range of policy measures and existing evaluations in different countries. The final selection included Finland, France, Spain, Italy, Austria, Hungary and Ireland. The selection criteria are depicted in Table 1.

<b>Country characteristics</b>	<b>Labour market context</b>	<b>Education and training</b>
Geographical location (north, south, east and west)	Youth unemployment rate (countries with high and low levels of youth unemployment)	Rate of early school leaving (countries with high and low rates, countries with declining / stable / growing rates)
Country size (small, medium and large Member States)	Youth employment rate (countries with high and low levels of youth activity)	Educational attainment levels (low, medium and high skilled)
Date when joined EU	Youth activity rate (countries with high and low levels of youth employment)	
	NEET rate (countries with high and low NEET rates)	

Table 1 - Country characteristics and contextual factors to inform the selection of countries (Eurofound 2012b)

The second step consisted of choosing the policies to include in the study. While it is often desirable to synthesise evaluations of policies that are most similar in an attempt to compare the comparable, this selection procedure can be unfeasible for international organisations. Their focus is often on the question how to solve a policy problem (in this case ESL) and on presenting a variety of approaches, rather than analysing one specific type of policy in detail. Especially in the area of ESL, reasons of school drop-out are so varied between different sub-groups and

regions that the variety of policy approach reflects this. There is no one-size-fits all solution that is implemented in many member states. For this study, the selection process of the cases was therefore mostly driven by the questions ‘what policies exist, if they are working and what their strengths and weaknesses are’.

The final eight measures selected have very different approaches to tackle the same policy issue. They include both measures that aim to prevent ESL, tackling a variety of risk factors associated with school drop-out and measures that are targeted at reintegrating those young people that have fallen through the preventative net and have left school early. An overview of the policies reviewed can be found in table 2 below.

Preventing Early School Leaving	Reintegrating Early school leavers
Priority Education, France	Production Schools, Austria
Learning Communities, Spain	Springboard, Hungary
Career Start, Finland	Youthreach, Ireland
School Work Alternation, Italy	PCPI, Spain

Table 2 - list of policies included in the study (Eurofound 2012b)

Preventative measures for ESL can take many forms, but generally tackle a number of risk factors that, when cumulated, can lead to young people’s school drop-out. Two of the policies included here are area based policies. **Priority education (FR)** is a French national policy seeking to reduce disparities between school results by helping pupils in the most socially and economically disadvantaged areas to succeed in education. Schools participating in the programme receive 10 – 15% greater financial support than other schools, so they can provide greater pedagogical support, hire teachers and teaching assistants, reduce class sizes, etc. Similarly, **Learning Communities (ES)**, are positioned mostly in low income areas in Spain.

Using a bottom-up approach, they aim to be hubs for pedagogic innovation and involve whole communities in the planning and implementation of activities to foster educational success.

Activities include, for example, interactive group teaching or a 'book club' approach to reading and literacy accompanied by regular meetings between staff, students, parents and the wider school community.

Other policies aiming to prevent ESL focus on critical transition periods in the educational career. **Career Start (FI)**, a mainstream programme providing transition support for young people who have dropped out of school or who did not gain a place in upper secondary VET. Participants design an individual development plan together with their tutor and pursue a range of activities exploring employment and education options. Activities include for example sampling different vocational courses, gaining study, vocational and life skills, and undertaking short periods of workplace training.

**The School Work Alternation Scheme (IT)** offers young people an alternative curriculum to mainstream education providing work-based learning opportunities. The policy was introduced to strengthen the link between school and work. Students aged 15-18 are enabled to pursue their secondary studies by alternating between periods of work and study. Additionally, greater focus in schools is put on labour market related skills.

However, even with the growing focus of effective prevention programmes, there will always be some young people who, for different and often complex reasons, will drop out of the education system early. ESL reintegration measures therefore try to reduce the social and economic costs associated with school drop-out by providing a second chance opportunity for young people to acquire a qualification.

