

# Final report RESL.eu project

## Executive summary

The RESL.eu project aims to provide insights into the mechanisms and processes influencing a pupil's act of leaving school or training early. In addition, RESL.eu intends to identify and analyse the intervention and compensation measures that succeed in keeping pupils in education or training, and supporting them attaining formal qualifications ISCED 3, in spite of their high risk of ESL, and ultimately, to disclose these insights and good practices to various audiences.

The project's key objectives are:

- To design common EU definitions and concepts on early school leaving and conduct comparative policy analyses;
- To collect data on youngsters, families, schools and particular research areas across partner countries in Europe;
- To identify risk and protective factors at the individual (resiliency, engagement), interpersonal (teacher relations), and broader institutional and structural features (school policy, educational and labour market features and policy) which may encourage potential ESL pupils to gain qualifications via alternative learning arenas;
- To examine ESL prevention in schools and ESL remediation through alternative learning arenas in order to let good practices inform a EU policy on Early School Leaving.

The project's focus is on the development and implementation of education policies, and the transferability of country-specific good practices. Its ultimate aim lies in the development of generic conceptual models based on good practices to predict and tackle ESL that contribute to local, national and EU policies. RESL.eu also seeks to understand the mechanisms behind, processes leading to and trajectories following youngsters through its focus on the actions, perceptions and discourses of all pupils (ESL and not-ESL) as well as those of significant others (family, peer group, school or alternative learning arena, community).

Nine countries across Europe are involved in the RESL.eu project: Belgium, UK, Sweden, Portugal the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Hungary and Austria. New survey data is collected among 2,000 pupils in each country across two different research areas and a number of different schools (except Hungary and Austria). Two years later, the same pupils are requested for a follow-up survey inquiring about their trajectory during the intermediate period. In the meantime, qualitative interviewing took place of both school stayers (at risk for ESL) and school leavers (ESL), as well as either interviews or focus groups with the peers and school staff of the interviewed individual youngsters in different educational institutions. Additionally, school staff and school administrators is surveyed. Finally, a set of risk assessment tools and policy briefs is developed for local, regional, national and supra-national policy makers and educational institutions. Last but not least, a compelling exercise was conducted at the final stage of the project in order to assess and study the long term impact of ESL on broader society of early school leaving, as well as all the distinct alternatives towards it, and prepare the theoretical foundations of a cost-benefit analyses of early school leaving, designed for European policy makers.

## Summary description of project context and objectives

The EU-funded research project, “Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe” – RESL.eu (2013–2018), brought together researchers with a variety of disciplinary backgrounds – including but not limited to sociology, anthropology and educational sciences – from nine EU-member states: Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Hungary, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the UK. To identify ‘early school leavers’, we started from the definition that is used at the EU level and defines early school leavers as ‘those young people who leave education and training with only lower secondary education or less, and who are no longer in education and training’. This definition is measured by looking at ‘the percentage of 18–24 year olds with only lower secondary education or less and no longer in education or training’ (Eurostat, 2012) . Or put differently, we focused on youngsters who did not attain an upper secondary education degree (ISCED [International Standard Classification of Education] 3). Joined by concerns of policy makers, societal stakeholders and researchers about the relatively high rates of ESL across EU member states and – in many cases – the large disparities between ESL rates of different social groups within these societies, we studied this complex phenomenon from a multi-disciplinary and multi-level perspective.

The rationale behind the RESL.eu project, is the premise that early school leaving in the EU is primarily a symptom of traditional educational systems’ difficulties to adapt to changing societal dynamics resulting from shifting social and economic contexts. The RESL.eu project aimed to gain in-depth insights into the mechanisms and processes leading to a student’s decision to leave school or training early, allowing us to uncover many relevant and interrelated indicators of structural/systemic, institutional and individual difficulties to adapt to and overcome these social transformations. Along with this focus on understanding processes of ESL more in-depth, the RESL.eu project also aimed to identify and analyse prevention, intervention and compensation measures inside and outside mainstream educational settings that aim to support youngsters in attaining an upper secondary education degree (ISCED 3). The combination of both focuses enabled us to identify many important risk and protective factors on various levels and contexts that influence young people’s educational trajectories.

The main research questions of the RESL.eu project are:

- How does the complex and often subtle interplay of factors on a macro, meso and micro level predict early school leaving?
- What prevention, intervention or compensation measures can be identified as successful in keeping ‘a pupil at risk of ESL’ in school or in guiding him/her to an alternative learning arena and what specific approaches or concurrences of variables explains this success?

