

# RESL.eu

Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe

Policy Brief for National and  
Regional Level Policy Makers

POLICY BRIEF 2

## Policy Brief for National and Regional Level Policy Makers

### Main Authors

Maurice Crul  
Elif Keskiner

### Authors of Country Pages

**University of Antwerp, Belgium (Project Coordinator)**  
Ward Nouwen, Lore Van Praag, Rut Van Caudenberg,  
Noel Clycq, Christiane Timmerman

**Middlesex University, UK**  
Alessio D'Angelo, Magdolna Lörinc, Neil Kaye

**University of Sheffield, UK**  
Louise Ryan

**University of Porto, Portugal**  
Helena C. Araújo, Sofia A. Santos, Cosmin I. Nada,  
Eunice Macedo, Alexandra O. Doroftei



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**Stockholm University, Sweden**  
Alireza Behtoui, Isabella Strömberg,  
Marie Björklöf

**Erasmus University Rotterdam, Netherlands**  
Maurice Crul, Elif Keskiner, Talitha Stam

**University of Warsaw, Poland**  
Hanna Tomaszewska-Pękała, Paulina Marchlik,  
Anna Wrona

**Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain**  
Sílvia Carrasco, Laia Narciso, Isidoro Ruiz-Haro

## Executive Summary

**At the macro level the RESL.eu research identified two main school system characteristics that affect pupils' risk of early school leaving (ESL) and school disengagement: tracking and compulsory school age.**

Our findings from educational institutions in high-risk urban areas revealed a group of at-risk pupils with learning or behavioural problems at the bottom of the educational hierarchy in each of the countries we studied. In European urban areas, many of these students are from low-educated and/or migrant families. They are frequently concentrated in the vocational tracks in stratified school systems or in vocational programs or tracks in upper secondary schools in (medium) comprehensive school systems (See DG EAC 38/04). In some educational systems, such as the Netherlands and Flanders (the northern part of Belgium), pupils are assigned to educational tracks at the start of secondary school and can change tracks over the course of their educational career. In countries with comprehensive school systems, such as Sweden or the UK, it is not common practice to officially track pupils. Young people are, however, put into different ability groups in upper secondary school. Countries like Portugal and Spain, assign pupils to vocational tracks, programs or schools at the end of lower secondary school. These different ways of tracking present different challenges for both schools and pupils. In general, we found that the main benefit of late tracking across educational systems was that it could help pupils to remain at school for longer and encourage them to pursue some form of post-secondary or higher education. Early tracking practices often result in a larger concentration of children with learning and behavioural problems in the same classroom. This leads to teachers being overburdened and unable to give adequate individual support to pupils who generally need more support than other children. Finally, we found that educational systems that track pupils at an early phase of their educational career often have strongly developed apprenticeship and internship programs which benefit young people by increasing their engagement with school, emphasizing the value of education and by reducing the number of early school leavers. Thus, our results indicate that tracking practices have different risks and benefits when it comes to keeping pupils at school long enough to obtain a school-leaving qualification.

Similarly, setting a compulsory school-leaving age also has its pros and cons. Setting the compulsory school age as low as 15 or 16 years often pushes youngsters with learning and/or behavioural problems out of school before they pass the ESL threshold, as defined by the European Commission. This used to be particularly common in Portugal but our country comparison found that this phenomenon is

mainly prevalent in Spain nowadays. On the other hand, educational systems that do not allow pupils (who have often repeated classes and are already older than their classmates) to leave school until they pass the ESL threshold often have to deal with pupils who are unmotivated and unwilling to put any effort into their schoolwork. This is not only a problem for the individual pupil but also for the classroom environment.

What would an ideal macro level school system look like based on the above overview? As we have already said, there is no simple solution because each solution creates its own problems and poses different risks with regard to early school leaving. Comprehensive school systems have the advantage of keeping children together in the same classroom. This may help pupils to develop their educational and professional aspirations and does not expose them to the risk of being put in a track that does not necessarily match their skills, expertise and personal interests. The advantage of vocationally-oriented school systems is that they help youngsters to make a smoother transition to the labour market as long as they provide high-quality apprenticeship places and internships.