The pilot programme **Springboard (HU)** gives a second chance to young people drop-outs. The programme aims to create a motivating learning environment and to fill any skills gaps that may hinder students' performance when they (re)enter vocational school. This is done by providing an alternative learning environment through teacher training, small classrooms, the design of teaching materials and the development of an innovative learning environment, including purpose-built classrooms and job shadowing opportunities.

The **Initial Qualification Programme (PCPI) (ES)** aims to get young people back into education through a practical and professional oriented course, tailored to their individual needs. These qualifications were introduced as a way of increasing participation in initial vocational education and training (IVET), facilitating the progression from IVET to higher levels of vocational education, and of updating and modernising existing vocational qualifications. The programmes have a practical nature than standard education - students must undertake a minimum of 150 hours of training in a workplace centre or undertake some productive work in companies – which is thought to be more appealing to these students.

Other early school leavers, from more hard-to-reach and vulnerable groups, cannot be 'rushed' in their path back to education or employment and need time to solve their personal issues first.

Thus **Production Schools (AT)** and **Youthreach (IE)** focus on groups of learners with more complex needs, by taking a 'whole person' approach to supporting the young person's learning, career and wider needs. In **Austria, Production schools** are designed help young people gain orientation of their career opportunities. It is targeted at young people who have so far failed to succeed in school or the labour market and who have not identified a clear pathway for their future development. Most offer vocational guidance and the opportunity to try out different practical/vocational skills; the opportunity of short work placements; the ability to catch up on

educational content or prepare for the completion of school leaving certificates; and the offer of socio-pedagogical and psychological support in a supportive environment. In a similar manner, **Youthreach in Ireland** takes an integrated approach to the needs of those unqualified young people who have left full-time education and who find it particularly difficult to gain a secure foothold in the employment market, or to take their place in society as young adults. The programme aims to provide early school leavers with the knowledge, skills and confidence required to participate fully in society and progress to further education, training and employment. Participants are provided with individualised education plans flexible to individual and local needs, career counselling assistance and arrangements for work programme placements and apprenticeships.

As becomes clear through the method of country and case selection international organisations often have to employ selection techniques that deviate from those established as best practice in the research world. A strong focus on the policy problem rather than a specific type of policy, the reactivity to stakeholder demands and the fact that international organisations need to cover a range of Member States and languages in their studies can lead to very different methodological choices than we are used to in academia.

### *Data Collection*

The base data of the synthesis stemmed from existing national level evaluations, other policy documents, programme documentation and administrative data and interviews with key stakeholders involved in the planning and delivery of the selected measure as well as “critical friends” external to the policy in each country. Making use of local knowledge, context and language skills, this stage of the research was carried out by country experts (independent labour market/ education researchers) with the necessary language and context expertise.

This approach aimed at gathering the most comprehensive evidence base available for the meta-evaluation by triangulating factual ‘written’ evidence with the insights of interviews. While the interviewed stakeholders – managers or representatives of each measure - were to provide factual information on targets, objectives and performance of the policy as well as an assessment of strengths and weaknesses, external stakeholders - ‘critical friends’ - to the policy were invited to give a more critical review of the measures.

This base data was collected in the form of country reports outlining the aims, objectives, activities, outputs, outcomes and impact of each measure, as well as an overall analysis of their effectiveness and lessons learned.

#### *Evaluation framework*

Any evaluation exercise will inevitably have to answer the question ‘what to measure’ (Sefton et al 2002) to determine the ‘success’ of a policy. For the frame of this study, it was decided to focus on those dimensions that were most likely to be available in national level evaluations. For every policy under review, the study assessed if it had produced the desired output, e.g. if it had engaged the desired number of students or engaged the planned number of schools in a measure, and if it had produced the desired outcome, e.g. the number/ share of beneficiaries that were reintegrated in further education or the number / share of participants finding employment or moving on to another ‘positive destination’. A measure was seen as successful, when its ‘status’ met or exceeded the target specifications (Stockmann 2011: 54)

This is a basic evaluation framework, which has a straightforward logic and a relatively simple execution. Given that policy makers presumably tend to set their targets rather too low than too high, it can be seen as the smallest denominator of evaluation: If a policy is not performing well according to its own standards, then it is likely not to perform well overall. Problems with this

logic arise when policies set unclear targets, there is incongruence between declared and pursued targets and if the target-focus leads to the ignorance of unintended effects (Stockmann 2011: 38 f.).

