

# **Review of the balance of competences between the UK and the EU on Education, Vocational training and Youth.**

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Submission to be recorded under the personal capacity of the 3 named individuals

## **Summary of findings**

The evidence suggests that early school leavers is a relevant priority for the UK as the UK has a higher rate of early school leaving than the EU average and is above the EU 2020 benchmark of 10%. The evidence equally suggests that early school leaving has a negative impact on democracy, social cohesion and economic performance in the UK.

The evidence of the benefits of working on this topic at a European level is more complex to evaluate as the outcomes are difficult to measure. There is support for the argument that the UK is benefiting from EU level collaboration, particularly through the sharing of good practice and research targeted at policy and practice in the prevention of early school leavers and by making use of European structural funds and European programmes.

Nevertheless, there is little sign of a direct impact of the EU policy process on English education policies on ESL. European policy has either been adapted in line with English policies or there has been no link between the two. It could be argued that more could be gained by the UK from participating more deeply in the policy process, for example, through the setting of national targets within the EU 2020 process.

## **Introduction**

This submission of evidence addresses the issue of policy coordination and the appropriateness that EU 2020 focusses on early school leaving. There are 3 sections. The first two sections identify the relevance of early school leavers as a policy topic for the UK. First, by comparing the levels of early school leavers with other European countries and second, by exploring the effects of early school leaving. The final section identifies the extent that it is relevant to work on this policy area at a European level.

## **State of play of early school leavers in the UK compared to other EU countries**

Early school leaving is commonly recognised as an important problem affecting both the opportunities of the young people concerned and the competitiveness and social cohesion of the wider society. For this reason the EU 2020 Strategy adopted a reduction of the average European rate of early school leavers to less than 10% by 2020 as one of the education headline targets. The EC defined early school leavers (ESL) as 'those young people who leave education and training with only lower secondary education or less [e.g. below GCSE grade C], and who are no longer in education and training' (European Commission

2013: 8). In statistical terms, European ESL rates are defined as the percentage of 18-24 years old with only lower secondary education or less and no longer in education or training. Eurostat, the statistics office for the European Commission, measures this by calculating the percentage of young people aged 18 to 24 fulfilling the following two conditions:

- (1) the highest level of education or training attained is ISCED 0, 1, 2 or 3c short
- (2) no education or training has been received in the four weeks

In 2012 the ESL rate in the EU as a whole was 12.8%. The UK recorded a slightly higher rate (13.5 %). This figure may well be higher for the UK since GCSE's grade A\*- C have been assigned an ICSED code of 3c long. Thus young people who drop-out of education after completing only lower secondary education who gained the qualifications of GCSE's grade A\*- C are not included in the UK figure on early school leavers, which complicates international comparisons.

There is considerable variation across Europe in ESL rates. Countries with moderately to very high ESL rates are Iceland, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Spain and Turkey. Ireland, the Netherlands, Austria and a number of Scandinavian and post-communist countries have already achieved the 2020 target of 10% (see Figure 1 below).

However, levels of attainment tell only half the story. Developments need to be examined to assess whether countries are making progress in reducing ESL rates. Figure 2 below shows both the level of ESL per country and its progress in reducing ESL between 2009-2012. While some countries in the EU on average are making good headway, some countries are stagnating. In others, ESL rates are even growing. The UK has succeeded in reducing the ESL rate by 5% annually between 2009 and 2012, but could do better as there are also countries with lower ESL rates than the UK that achieve higher levels of reduction (e.g. Denmark, the Netherlands and Ireland). Some countries with very high ESL rates are showing impressive improvement (e.g. Portugal and Spain) while others see the situation deteriorate (e.g. Romania). There are also countries currently meeting the EU 2020 target but experiencing rising ESL rates, including quite a few post-communist countries. Among the group of countries showing good progress in reducing ESL rates, there are both countries with healthy economic growth figures (e.g. Bulgaria, Lithuania and Estonia) and countries having suffered badly from the economic crisis (e.g. Portugal, Spain and Greece) (see Balcerowicz 2013, p 29, for figures on economic performance). This suggests that developments in ESL rates are not just a reflection of specific social and economic conditions but depend in large measure on the existence of targeted policies against ESL.