Pupils who struggle to remain in more rigid school systems may benefit greatly from flexible pathways that enable them to gain certificates at different speeds and offer more intensive apprenticeship programs. Another crucial element to prevent or tackle early school leaving seems to be a holistic care system which simultaneously addresses learning and behavioural problems as well as issues stemming from poverty and living in a disadvantaged environment. It is only useful to raise the compulsory school-leaving age to eighteen if pupils are offered flexible arrangements that motivate them to stay in education or training. Examples of flexible arrangements include work-based learning programs and other programs that give pupils experience in the labour market, often accompanied by some form of remuneration. If such measures are not in place, raising the compulsory school-leaving age may be disruptive for other pupils. Furthermore, teachers must be made aware of their role in tackling early school leaving and provided with ongoing professional training. Incentives to improve parental involvement could also prove effective in combatting early school leaving.

Finally, we should note that there are other factors that complicate the positive and negative effects associated with tracking practices and the compulsory school-leaving age. In Sweden, Belgium and Poland, schools are often confronted with highly-segregated populations in terms of their pupils' migration and/or socio-economic background. This situation is fuelled by high levels of neighbourhood segregation and the fact that parents are free to choose which school to send their children to. We also noted that the macro-level structure is often not the sole problem: rather it is the funding that a program needs to be successful. We have

observed that pupils often receive individual guidance that is tailored more closely to their needs in alternative learning arenas. Implementing such measures in regular secondary schools would require substantially more funding. However, the costs of school failure and early school leaving far exceed the costs of targeting at-risk pupils more intensively within a regular school situation.

## | Flanders (Belgium)

### Studying School Disengagement and ESL in Flemish Education

As young people at risk of ESL in Flanders are concentrated in urban vocational schools, we oversampled students in these at-risk educational contexts. Most of the students we studied have repeated grades and have moved from the more academically to more vocationally oriented institutions, commonly perceived as ‘downward’ track mobility. The class groups in vocational education, therefore, often hold students from different age groups and those who have previously followed different pathways and, thus, come into the class group with different levels of knowledge and abilities, as well as varying experiences of failure. In general, the school climate in vocational tracks is characterised by a higher number of less engaged students, and a higher level of classroom misbehaviour and other disciplinary problems, such as peer victimisation. These features have been linked to systemic characteristics, such as early tracking and high levels of segregation, in previous research on Flemish secondary education. Within this research context, we studied the processes of school disengagement, which can potentially lead to early school leaving.

### Protective Factors in High Risk Educational Contexts

Despite these structural features of the Flemish educational system, and its consequences for school and track composition and classroom interaction, a number of protective factors could be identified in the RESL.eu research. Schools that strongly invest in discipline and address peer victimisation seem to be the most successful in supporting student engagement. Positive teacher-student relations can serve as an additional protective factor against school disengagement and ESL. In these vulnerable educational contexts, students’ relationships with teachers are crucial for their sense of belonging and behavioural engagement in education. Negative peer pressure – linked to a high concentration of socially disadvantaged students who have experienced educational failure – can, at least in part, be countered by positive teacher relations to increase their feelings of school belonging and overall engagement. A positive finding is that most students we interviewed continue to see education as a way to improve their success in future life. This is also true for most of their parents. Schools often interpret the fact that parents who are less active in communicating or who participate less in formal school activities, are less interested in their children’s education. Our findings, however, show that it is the distance parents experience towards teachers and other school staff that explains their involvement in school, not their belief in the institution of education. This finding indicates that this is an important extra resource for schools to build on. If schools can tap into the positive attitudes of students and parents towards education, we would see a positive effect on student school engagement and outcomes.