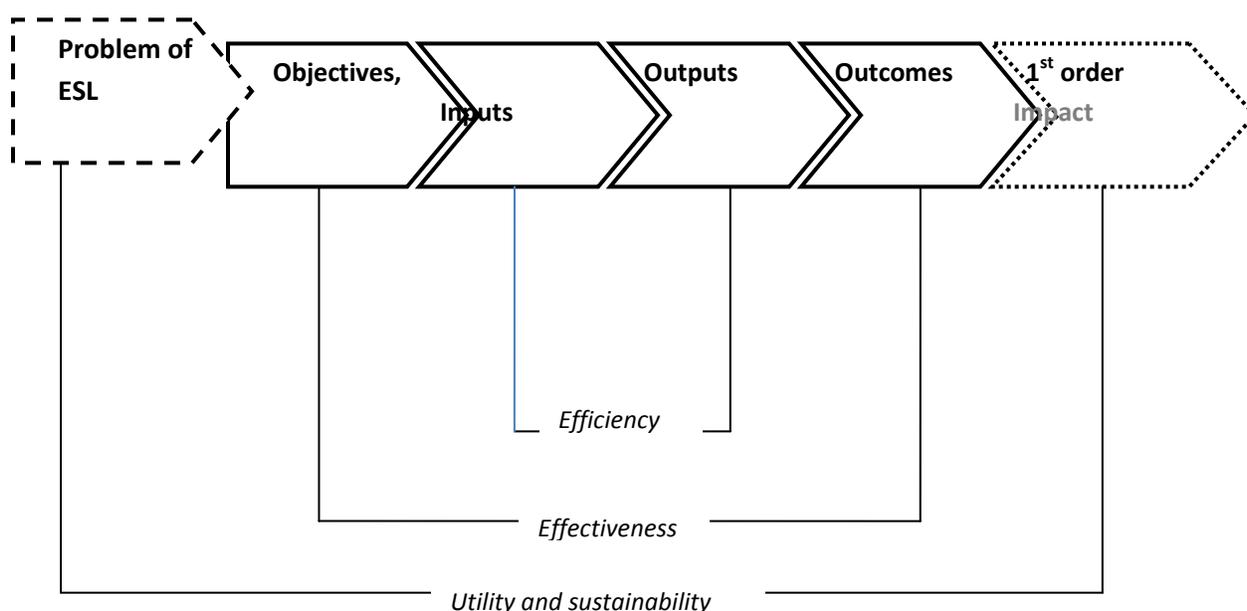


Figure 1 - evaluation logic

Naturally, there are other dimensions that can be investigated when evaluating policies, one of the most important being the impact of a policy (a more comprehensive evaluation logic is displayed in figure 1). The focus on output and outcome targets for this study was very much driven by considerations of data availability and comparability, as the global impact of a policy will be very different given country specific conditions, e.g. it might be more difficult to lower

ESL in countries facing a number of other structural constraints. Moreover, robust data on what a measure was able to contribute to diminish the issue of early school leaving was not available.

### *Findings*

Generally speaking, we found that the quality of primary evaluations on member state level and therefore the evidence of policy effectiveness was meager. Many policies did not set themselves operational or outcome targets from the outset. If this was the case, the study team aimed to identify the aims and objectives of each measure and gathered missing information through research. However, without outlining what the policies were trying to achieve, it often proved difficult to assess whether they have achieved it. Triangulating primary evaluations with stakeholder interviews and other programme documentation proved to be a helpful way to address such knowledge gaps, but was not able to clarify all open points.