Figure 1. Early school leaver rates in European countries

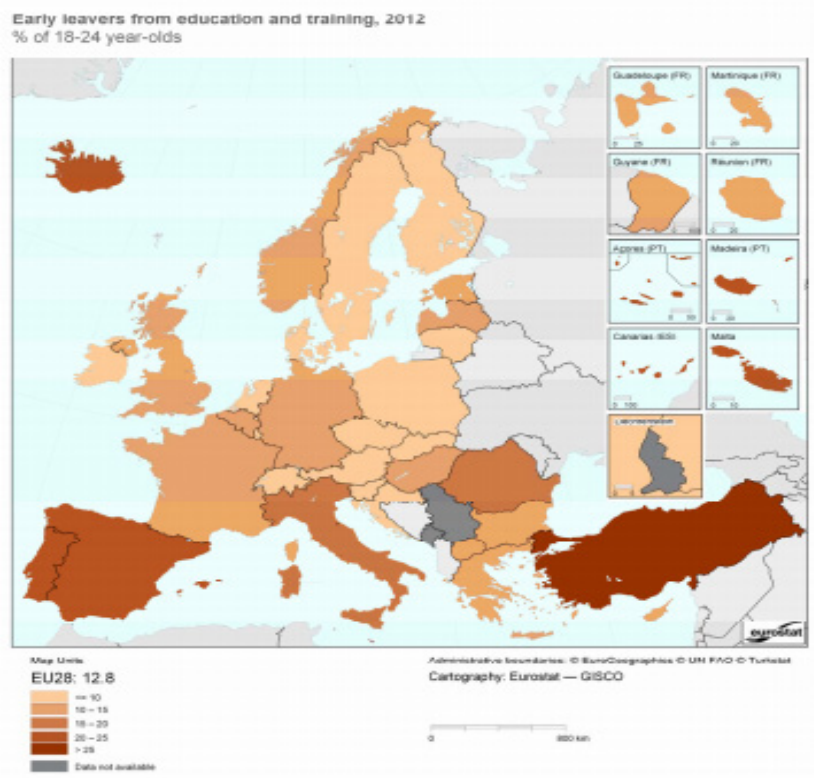
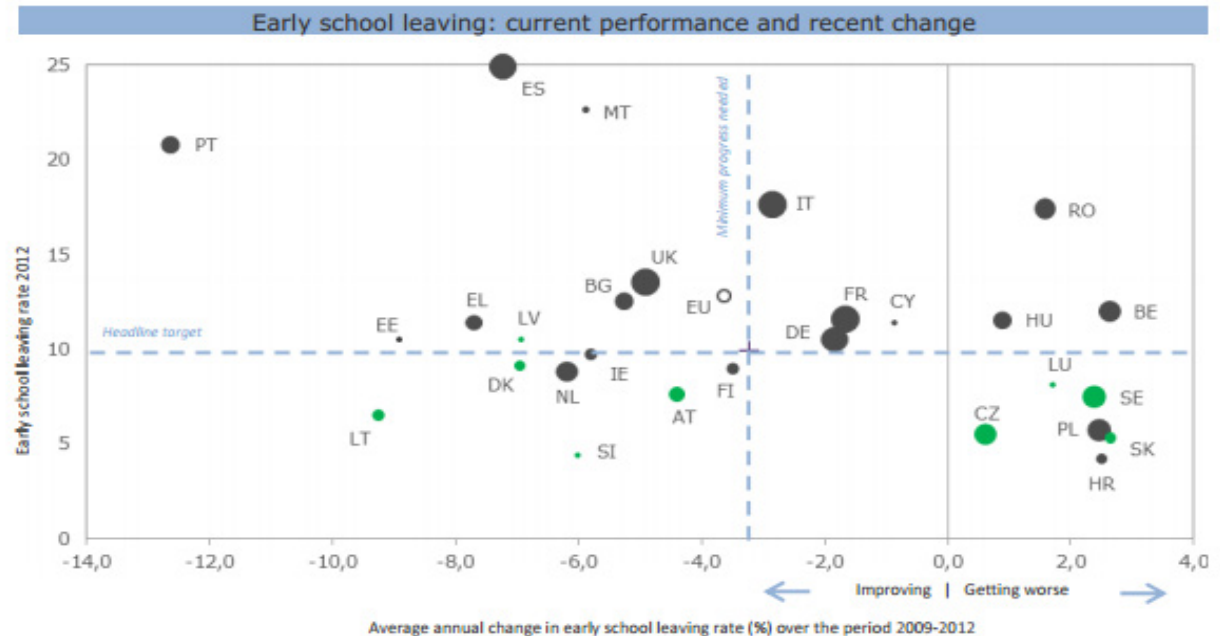