A theoretical framework was constructed and adapted over the course of the RESL.eu project to analyse the Early School Leaving phenomenon. This model was based on the state of the art on ESL in a broad European context, and further refined to include specific links between concepts, theories, methods and data collection, before and after data collection. Overall, both the initial and the revised the RESL.eu conceptual model illustrate how the project research invested in identifying and analysing the interplay between risk- and protective factors for ESL by focusing on the role of social and cultural capital. This enabled researchers to link the structural macro context with individuals’ resiliency through analysing youngsters’ embeddedness in their school environment, alternative learning arena, family, peer group

and/or community. The conceptual model is based on a classic tripartite multilevel approach to the process of ESL, that consists out of the three main levels commonly distinguished in the academic literature influencing ESL: the macro-level of the structural and systemic features and policies, the meso-level of the institutional context such as the policies and capital resources in school, the alternative learning arenas and the family, and the micro-level, which focuses on the individual. However, these levels interact with and influence each other, and the project also focuses on the interpersonal relations within the different context (in particular the idea of social support). With this model, we aim to embed the process of ESL in a broader conceptual framework and to move beyond a sole focus on the traditional socio-demographic risk factors related to ESL in order to grasp the underlying processes that lie at the basis of ESL and contribute to gradual processes of school (dis)engagement.

Following was the comparative analysis of the development and implementation of education policies and instruments aiming at dealing with ESL in the research countries during the construction of the EU and especially since the Lisbon Treaty. The analysis shows that Europeanisation takes place on the basis of countries' diverse interpretation and implementation of a common policy grammar, by means of the national policy and under the framework of programs of cooperation, support, research and development set by different international organisations and with EU funding, evaluation systems and soft law. Moreover, the analysis of the goals, 'drivers' and rationales underpinning education and social policies related to ESL suggests that the economic concern prevails over educational and social goals. In spite of the fact that in some countries, such as UK and the Netherlands, this concern is more visible, in others the encompassing discourse on the need to respond to the new labour market needs is pervasive. In Belgium and Poland, for instance, this driver is more nuanced as social and educational concerns could also be identified. In Austria, both economic and social drivers can be identified. The study underlines that there exists a close relationship between social and economic policies, on the one hand, and educational policies, on the other. Subsequently, the RESL.eu project mapped and assessed existing statistical evidence on early school leavers and NEETS in Europe by conducting a systematic review of existing databases at regional, national, international and comparative levels.

Overall, this existing review of the existing data and literature in all countries involved resulted into the identification of the research areas to collect the qualitative and quantitative data. The selection criteria for the two research areas stipulate that a research area has to 1) consist of an urban neighbourhood/borough/ward/district; 2) have a population of 100 000 to 500 000 inhabitants; 3) be under the same political framework on education, training and work; and 4) have a high youth unemployment rate. The two selected research areas have to be different with respect to at least one the following: 1) migration /ethnic background of their population; 2) socio-economic characteristics of the area; 3) local policy; and/or 4) labour market opportunities. Furthermore, in this phase, a common definition of ESL was developed based on the interpretation of the concept in each of the partner countries. In the RESL.eu project, ESL is defined as "leaving regular secondary education system without attaining an upper secondary school degree/certificate, equivalent to ISCED level 3 (2011)".

Given the complex nature of the phenomenon of early school leaving, the RESL.eu project relied on a mixed approach of quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. The project was innovative in the sense that we were able to design the qualitative and quantitative research parts together and use the strengths of each method for the selection of the respondents

and the interpretation of the data. The continuous cross-fertilization enabled the researchers to build upon each method's – quantitative and qualitative – findings. Our collective efforts resulted in a vast amount of new empirical quantitative and qualitative data collected in all of the RESL.eu-participating countries, except for Austria and Hungary. In these countries, new survey data (survey A1 en A2) is collected by pupils in each country across two different research areas and a number of different schools. Two years later, the same pupils were contacted to participate in a follow-up survey enquiring about their trajectory during the intermediate period. Overall 19,586 young people took part in the first wave of the survey (A1), with 7,072 also responding to the follow-up survey (A2) two years later. Additionally, 1,977 school personnel members responded (Survey B). In the meantime, qualitative interviewing took place through contacts with selected pupils consisting of both school stayers (at risk for ESL) and school leavers (ESL), as well as interviews and/or focus groups with the peers and school staff of the interviewed individual youngsters. In total, 252 in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with youngsters between 16 and 24 years of age interviews of whom 171 youngsters (21 to 32 per country) of the total sample were interviewed twice. To critically assess the school-based intervention and prevention measures as well as the compensatory pathways to reduce early school leaving, per country, additional interviews were conducted in schools, with school principals (4 per country) and focus groups with peers in interventions/classmates as well as with school staff (also 4 per group, per country). Similar to this design, for the compensatory pathways 8 interviews with staff members and 4 focus groups peers in compensatory measures were carried out.