Firstly, we found that output targets for the measures analysed typically referred to targets such as the number of young people engaged overall / in a specific target group or the number of places to be created for a specific training measure. As output targets are relatively easy to measure or track with administrative data we found that five of the policy measures under review set themselves operational targets on a national level, while two measures set targets at the local level without national oversight (School Work Alternation, IT, Learning Communities, ES). Only one policy measures did not set itself any operational targets (Priority education, FR).

In general, those policies that set themselves operational targets reached their target or exceeded it. This is especially true for policies aiming to reintegrate early school leavers, as much of the information on preventative measures is missing. In general, the policies seemed to be able to engage the targeted number of people or were oversubscribed, only one policy (Springboard,

HU) did not fully reach its own targets. Policies were also generally successfully in engaging those young people they considered their target group, i.e. young school drop-outs or young people facing the greatest difficulty in mainstream education. This indicates that there is strong demand for policies tackling ESL. In our study, reintegration measures are better in setting and achieving targets, possibly due to a clearer mandate – to reintegrate young people – than the preventative measures. Table 3 displays our findings on output targets in a schematic way.

Name of the measure	Operational targets	Were operational targets achieved?	Comments / details
<b>ESL preventive</b>			
Career Start, FI	Yes	Data not yet available	No targets for the pilot phase, but an ambitious target has now been set for the future, since the programme was mainstreamed
Priority Education, FR	No	-	No targets set (the number and size of geographical areas covered, i.e. the list of schools involved, depends on objective criteria/indicators)
Learning Communities, ES	Only at local level	Data not available	Individual schools as 'learning communities' (incl. teachers, parents, students and the wider community) decide on goals for their own school community.
School Work Alternation, IT	Only at regional / organiser level	Yes	No targets set at national level, however, targets were set for measures coordinated by the Chambers of Commerce and they have been exceeded. I.e., initial aim was to engage 5,000 students per year, and in 2010, 19,594 students participated in measures promoted by the Chambers. All of the indicators have registered an increase over the years, except the number of provinces involved.
<b>ESL reintegration</b>			
Production Schools, AT	Yes	Yes	Targets are implicit in the capacity of current schools. Places at production schools are oversubscribed and further schools are being planned / constructed.
Springboard, HU	Yes	Partially	Target was to engage 19 schools to be engaged (one in each county), with an average class size of 12-16 pupils. Target for number of schools not achieved (15 schools applied), but target for class sizes achieved (average class size of 15).
Youthreach, IE	Yes	Yes	'Target' is the number of places to be filled, which is around 6,000. Participation is in line with the number of places.
PCPI, ES	Yes	Yes	Target was to increase the number of PCPIs to at least 80,000 for the academic year 2010/11: 80,008 students enrolled in these programmes in 2010/2011.

Table 3 - Performance of youth employment measures in achieving intended outputs (Eurofound 2012b)

Going beyond participation numbers, outcome targets are much more complex. They are closer linked to the actual effectiveness of a policy measure, as they go beyond the sole participation in the measure as a measure of success, but refer to an effect of the measure on the individual

participant. Outcome targets can refer to the percentage of participants who achieved a qualification or secured a subsequent job placement. Bringing in the effectiveness of a measure makes the setting of outcome targets a much more ‘political’ issue. Our analysis shows that many measures avoid setting such targets – either being unable to measure outcome targets or being reluctant to be pinpointed on a specific performance of their programme - in fact, only one policy in our sample set itself quantitative outcome targets (Career Start, FI) on national level.

Although most measures did not set quantifiable targets, many of them monitor their achievements systematically with tracking data, evaluations or ad-hoc surveys of beneficiaries. Our analysis indicates mixed results concerning if these policies have reached their explicit or implicit outcomes targets. Clear positive outcomes are noted for four programmes (Career Start, FI, Youthreach, IE, Production Schools, AT and Springboard, HU), while one measure indicates mixed results (Priority Education, FR) and little can be said about some measures due to the lack of comprehensive data (Learning Communities, ES, School Work Alternation, IT, PCPI, ES).