Figure 2. Development of ESL rate by country



Source for both figures: European Commission (2013: 9,10)

## The consequences of early school leaving

Leaving school prematurely is first of all a tragedy for the individuals concerned. Reviewing the literature on the effects of ESL, Dale (2010: 32) arrives at the following list of consequences:

- Young people that leave school early are more likely to be unemployed than those that complete their education;
- They are more likely to be in blue collar jobs with less employment security and more part-time work
- Pregnancy, crime, violence, alcohol and drug abuse, and suicide have been found to be significantly higher among early school leavers. Most of these issues are also found to be causes of early school leaving;
- Early school leavers are more likely than other citizens to draw on welfare and other social programs throughout their lives
- Early school leavers have a shorter life expectancy
- ESL is associated with a much lower propensity to become involved in lifelong learning.

To this list we may add low self-esteem (Prause and Dooley 1997). Early school leavers often develop feelings of failure and sense that society views them as people lacking willpower. The following portraits collected as part of the ESRC LLAKES centre research from young people in the greater London area capture this frame of mind well:

Shana is now 21 years old she was expelled from school at 15, she doesn't have any qualifications and she has never worked. She has been living in care since the age of 14 and she had issues with drug addiction, and alcohol:

*'I moved away (from home) when I was 14, into care. I think that's when I got kicked out of school and I was just hanging around on the street. (...). The reasons why I've been really far back, I've dropped out from school and from employments and stuff is because I was getting in trouble with the police, I was addicted to drugs'.*

Michael, now 22 years old, left school at 16. He then started a music technology course at college but gave up without gaining any qualification. Since then, he had a couple of jobs and he has been claiming unemployment benefits on and off. He is currently out of work as he was made redundant from the last job:

*Researcher: And did you have any particular hopes when you left school?*

*Michael: Sighs heavily. At the time I wasn't one of those who thought about the future much, just sort of, not bothered about the future so I didn't really plan ahead for anything.*

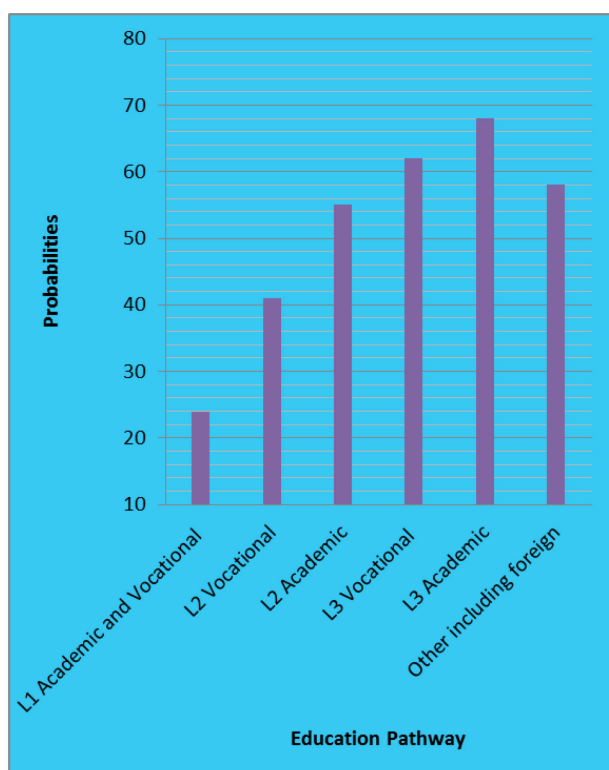
*It's just me. I was **disinterested** which is why I didn't really follow up a lot of stuff... But to be **honest it's getting the motivation to do it** all which, I don't know, I just don't really have*

*I was thinking about joining the Forces or something but I just don't have the temperament to take orders, you know, so that was kind of....I mean now, I wouldn't mind like, just for the money really, an electrician or some at but I didn't get any of the qualifications when I was*

*younger so....I'd have to save up loads of money and go back and pay loads and get in college again or something. So that's pretty much nothing really apart from that.*