### Countering Educational Disruption in Flemish Secondary Education

The educational pathways of many at-risk students are characterised by disruption (i.e., grade repetition and track/school/course changes). The outcomes of our study show that some of these disruptions have had additional negative effects on student engagement. The relatively high levels of grade retention and track changes result in non-linear and intermittent school careers, which can lead to feelings of failure and stigmatisation. Furthermore, grade retention, especially when delayed by more than one year, can lead youngsters to feel ‘too old’ to be in secondary education, which was often expressed as a reason to drop out. This calls for schools to (re) think the policy of repeating classes and early tracking, and to increase guidance and support during educational transitions.

Our findings also question the rigid structure of the educational system and call for flexibility in order to adapt to the needs of increasing groups of vulnerable students who do not feel they (manage to) fit into this system. In alternative learning pathways provided outside of formal secondary education, which are often stigmatised for being second or last-chance options, we often find higher levels of institutional flexibility that allows students to better combine school with work and family. Moreover, the staff is more open and caring towards the student’s voice and individual needs. These findings beg the question: shouldn’t such forms of institutional flexibility and more caring relationships in the arena of alternative learning be introduced more broadly into formal secondary education?

## Studying School Disengagement and ESL in Poland

Poland has the lowest ESL rates amongst the countries we studied, while having the highest percentages of truancy and the lowest levels of school engagement. This is partly due to the fact that Poland has a comprehensive school system and compulsory education ends at age 18, leading to most pupils passing the ESL threshold. However, this does not necessarily mean that pupils cannot be labelled as potentially at risk. The low ESL numbers have resulted in 'pupils at risk' not being considered a priority for educational policy. Those pupils who are at risk are concentrated in certain schools. In Poland, we also found large differences between schools for truancy, misbehaviour of students, peer victimisation and lack of school engagement. The reason for this is school segregation at the upper secondary level, mainly between vocational and general (academic) tracks. This is strongly linked to the socioeconomic background characteristics of pupils because selection to upper secondary schools is based on results from the previous educational level. Neoliberal reforms leading to free school choice has contributed to growing school segregation, which is especially visible at the upper secondary-school level in big cities. Hence, a high level of at-risk pupils are found in basic vocational schools, where mostly young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are concentrated. These schools also suffer from a high level of stigmatisation. Since school staff and teachers are unaware and unfamiliar with the concept of ESL, there are not many policies directed at pupils at risk.

## Protective factors in High Risk Educational Contexts

Schools that invest in strengthening the development of a positive and supportive school environment, as well as in tackling peer victimisation, are more successful in fostering school engagement. Our findings also point to the important role of teachers. Amongst the countries we studied, Polish students reported the lowest level of perceived social and teacher support. Mostly focused on their role of transferring knowledge, teachers seem to be less equipped to provide (social) support, especially for students at risk. Similar to Spain, teachers seem to be unaware of their significance in this role; hence, improving teachers' awareness can help enhance their role and build positive teacher-student relations. Since the choice of type of upper secondary school has a strong impact on students' trajectories, motivations and aspirations, investing in career guidance opportunities must be improved and cooperation should be fostered between schools and family, social care and labour market institutions in helping youth at risk of ESL.

## Repairs within the Polish Education System

Since majority of the risk lies in basic vocational tracks, further improvement and adaptation of vocational education and training to labour market requirements could be an immediate solution. Promotion of flexible, intensive, short-term vocational pathways for youngsters and young adults could also help young people achieve stable transitions to the labour market or reconcile education and work. Alternative learning pathways we studied in Poland offer more individualized approach e.g. in case of Youth Socio-therapy Centres an Individual Educational-Therapeutic Programme (IETP) is created for each student. There are more specialists available on-site and the staff is better prepared and equipped in competences to work with youth with various challenges (e.g. SEN, mental health problems etc.). Combining education and the labour market experience is also emphasised, i.e. in Voluntary Labour Corps. One of the solutions we think might be interesting is the program acceleration (students learn 2-years instead of 3 and have more classes per week) to reduce the time between graduating from lower secondary school and entering the labour market. The main challenge for alternative education pathways, similarly to basic vocational education, is the negative social perception and the risk of stigmatization of their students and/or graduates.