The collected stakeholder opinions can be seen as complementary to the outcome evaluation, but should be read with the caveat of subjectivity in mind. See table 4 for detailed outcome assessment of the individual policies.

Name of the measure and overview of specific objectives	Overview of the success of the measures, on the basis of research / evaluation / monitoring data	A short overview of stakeholder opinions
ESL preventive		
<b>Career Start, FI</b> No quantitative targets for the pilot phase, but in the future 90 % of beneficiaries are expected to	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Data not yet available</i></p> During the three year pilot phase, successful outcomes were found for around 70% of participants who had taken up a study or training place or found a job within one year of completing Career Start (Jäppinen, 2010). Thus the future target is more ambitious.	Overall, broad, tripartite support for the measure. Seen as a policy for which there is considerable demand as drop-out rates from VET are higher than from schools of general upper secondary education, and the measure is seen as adding value to the existing support mechanisms, rather than duplicating work of others.

Name of the measure and overview of specific objectives	Overview of the success of the measures, on the basis of research / evaluation / monitoring data	A short overview of stakeholder opinions
<p>move on to further studies (80 % continue to a VET course and further 10 % take up other studies)</p>		
<p><b>Priority Education, FR:</b> To help pupils who face the greatest difficulties to succeed in education in specific socially and economically deprived areas, with a particular focus on the acquisition core competences.</p>	<p><i>Mixed results</i></p> <p>A stocktaking report on the RAR network, the core of the Priority Education system until 2011 (<i>Ministere de l'education nationale, 2010</i>) found that over the period between 2006/07 and 2009/10, progress against 21 indicators had been stable or positive for all of the indicators, except for the share of pupils who master basic competences in French and Maths at the end of lower secondary education. However the gaps in performance between RAR and the rest of the education system have been widening in relation to some indicators. The net impact of RAR not clearly identified.</p>	<p>The views of interviewed stakeholders are mixed. The measure produces many positive outcomes, but it is the view of many that resources are spread too thinly to make sufficient impact. Calls have also been made to make the measure more targeted at students with most complex needs</p>
<p><b>Learning Communities, ES:</b> For most Learning Communities the outcome related goals include reducing drop-out rates, improving the school atmosphere, reducing discrimination and enhancing community cohesion.</p>	<p><i>No 'whole programme results', but positive outcomes reported by all participating schools</i></p> <p>Learning Communities have not yet been formally evaluated, however all individual Communities have reported positive results, including significant improvements in academic performance and improved relations between members of the educational community (Elboj and Niemela, 2010; Garcia, Duque, and Mircea, 2010; and Prieto and Santa Cruz, 2010). For example, a longitudinal study of the La Paz Learning Community shows that the average reading competence went up from 1.4 to 2.9 (out of 5) between 2006 and 2008 and absenteeism dropped from 30 % in 2006-2007 to 10 % in 2007-2008.</p>	<p>The measure regarded in a very positive light by those stakeholders who are familiar with it (the measure is more known in specific regions, and not all stakeholders at national know the programme). Interviewed stakeholders emphasized that actions are regarded as universal and transferable to any context, and, due extensive research carried out, actions are proven to improve results.</p>
<p><b>School Work Alternation, IT:</b> To enable students over 15 years of age to do their secondary studies alternating periods of work and study.</p>	<p><i>Assessment difficult due to lack of data</i></p> <p>Although targets were set for the number of young people to take part in measures promoted by the Chambers of Commerce, it does not appear that a target was set for the outcomes these young people should achieve (e.g. what proportion should acquire a qualification, reduction in ESL), and there is no specific data is available on student outcomes.</p>	<p>Stakeholders stressed that there is anecdotal evidence from teachers that the measure have succeeded in re-motivating students, strengthening their 'employability' skills and prevented drop-outs. Critics stress that the measure has been successful only in a small number of regions. Employers would prefer longer work placement periods and challenges have been faced in convincing some teachers to engage in the measure</p>