ESL also carries very high costs for national economies. Due to their low levels of skills many early school leavers cannot find a job. Their high unemployment rate has been calculated to cost the UK £ 13,442,164,622 in non-earned income and welfare expenditures in 2008, which is just less than 1% of GDP (Eurofound 2012: 76). But the damage is not just economic. The social fall-out includes higher levels of crime, higher inequality, reduced intergenerational mobility and poorer levels of public health (Levin 1972: 10), which in turn have been identified as threats to social cohesion (Green and Janmaat 2011). Early school leavers also tend to be politically disengaged. Taking social background and other influences into account, Hoskins and Janmaat (2014), for instance, found that young people in England with level 1 and 2 qualifications (i.e. those with qualifications from lower secondary) had a significantly lower chance of voting in the 2010 elections than youngsters with higher qualifications (see Figure 3). This unequal electoral participation makes democratic politics less responsive to the needs and interests of the disengaged, which may ultimately undermine the public legitimacy of democracy.

Figure 3. Probability of having voted in the UK 2010 general election by level of qualification



This graph shows the results of logistic regression analysis performed on the Citizenship education longitudinal dataset 2002 -2011. The young people were aged 20 at the time of the election.

### Relevance of the European level

The previous sections have demonstrated the policy importance of tackling early school leavers in the UK. The question that this section addresses is the extent that working on this topic at an EU

level can be beneficial for the UK. It could be argued that the EU level could bring the following benefits:

- 1) Facilitates the exchange of good practice with other European countries
- 2) Enables additional funding to support national initiatives and programmes that tackle the consequences of ESL
- 3) Enables funding of European mobility projects that tackle the issue of early school leaving
- 4) Allows for the pooling of expert resources and funding of research towards understanding and tackling ESL
- 5) Supports the policy development and ensure the policy priority on early school leavers

Each of these points will be discussed below.

### **1) Facilitates the exchange of good practice amongst policymakers and practitioners from different countries**

The EC has enabled both policymakers and practitioners to exchange experiences and share good practices on how to tackle early school leavers. For example, the EC has facilitated a thematic working group between 2011-2013 to tackle ESL that addressed the challenges of developing and implementing comprehensive policies. The thematic working group built from various previous EC working groups, peer learning activities and cluster group on Access and Social Inclusion that the EC has facilitated from 2006-2010. The final report of the 2013 thematic working group concluded that there was a need to ensure long-term political and financial commitment to reducing ESL, that young people's voices should be at the centre of creating policies in this field, the need for quality vocational education and training, quality teachers with knowledge on ESL, a curriculum that is relevant and engaging for young people, guidance on study options and cooperation between communities and schools. In addition, it recommended the need for young people to have a second chance through alternative routes and programmes. The UK government decided to participate in these activities and the Princes' trust was said to have represented the UK in these meetings.

### **2) The EC enables additional funding to support national initiatives and programmes that tackle the prevention and consequences of ESL**

European Social funds and the European Youth Employment Initiative for the period 2014-2020 have been proposed by the UK government (following guidance from the EC) to be orientated towards 'complimenting and enhancing' national and local programmes that tackle the issue of young people not in education or employment (NEETS) by offering them additional measures to 'to increase the number of young people who are in education, employment and training, and to reduce the number who are NEET or at risk of being NEET' (Department for work and pensions, 2014). Although the EC new programme for the European Social Funds directly states that they can be used towards preventing early school leavers and use funding for '*the design and introduction of reforms in education and training systems in order to develop employability, improving the labour market relevance of initial and vocational education and training*', the UK government (Department for work and pensions, 2014) has said that it will not use the EC investment priority on ESL or targeting schools as it argues that national policies such as, 'Raising the Participation Age have been put in place to address these issues, and the most significant challenge is to re-engage those who have become NEET.' However, the UK government has proposed to allow European investment in projects that prevent young people at risk from the age of 15 from becoming NEET. The Department of work and pensions itself evaluates that the 2007-2013 ESF programme has shown 'how ESF can support localised, targeted provision in a way that complements existing provision, helping young people to meet the requirement to participate in education or training until their 18th birthday.' (Department for work and pensions, 2014 p. 20).

The total amount of funding for the ESF and European Youth Employment Initiative programmes targeted at increasing the number of young people in education, training or employment is said by the Department of work and pensions to be about £490 Million (BIS Press release 16 April 2014).