## Inspiring measures from other countries

Compared to countries like Sweden, life-long learning and alternative pathways to education are still weak. Vocational education could learn from the example of the Netherlands, with regards to better cooperation between schools and the labour market. In a similar manner to Spain, Poland also suffers from a lack of awareness about school disengagement and ESL in schools, especially amongst teachers. Improving the quality of student support and counselling in schools, and educating staff on its importance for young people at risk of ESL are the main challenges.

### Studying School Disengagement and ESL in Portugal

Being amongst the countries with the highest ESL rates, Portugal has achieved a significant decrease in its rates thanks to treating ESL as a priority, and with comprehensive long-term educational reforms. These reforms include evidence-based initiatives, such as the extension of compulsory education until 18 years of age, or grade 12, alternative education pathways (ISCED 3), the recent implementation of teacher-tutors in schools to attend to individual students' needs, and curricular flexibility allowing schools to define 25% of their curriculum. Beginning in 2015, with a new socialist government, more attention has been given to educational equality and inclusion. The analysis shows that current ESL rates are linked to grade repetition and academic failure, as well as to the need for better organisational measures (including early warning systems and teacher awareness for intervention measures). In Portugal, upper secondary education (from 15 to 18 years of age) comprises three types of track: general, technical/vocational and artistic. Our study shows that vulnerable students are mainly located in the vocational track, where they feel socially stigmatised. The recent financial crisis affected Portugal in very serious ways, and social deprivation of the families of at-risk pupils pushed many youngsters into low-paid jobs. Many others do not value education and experience school disaffection, being demotivated by high youth unemployment rates.

### Protective factors in High Risk Educational Contexts

The sharp decrease in ESL rates constitutes a strong foundation on which to build, and to tackle the wide diversity of issues that negatively affect students. Teacher social support was more emphasised amongst young adults from alternative learning arenas as a significant protective factor. Parental involvement emerged in all educational settings as another important protective factor for improving study behaviour, showing that many poorly educated parents do support the learning trajectories of their children.

### Repair measures within the Portuguese School System

In Portugal, in recent years, greater autonomy for schools has given them more flexibility to develop support measures related to study behaviour, according to their specific needs. Good examples are the students' ombudsman in which teachers and older students provide holistic support to new students in need of protection, as well as the class advisor, or the social cohesion group. Parental involvement is significant in tackling school disengagement. Portugal has implemented political measures that encourage parental involvement in school decision-making, as members of educational bodies. Significant diversification of the education system,

offered both inside and outside mainstream school, has been shown to be a factor of attraction in keeping at-risk young adults in school, as well as reintegrating them. As shown by our data, greater flexibility and diversity of dynamics, courses, and teaching and learning methodologies attract youngsters to alternative learning arenas, motivating them to re-engage in education.

### Inspiring measures from other countries

Two inspiring measures used in other countries that could be applied to the Portuguese case – if implemented in accordance with local specificities – are, firstly, the inclusion team, a UK initiative in which several relevant figures for the wellbeing of students seek solutions on a case-by-case basis, and, secondly, dividing students into small groups rather than classes, a Swedish measure in which a mentor is assigned to pupils. This could be particularly beneficial in Portugal, where teachers are frequently burdened with overcrowded classes.