Name of the measure and overview of specific objectives	Overview of the success of the measures, on the basis of research / evaluation / monitoring data	A short overview of stakeholder opinions
<b>ESL reintegration</b>		
<p><b>Production Schools, AT:</b> The overall aim is the (re)integration of young people into school or the labour market, and reduce social exclusion.</p>	<p><i>Positive outcomes</i></p> <p>Around a third (30 %) of beneficiaries enter employment (17 % in the open labour market and 13 % in employment supported by the PES) immediately after their time in the school. Around 30 % classified unemployed and a further 30 % 'out of the labour force', which includes young people who have (re)-entered the education system, as well as those who have exited education or the labour market entirely. The remainder enters other PES training measures. A year after participation integration rates increase significantly, with a total of 50 % in employment, 15 % unemployed and 10 % participating in a qualification measure, with the rest out of the labour force (Bergmann and Schelepa, 2011). Given the nature of the target group (young people with no or low qualifications, low motivation and often associated social or health problems), the integration rates are considered as 'very positive'.</p>	<p>Stakeholders see the measure filling a real gap in support for young people and regard the combined offer of personalised social and pedagogical support offered with training, learning and practical tasks and experience, as a real strength. Another strength relating to the 'stabilisation' of the position of many vulnerable young people, is the group support and day to day structure offered to them. Some flexibility in the length of placements could benefit the measure, as would wider referral system and outreach work.</p>
<p><b>Springboard, HU:</b> Possible outcomes for students are include continuing in the ninth grade of VET as stated in the initial plan (thus reduce ESL), enrolling in 10th or 11th grade of VET, enrolment into adult training, going directly into employment.</p>	<p><i>Positive outcomes</i></p> <p>In the first year, 89 % of the participants continued education after completing the programme, 7 % found employment and only 4 % were unemployed (OECD, 2011). A follow-up study then found that a year later, 67 % of the students for whom follow-up data could be collected were still in education or training (Magyar Gallup Intézet Kft. 2011). In addition, drop-out rates were less than half of the average of 'type 1' vocational schools (14 % versus 30 %) and even improved in the second cohort (to 11 %). This considered to be 'a significant achievement', given that the measure targeted students who practically all had a history of drop-out.</p>	<p>Widely regarded as a successful measure, with the good results brought by new methods such as individual development plans, reduction of class size, long training of teaching staff and transformation of the learning environment.</p>
<p><b>Youthreach, IE:</b> Main goal to provide early school leavers with the knowledge, skills</p>	<p><i>Positive outcomes</i></p> <p>An evaluation found that 'practically all learners were experiencing success to some degree in the centres visited, whether from an academic, personal or social viewpoint' (Evaluation Support and Research Unit, 2010). The same evaluation also found that the learner</p>	<p>Youthreach praised for providing positive learning experiences for young people who have experienced failures in the past, for the positive and encouraging learning environment, for good relationships with teachers, for involving beneficiaries in improvement efforts, for well-qualified, dedicated teachers from a variety of professional</p>

Name of the measure and overview of specific objectives	Overview of the success of the measures, on the basis of research / evaluation / monitoring data	A short overview of stakeholder opinions
and confidence required to participate fully in society and progress to further E & T and employment.	destinations of learners taking part the year before the evaluation were as follows: 46 % still active in the programme, 15 % in employment, 11 % unemployed, 4 % in FAS training centre, 6 in further education and 18 % other. Earlier study concluded that 61% go on to further education, training or employment. Early leavers are estimated to be between 20% and 30%. Of those who leave early, 32% leave for employment or to go to other further education or training (Forfas, 2010).	and vocational backgrounds, etc. Progression from the centres to promising options was identified as a challenge.
<b>PCPI, ES:</b> To facilitate labour integration or education reintegration of young people who have dropped out of school.	<i>Assessment difficult due to lack of data, but indications of positive outcomes</i>  Although a target was set for the number of places to be offered, no targets were set for the outcomes. There has not been a formal evaluation of PCPI. For example, one stakeholder interviewed for this study indicated that according to data collected from a number of centres, 60 % of participants obtained a professional qualification, 20 % obtained the Diploma of Secondary Education and the remainder did not continue in education / training.	Although the general perception among interviewed stakeholders is that PCPIs are having positive results because they are seen as getting drop-outs / excluded young people back into education or work, the labour market relevance of the training has been questioned and it is considered as an area with room for improvement.