Data retrieved from the qualitative and quantitative data collections on the factors and process predicting ESL, were triangulated. An in-depth and multifaceted analysis of the educational trajectories of youth at risk of ESL from the nine countries involved, led us to create distinct types of trajectories that could provide more insight into the multifaceted routes to early school leaving, and which are used for the development of conceptual models of inspiring practices to tackle ESL. Therefore, the main aim was to provide a link between various educational trajectories and the practices to tackle ESL that can be implemented by schools, as well as other (educational) institutions that work with vulnerable youth, and entities responsible for creating educational policies. By creating a conceptual model for inspiring practices, we wanted to ensure that such practices meet the specific needs of young people at risk of early school leaving and that they can be applied in heterogeneous institutional educational contexts. For this reason, the model takes the form of general recommendations, rather than detailed, ready-to-use instructions. This triangulation process also resulted in a (set of) risk assessment tool(s). This set was seen as a spin-off of the conceptual model in which hypotheses about the typology of students at risk of ESL and understanding of the process of ESL, based on the literature and qualitative study, and was later tested making use of quantitative data. This toolkit aims to support practitioners working with youth in identifying and monitoring students and schools in need of greater care and support. It is primarily focused on the situation of those young people who are at risk of early school leaving.

In the last phase of the RESL.eu project, a well-thought of exercise was conducted about the possible costs and benefits associated with (the prevention of) early school leaving to inform policy makers and academic about the widespread impact of the phenomenon of ESL. As became clear during the previous phases of the project, the level in which ESL was dealt with and the organization of educational and employment systems were located varied considerably

across countries and the gathering of the data at all levels would have taken the involvement of all local, regional and national governments, which was in many cases not possible and feasible given the timespan of the research.

Finally, policy briefs were written based on the results of the RESL.eu project, that further facilitated the dissemination of the findings of the RESL.eu project in policy meetings and academic conferences. This process of defining the key findings of the project added to a better understanding of the local contexts of the countries involved in this project and resulted in some additional analyses that have been carried out.

## The Main S&T results/foregrounds of the RESL.eu project

### The conceptualisation and definition of ESL

- **ESL should be approached as ‘a moving target’**

Over the course of this research project, we have already refined the conceptual model to relate socio-economic and educational systems, institutional arrangements to individual level processes of school (dis-)engagement and early school leaving (see Deliverable D1.1.). However, one of the main findings of the RESL.eu project, which may be recognisable for policy makers trying to measure or define the number of early school leavers in their region, is that ESL is too frequently approached as a static situation at one particular moment in time. However, processes of ESL that is often not an end point in a youngsters’ trajectory. Our findings show that there is a high degree of ‘churn’ among this group, with young people frequently leaving and returning to education, training or short-term employment. This is particularly true of early school leavers who go back to school. This group requires special attention. The lack of a longitudinal measure of ESL obscures the impact of compensatory educational interventions for previous early school leavers.

- **The use of ESL as an indicator to identify pupils at risk of school disengagement**

Although ESL rates to some extent provide a rather consistent and comparable quantification of educational underachievement among young people, the ESL rates are not flawless and cannot fully grasp the problems facing these youngsters as they approach the transition from school to work. Our quantitative and qualitative findings show that many pupils who attain an upper secondary school qualification, nevertheless display risk behaviours or school disengagement (e.g. high truancy rates or non-compliant/disruptive behaviour). The focus on headline ESL rates should not cause us to lose sight of these pupils.

### Macro-, meso- and micro-determinants of processes leading to ESL

- **The relationship between early/late tracking and ESL**

The RESL.eu project included both countries with early tracking systems and more comprehensive systems in its research design. However, we did not observe any straightforward relationship between tracking and ESL. Although education systems with late tracking have a lower concentration of pupils with learning and behavioural problems in (lower) secondary vocational tracks, the lack of good internship places or apprenticeship possibilities in these systems is problematic. In education systems with early tracking, these pupils are more concentrated in the (lower) secondary vocational tracks, but internship or apprenticeship systems are often better developed. To tackle ESL, it is therefore necessary to develop and improve vocational education and training in all systems.

- **The relationship between compulsory school leaving age and ESL**

In our RESL.eu study, we observed that ESL rates were falling in systems in which the compulsory school-leaving age is (or has recently been raised to) 18. In systems where

compulsory education ends before the age of 18, young people tend to leave school before reaching the threshold of the upper secondary school diploma (ISCED 3 – one of the most frequently used measures to capture the number of ESL), as this is legally permitted.