## Studying School Disengagement and ESL in Spain

Of all countries in our study, Spain still has the highest percentage of early school leavers despite its decline from 25% to 20% in the last four years. In Spain compulsory schooling ends at age sixteen, at the end of lower secondary education (ISCED 2) and there are no specific measures to keep students in education afterwards. Problems related to ESL seemed to be concentrated in the transition to upper secondary education and in the first years of academic and VET tracks. About one in every four students does not graduate from compulsory schooling and this becomes a systemic barrier to move on to upper secondary education. Pupils from low income families and from migrant families are overrepresented among those who do not pass compulsory education and can only take out-of-school training programs with difficulty to integrate in official education. Austerity measures resulting in cuts and severe reduction of resources in education often forces schools to select students who are most likely to succeed instead of those most at-risk (in-need) for extra support measures. Public schools who serve the most vulnerable pupils actually have suffered from the most severe budget cuts and experience the highest teacher turnover. This results in pupils repeating classes and dropping out of the vocational programmes altogether. Finally, the existing offer of on the job training programmes and also of many vocational tracks does not currently provide an adequate answer to the needs of the young people at risk in Spain. Real second chance opportunities are missing, and existing measures are not harmonised in a coherent way to serve youngster at risk.

## Protective factors in High Risk Educational Contexts

Based on our qualitative and quantitative data we have identified certain protective factors. Our findings demonstrate the importance of teachers. Paradoxically, the high ESL rates in Spain go hand in hand with high perceived teacher support and students show high aspirations. Youngsters in out-of-school compensatory programmes are also highly satisfied both with teachers and their more personalized and global approaches. But our study showed that teachers are not aware of their significance as key agents in tackling ESL. Guidance and orientation by teachers in lower secondary school is insufficient hardly including personalized monitoring.

Hence raising teachers' awareness and training them in up-to-date teaching and counselling methods with youngsters and their families would make a difference. Practical issues like offering flexible timing of family meetings and alternative communication strategies can enhance the participation of families both in compulsory and upper secondary education.

## Repair measures within the Spanish School System

As is clear from the description in the diagnose paragraph the main problem is concentrated in the last years of lower secondary education and the transitions to upper secondary schools and vocational programmes. To be able to tackle the issue at stake does not necessarily require structural reforms but primarily asks for extra investment that would give the teachers more time for personal guidance of students and ensure universal access to vocational tracks and out-of-school training programmes for all the youngsters at risk. Our findings show the value of alternative learning arenas and how these can repair some of the failures of regular education, although currently alternative learning pathways in Spain explicitly aiming to reduce ESL, in practice tend to foster labour market integration. Disaggregated data on ESL and on return rates to education should be collected and available to monitor the impact of policies implemented.

## Inspiring measures from other countries

Due to austerity measures and financial cuts in the system vocational education programmes seemed much more marginalized compared to countries like the Netherlands and Belgium. Apprenticeship systems that provide at risk youth a chance to combine study with gaining work experiences should be expanded. Compared to countries like Sweden, second chance education or alternative pathways are also underdeveloped. Therefore, it seems reasonable to suggest reforms in the conditions for graduation in lower secondary education while ensuring alternative pathways to reengage into further education and training.



### Studying School Disengagement and ESL in Sweden

ESL percentages in Sweden are relatively low, yet our findings demonstrate that many Swedish students demonstrate low school engagement, and thus are at risk of becoming ESLs. Our findings show that problems are more concentrated in certain schools, i.e., those, which due to the school reforms from the 1990s onwards, have become socioeconomic and ethnically segregated. These schools do not have an appropriate environment and necessary resources to serve the already vulnerable students. Increasing numbers of quality-education-conscious middle-class parents have already removed their children from these schools, considering them to be inferior. The parents who choose to leave their children in segregated schools are, like their offspring, less able and less confident to 'voice' their discontent and have fewer inner resources to improve their situation.

### Protective factors in High Risk Educational Contexts

In highly segregated schools, teacher support and student involvement in organisations, such as anti-bullying groups, school magazines and student associations, were found to be of great importance for developing a positive attitude towards school and increasing school engagement. Many of the Swedish participants reported that support from teachers had made them re-evaluate their aspirations and become more motivated to complete their upper secondary school qualification.