Table 4 - Performance of youth employment measures in achieving intended outcomes (Eurofound 2012b)

Given the lack of comprehensive data, it is difficult to come to generalizable conclusions on ‘what works and under what circumstances’ in early school leaving in the frame of this study.

Possibly the most critical finding of our study was the lack of evaluations on national level.

Evaluation capabilities will have to be developed on the national level, not only for greater accountability, but also to enable learning from an EU perspective.

### Conclusions and lessons learnt

This paper presented a meta evaluation on ESL policies as a case study on how international organisations pursue the synthesis of primary evaluations to support policy makers, practitioners, social partners and researchers in the conception, planning and implementation of policies. The

project faced several specific challenges, which may be encountered by other international organisations when conducting such studies, and was able to identify some ‘lessons learnt’:

First and foremost, meta evaluations rely heavily on the quality of national level evaluations. However, sound evaluations at Member State level are generally sparse. While some Member States might have advanced systems in place to ensure accountability through evaluation, other Member States’ systems are much less established, reflecting very different evaluation cultures. International organisations do here face the specific challenge of case and country selection as they have to provide a balanced picture without favouring those countries where the best evidence is available. In this specific case, a different country selection, e.g. a focus on Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian countries could have allowed us to draw stronger conclusions due more robust evaluations conducted in these countries. However, having to facilitate knowledge exchange throughout the European Union, such a biased focus is an improbable solution for an international organisation.

Even if international organisations find that primary evaluations are available, they will have to make restrictive choices on the dimensions and indicators against which policies will be evaluated. The evaluation framework cannot always include the most valuable dimensions, e.g. impact, as evidence on these dimensions might not be available across the number of policies under review. In this study, for example, it would have been desirable to discuss the actual sustained impact of the policies on the lives of young (potential) school drop-outs and the global impact of the policies on the issue of ESL

Most importantly, international organisations tend to focus on policy issues rather than specific type of policies. Stakeholders of international organisations may be more interested in how to

solve a problem than to gain in-depth insights on very specific policies. This raises the issue of comparability of the policies included in such studies. While it may be possible to identify success factors and effectiveness when comparing several very similar policies, it will be nearly impossible to draw robust conclusions for diverse policies tackling one specific issue. In this case for example, the study was embedded in a much larger project on policies tackling youth unemployment. In this frame a range of varied policies were included in the meta evaluation. While it was possible to deduct a number of overarching conclusions on how to tackle youth unemployment, it was more problematic to make detailed ‘what works’ claims about the specific policies of ESL.

In the course of this project, we have learnt that some of the shortcomings could be alleviated by both the reliance on a network of country analysis and the triangulation of the available research with stakeholder interviews. The network of country analysts was able to get into the linguistic and contextual challenges of the countries under review and enabled to lift local knowledge to a supranational level. They were also able to complement primary evaluations with stakeholder interviews. Especially when evaluations are sparse, stakeholder interviews – both with factual and critical voices – have proven to be a valuable input for the meta evaluation on ESL.

Finally, although meta evaluations do face many challenges, they can still prove advantageous for the purpose of supporting evidence-informed policy making. Despite its methodological shortcomings, this exercise helped to identify good practices, point towards ‘what works in what circumstances’ and shed light on gaps in national level evaluations. Not least for this reason, meta evaluations and its methodological implications for IOs should continue to be debated by researchers and the institutions.



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