



# Early School Leaving Event

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Scotland House Conference Centre | Scotland House | Rond Point Schuman 6, B-1040

Brussels

Early School Leaving – A regional response

Report – Summary

On 28 April, Scotland Europa along with the Regional European Skills, Education and Training (RESET) network held a conference in Scotland House to address the headline target set out in the Europe 2020 Strategy to reduce Early School Leaving to less than 10% by 2020.

## European headline target

The European Commission has stated that Early School Leaving is both an urgent and serious problem for both individuals and society as a whole, not only does it affect the lives of the people who have left education early as they will be unlikely to attain high-value jobs and therefore are at more risk of poverty, but the economy needs young people to fill gaps in skills that are arising in the ever-changing global economy. The reasons cited for individuals dropping out of education and training are often individual and the reasons that are perceived include: learning difficulties, social problems, lack of motivation, guidance and/or support.

This is not a new problem for Europe, in 2003, EU Member States agreed to reduce the share of early school leavers to less than 10% of all 18-24 year-olds by 2010. This target was not achieved and currently one in six young people only have lower secondary education – this equates to a current figure of 14.4% but this EU average masks considerable differences between EU Countries. Eight Member States have already achieved the 10% benchmark: Austria, Czech Republic, Finland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. In direct contrast three Member States have rates higher than 30%: Malta, Portugal and Spain. So in June 2010, European Heads of State and Government adopted the Europe 2020 Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth where we saw Education go back up to the top of the agenda and Member States reset the target to reduce early school leaving to below 10% by 2020. The UK however are not setting European targets, as the Government believes that they have already set ambitious targets at a national level and wants to have more focus on achievement rates than drop-out.

This topic has risen high on the agenda because low levels of education not only have severe consequences for the young people concerned, but have high economic and social costs for society as a whole, as the world demands a highly skilled knowledge economy we need young people to attain a high standard of education and train for the “jobs of tomorrow”.

## Regional Responses to Early School Leaving

In response to the European Commission raising this highly contentious issue on the European agenda Scotland Europa and the RESET network decided to host an event to ask what are the main issues at a regional level and to see what can be done by the European Commission to ensure initiatives taken at a European level add value for Member States.

The day started with presentations from Bernard Hugonnier, Deputy-Director for Education at the OECD who discussed their findings and projects relating to early school leaving in both a European and International context. This was followed by two presentations from the European Commission. Suzanne Conze from DG Education and Culture outlined the Commission strategy for dealing with early school leaving which has three key actions; prevention, intervention and compensation (second-chance schooling) which is due to be formally adopted on 20 May. Ms Conze was clear to say that

Europe cannot afford six million young people only having low level education or less. Going onto say that the data collected to capture information on early school leaving is only a snapshot and not a real reflection of the situation in Europe. Christiane Westphal from DG Employment discussed in the session the impact of early school leaving on employment and also the flagship initiative “Youth on the Move”. Ms Westphal says that the European Commission wants to achieve a 75% employment rate by 2020 but with youth unemployment sitting at an EU average of 20% (highest-ever rate) it will have a profound affect on young people with low qualifications and subsequent impact on poverty as most Member States are expected to reform social benefits as part of cuts due to the economic crisis. Part of the “Youth on the Move” initiative is to better engage and monitor young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). Ms Westphal then quite rightly went on to state that there has to be some re-evaluation of jobs branded as “low skilled” e.g. retail and social care, where in fact employees use a wide-range of soft-skills which are needed in the labour market and workplace, going further to state that these “soft-skills” should be formally recognised. As part of the “youth guarantee scheme” which originates from the Lisbon Strategy but now sits within the Europe 2020 targets young people under 25 who are long-term unemployed (more than 1 year) should be offered a job or training within 4 months of reaching this term. This is a target again set at a European level but still needs to be recognised and implemented by Member States which in turn have to implement this strategy at national, regional and local levels.

As part of the conference we invited key speakers from Scotland, West-Brabant (Netherlands), Flanders (Belgium) and Catalunya (Spain) to take part in a regional debate to discuss the general approaches in individual regions as well as debating their differences and synergies at a European level and what they would like to convey to Europe and what they expect as European “added value” from the European Commission.

Herman Pranger from ROC West-Brabant started off by presenting their project “attacking dropping” which aims to reduce early school leaving by 40% in five years in West-Brabant, they are now in the third year of the project and they have achieved a reduction so far of 27%. The national Ministry of Education believes that students should not leave school before obtaining a qualification comparable with level 2 EQF, which is considered necessary to be able to function independently on the labour market. The national government invested in the reduction of ESL. In West-Brabant alone they allocated €2.8 Million to priority areas addressing this issue. An example of a successful project is the transfer coach to support transition between institutions. Also an SMS (text) notifies parents when their children are not attending school. Their main message was that they believe that all the stakeholders (not only education) should be included in the process and cooperate fully in tackling early school leaving.

Ruben Plees, from the department for education and training in Flanders told us that Flanders has set even more ambitious targets than those set at a EU level. They would like to reduce early school leaving to below 5%. Flanders allocates €1.2 Million to time out projects for unruly kids. They believe that the age in which a child has to effectively choose their career path should be postponed, as opposed to the current age of 12, and that is too early for a child to face this monumental decision. They also believe that student support should be a priority no matter where that child is in the system. They identify that there is not enough early warning data, which could help in the prevention of early school leaving and this data should also be measured at national and European levels. An “Equal Education Framework” should be used as indicators for early school leaving and the best teachers in the regions should be sent to the worst affected areas to help tackle early school leaving.

Norman Emerson, from Learning Teaching Scotland shared with the delegates that a visit to Scotland from the OECD opened Scotland’s eyes to the challenges that Scotland faced and when tackling early school leaving and the OECD urged them to set national targets. Scotland’s “Curriculum for Excellence” allows a coherent approach to be achieved in what is a large “region” where there are 32 Local Authorities and the Scottish Government who look after the education agenda. £140 Million is allocated to Local Authorities in Scotland and they then have to implement the “Curriculum for Excellence” but the system allows for a more flexible approach in Scotland that suits different approaches according to the demographic.

Monica Perena, the secretariat for Education in the Government of Catalunya says that they can link the attainment of basic skills with early school leaving. In Catalunya there are a high percentage of early school leavers (30%) and they often leave with a lack of basic competences like reading and writing. She went on stressing that the context is always important to consider and a change of culture and systems is needed within schools and universities to ensure those who go into higher education achieve better qualifications. Catalunya would like to see more autonomy with more focus on students than teachers and that goals should be shared equally between schools, teachers and students therefore creating a more flexible approach.

#### **Recommendations to European Commission**

The day finished with parallel working groups where we asked participants to discuss the main areas of early school leaving that affected their regions and to come up with recommendations for the European Commission. Of course there were differences in priorities but there were some common areas where the European Commission could add value to Member States goals in tackling early school leaving:

- Create coherent approaches that European countries could use as a basis to implement strategies at Member State level, National level, Regional and Local levels;
- Stimulate the exchange of best practices at a European and International level;
- Develop good practices for capturing data and provide good indicators for Europe;
- Create more awareness of the problem, especially about costs, options for individuals and the consequences of dropping out of education and training that is more person friendly; and
- Align funding to combating early school leaving, for example European Social Fund.

If you would like more information on the event please contact Claire Robertson for more information.

Supporting documents:

European Commission: <http://bit.ly/ghGP1u>

Policy Initiatives: <http://bit.ly/aQHBBb>