Schools that have been successful in involving parents actively in parent associations, and those which have been able to forge effective connections with civil society organisations in the neighbourhood, have increased student school engagement.

### Repair measures within the Swedish School System

The Swedish educational system provides good opportunities for second-chance learning in adult education. We found that even those students who had experienced failure in the past were more likely to succeed after finding an educational path that was more suited to their individual needs, and giving them more self-confidence and self-esteem. Providing different kinds of educational pathways (even after the age of 18) is, therefore, an important aspect of the Swedish school system that can create a successful outcome in education.

### Inspiring measures from other countries

Desegregation of schools is an urgent task for the Swedish educational system. If this issue is not addressed, there will be a catastrophic rate of ESL in the near future. Highly segregated schools should be closed down and their pupils be given the support needed to study in socioeconomic and ethnically mixed schools.

Another feasible reform is a system of compulsory education until 18 years of age. Evidence from the Polish and Portugal educational systems demonstrates that such a reform can decrease the rate of ESL.

## | The United Kingdom

### Studying school (dis)engagement, ESL and risk of NEET in English education

In accordance with the Government's policy of Raising the Participation Age, Local Authorities have a statutory duty to track young people's participation between the ages of 16 and 18 and to identify those who are not participating in education, employment or training. Emphasis has been placed on the early identification of young people who are 'at-risk of becoming NEET', so that the appropriate support can be provided to help them to re-engage. Decisions made by young people undertaking post-16 transitions are crucially important for their future. Studies on dropout, disruptive transitions and young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) emphasise these decisions are the end result of a gradual process of disengagement from school. The RESL.eu study in the UK focused on two areas of England with higher-than-average levels of youth unemployment: the North East and Greater London. Data was collected through both a large-scale students' survey and with a number of biographical interviews with young people in mainstream education, those in alternative provision and NEETs. In general, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and, particularly, White British and Black Caribbean young people are more likely to report lower levels of school engagement. However, characteristics such as a young person's developmental stage, their relationships with parents, teachers and peers, and the institutional setting they find themselves in at school, all contribute to differences in individual levels of engagement.

### Protective factors in high-risk educational contexts

Despite the persistence of structural inequalities, the role of schools, families and communities in influencing youth development and outcomes must be highlighted as providing key opportunities for promoting students' engagement. Promoting young people's academic self-concept – that is, the extent to which they feel that they are 'a good student' – is a key factor in assisting students to perform well in their studies and remain engaged more widely in the school. In order to do this successfully, positive teacher-student relationships are key. The support provided by teachers is crucial for young people's sense of belonging and behavioural engagement in school. Schools that invest in tackling negative classroom environments and assisting teachers in providing more support could help to increase compliance and foster engagement with the school structure.

These findings are supported by our qualitative interviews with young people. One student explained the importance of teacher support to him:

*"If I don't understand something and I will ask the tutors they are all supportive. Cause I have cerebral palsy and learning difficulty, the college helped me to overcome these difficulties and I have been here three years and am nearly finished and achieved my goal because of this."*

Additionally, our study confirms that increased parental involvement in school is important to maintain strong parent-school relations, which further increases student engagement at school. Social support from parents and provision of practical assistance for their children are also protective factors that promote engagement.

'Reuben', a young man who attained low GCSE results but then succeeded in a college explained that his mother's support was crucial in keeping him in education:

*"My mum was very on top of me with my work and she communicated with the school a lot about homework and about coursework, just things like that... She helped me to motivate."*

### Enabling success by promoting engagement at school

Promoting and fostering student engagement at school is vital in enabling young people to achieve positive academic outcomes and undergo successful transitions from school to higher education, training or employment. Our study suggests that students' self-perceptions and key personal relations hold the key in determining individual levels of school engagement – well beyond the effect of specific demographic characteristics and socio-economic inequalities, and irrespective of specific school settings. Of course, this does not mean that structural factors are not relevant – on the contrary, the contextual element and the ways in which young people interact with it on the basis of their social, demographic and economic background is crucial. The interplay between these is very complex although what our findings do identify, however, are those dimensions which seem to matter for every young person, those which can be the centre of policy, pedagogic and pastoral interventions at local and even international level. In particular, the extent to which students perceive that support is available to them, from a variety of sources – not least from their teachers – is a key factor and, by promoting these perceptions of support, young people's school engagement is also improved.