### **3) The EC funds European mobility projects that tackle the issue of early school leaving**

The EC Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) 2000-14 gave opportunities for the development of programmes and activities for disadvantaged youngsters many of which were early school leavers to participate in youth programmes, engage with second chance education and to improve vocational education and training opportunities (GHK 2011). The EC in the new Erasmus+ programme is described as targeting young people at risk of or who are early school leavers as part of its priority on equity and inclusion (EC Erasmus plus programme guide, 2014). An example, of this funding is for teachers and head teachers in EU countries to train them on prevention strategies for early school leaving. A course like this is being run by the UK International study programmes centre June 2014 and participation fees can be funded by Erasmus plus.

### **4) Working together at a European level allows for the pooling of expert resources to fund research towards understanding and tackling ESL**

The EC has funded a multitude of research that enables a better understanding of ESL and can identify successful strategies (Dale 2010, Ecorys 2013, Brunello and De Paola 2013). Examples of this are:

- The European Network of Experts in Social Sciences of Education and Training that produced a report on 'Early school leaving lessons from research for policy makers' (Dale 2010). This report identifies that quality early childhood education can prevent early school leaving more than 10 years later as well as the importance of various intervention strategies such as the mentoring at risk students. It identifies a lack of joined up thinking between interventions as to why previous strategies have not worked.
- The EC are funding a large scale 9 country study on 'Reducing early school leaving in Europe' through their 7 framework programme that will run between 2013-2018. The UK partners are from the University of Middlesex.

The EC has also funded conferences between practitioners, researchers and policy makers, for example, The March 2012 conference on 'Reducing Early School Leaving: Efficient and Effective Policies in Europe' with 300 participants focused on developing a sufficient evidence-base for better targeted policies against early school leaving, of establishing cross-sectoral cooperation, of addressing drop-out from vocational education and training, and of promoting different forms of learning to retain disengaged young people in education and training.

### **5) Supporting policy development on early school leavers**

The EC has developed a wide range of policy initiatives on ESL that stem from the fact that reducing ESL is one of the five headline targets for the flagship EU2020 programme to obtain smart and sustainable jobs. Relevant EC policies on ESL and NEETS can be found across the policy domains of employment, youth and education. Within the education policy process the main tools have been Council Conclusions and Recommendations agreed by member states in the Council on Education. These tools are only recommendations and are not legally binding. An example of this is the 2011 Council Recommendation on policies to reduce ESL that suggested the development of coherent national strategy that includes 3 dimensions of prevention, early intervention and compensatory measures to combat ESL. These ESL policies were said by the UK government to be broadly endorsed (UK Parliament, European Scrutiny Committee, April 2011) and reflect the analysis and policies adopted in the UK in particular the 'priority of increasing the flexibility and freedom of schools to respond flexibly to students' needs' (UK Parliament, European Scrutiny Committee, April 2011).

Where there were differences with national policies the government suggested it *'will seek to amend these references in negotiations and ensure that the final version of the Recommendation to be agreed by Ministers at the May Council is as closely aligned as possible with our domestic policies as set out in the recently published Schools White Paper 2010.'* Reflecting the discourse used within the UK parliament European Scrutiny Committee (UK Parliament, European Scrutiny Committee April 2011), the UK government approach to EC education policy initiatives has been to adapt the European level policies to fit with current UK policies rather than the adoption of any particular EC policy proposals. The UK government has equally been able to vote against or refrain from participating in European policy on ESL, for example, the UK was the only country that did not adopt national education targets in regards the EU 2020 education goals. The EU study (GHK consulting 2011) on reducing early school leaving in the EU identified from interviewing key stakeholders in the UK (including education authorities, teachers, parents, and secondary school students) suggested that the EU benchmark on early school leavers had not influenced national policies on ESL. However, countries where national targets have been set had such as Finland, France, Greece, the Netherlands and Spain the indicator was said to have at least raised the policy profile of ESL within their countries.

## Conclusion

The evidence suggests that early school leavers is a relevant priority for the UK as the UK has a higher rate of early school leaving than the EU average and is above the EU 2020 benchmark of 10%. The evidence equally suggests that early school leaving has a negative impact on democracy and economic performance in the UK.

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There is little sign of a direct impact of the EU policy process on English education policies on ESL. European policy has either been adapted in line with English policies or not engaged with. It could be argued that perhaps more could be gained by the UK from participating more deeply in the policy process and considering, for example, the setting national targets within the EU 2020 process.

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