## | Netherlands

### Studying School Disengagement and ESL in the Netherlands

The Dutch school system concentrates students with learning and behavioural problems into the two lowest of the four vocational tracks in secondary school. These pupils, many with severe learning or behavioural problems, are already being pushed to decide on their future career at age 14, and make the transition to senior vocational education (SVE) at age 16. Pupils most at risk are concentrated in one- or two-year tracks in SVE where they are supposed to obtain their basic qualification (the ESL diploma threshold). Pupils below the age of 18 are not allowed to leave school until they have accomplished a basic qualification. This situation leads to the creation of a group of students unwilling to be in education, but forced back into school time and time again. This results in ESL becoming a moving target, with young people in this age group constantly moving in and out of school, and also frequently switching within sectors of study.

### Protective factors in high-risk educational contexts

We found that schools that invest in developing a positive school climate and in tackling victimisation were successful in promoting school compliance amongst their students. Our data further showed that improved teacher-student relations and high teacher aspirations play a crucial role in enhancing school engagement amongst students. Teachers, therefore, are a key component in tackling ESL. Schools that welcome and promote parental involvement were successful in counteracting truancy behaviour and increasing school engagement. In the Dutch context, conducting an internship successfully was also a significant protective factor against school disengagement and ESL.

### Repairs within the Dutch Education System

The transition from lower secondary vocational to SVE forms a risk moment for vulnerable students. We found that measures that combine the lower and senior vocational training prove to be successful. Our RESL.eu data further show that having successfully conducted an internship decreases the likelihood ESL. Yet, schools suffer from lacking cooperation with employers and organisations in providing internship positions. Strengthening the bond between schools and companies- and involving more employers in providing internships positions - could assist students in acquiring minimum qualifications, but also relevant labour market experience.

Alternative learning pathways we studied proved very efficient in reintegrating young people in education and work. Work-based learning programs were successful, provided that the program could help the participants find an employer to finance work-based learning. This was often a difficult task. The key to success of small scale projects is that they work in cooperation with SVE institutions, focus on the multi problems of pupils in a holistic way, and provide one-on-one coaching to acquire.

### Inspiring measures from other countries

The Swedish system of adult education offers an important example to look at, because it offers educational re-integration opportunities to people who are older and have worked in the labour market already. The Netherlands has already offer work based learning programs (BBL) but the conditions of these institutions should be improved.

Another disruptive element is the early choice of the study and work sector at age fourteen. In our study, no other country required such selection at such an early age. As the examples from other countries illustrate, it is perfectly feasible to postpone that decision to age sixteen. Pupils between the age of fourteen and sixteen could be offered to try out different sectors in this period, combined with small internships, to help them make a well-informed choice at age sixteen.



**Project  
Coordination**

**Belgium**  
University of Antwerp  
Center for Migration and Intercultural Studies



**Partner  
Institutions**



**United Kingdom**  
Middlesex University  
Social Policy Research Centre



**United Kingdom**  
University of Sheffield



**Sweden**  
Stockholm University



**Portugal**  
University of Porto  
Center for Research and Intervention  
Faculty of Education



**Netherlands**  
Erasmus University Rotterdam



**Poland**  
University of Warsaw  
Faculty of Education



**Spain**  
Autonomous University of Barcelona



**Hungary**  
Central European University  
Center for Policy Studies



**Austria**  
Vienna University of Economics and Business  
Education Science Group