- **Each educational measure has its advantages and disadvantages with regard to ESL**

Academic research cannot provide a simple solution to design the ideal macro level school system, because each solution creates its own problems and poses different risks with regard to early school leaving. Two main school system characteristics at the macro level could be identified that affect pupils' risk of early school leaving (ESL) and school disengagement: tracking and compulsory school age. Nevertheless, each of these has their advantages and disadvantages, which should be weighed out against each other by local policy makers and understood within the broader context.

- **Cross-national predictors of ESL**

Among the most important predictors of ESL are students' levels of school engagement. Being a boy and having at least one foreign-born parent are also associated with a higher level of risk in most European countries. Higher levels of parental expectations (which often represent a proxy of family background) represent one of the clearest protective factors. These predictors form also the basis for the toolkit developed by the RESL.eu team to reduce early school leaving.

- **Relationship ESL and educational aspirations and expectations**

Early School Leavers are also more likely to report lower levels of educational aspiration and educational expectations. These, in turn, are highly correlated to the expectations of one's parents and teachers as perceived and reported in the midst of their school career.

- **Distinct dimension of school engagement are key indicators in processes leading to ESL**

With school engagement being one of the key dimensions involved in the processes leading to ESL, it is particularly important to look at the factors correlated with young people's level of engagement. These include the extent to which young people display a positive academic 'self-concept' and the level of support they perceive to receive from their teachers. School engagement can also be broken down into underpinning dimensions such as behavioural engagement (how well students behave at school), affective engagement (how much they feel they belong to the school) and cognitive engagement (how much effort and commitment they put into their studies); in particular:

- Young men and those students reporting being bullied or victimized at school are also more likely to report lower levels of 'behavioural engagement'.
- The importance of student-teacher interaction is confirmed by the fact that students' perceived level of support from teachers is by far the most significant predictor of their sense of school be-longing, or 'affective engagement'.

- Key indicators predicting levels of students' 'cognitive engagement' include their levels of truancy and the extent to which young people place value on their education towards achieving positive outcomes for the future.

- **Early school leaving as a multi-faceted and volatile social phenomenon**

An important and general conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that the youngsters under study encountered and perceived many challenges related to various life domains. There was a clear difference in the extent to which the youngsters experienced these challenges as a hindrance to their school career according to their educational 'situation'. In general, youngsters that left mainstream secondary education prematurely and were not in education or training encountered a complex interplay of relatively many 'insurmountable' challenges – more so than those still enrolled in some kind of educational programme. The narratives of youngsters enrolled in alternative learning arenas, on the other hand, often reflected the importance of resilience after having faced similar challenges and 'bumpy' trajectories in education as those who left education early but were not enrolled in alternative pathways. Finally, while we could find similar structural, institutional and individual seeds of disruptive or troubled school careers in the stories of many of the youngsters that were still enrolled in regular secondary education, it was often to a lesser extent.

- **Youngsters were often lost in translating aspirations into strategic plans and strategies**

When talking about their aspirations, most youngsters formulated these in very general and broad terms and often referred to them as 'dreams' they hoped to achieve in the future. Overall, the youngsters highly value the role of education to attain their aspirations/future goals – and are also repeatedly reminded of this by their parents. However, they do not seem to (be able to) translate their aspirations into more clearly defined educational and occupational strategic plans or strategies that guide their trajectory. Together with the difficult living conditions and problems they face in their everyday lives, the lack of concrete plans and visions on how to realize their educational goals makes youngsters more vulnerable in education and jeopardizes a successful educational career. Instead, they sometimes started to tone down the importance of educational qualifications and prioritize other aspects - especially when they experienced school fatigue - often listening to the cry for money. That is, employment is sometimes prioritized over education, exactly because of the financial conditions in which youngsters find themselves.

- **Youngsters have to make difficult educational choices and receive insufficient guidance in educational decision making processes**

When asking explicitly about educational challenges, the youngsters' stories suggest that these challenges could in many cases be linked to the country-specific organization of the educational system and accompanying practices, such as grading systems, structures of educational programmes (e.g. early tracking) and the rigidity of the system, which limits opportunities to change programmes. Some structural features applied to all or most educational systems, albeit in different ways, while others were more country-specific. However, across all educational

systems we found that the timing and number of possibilities to switch educational tracks/programmes/institutions mattered for the final outcome of the youngsters' educational trajectories. Nearly all youngsters in our sample followed very heterogeneous, non-linear and (thus) 'not so logical' educational trajectories, characterized by frequent 'changes' across educational programmes/institutions/tracks over their educational and professional careers. These educational transitions could lead to exclusion from a particular institution/programme/track or result in changes in one's future professional career opportunities.

- **The more choices youngsters have to make, the more difficulties they encounter in education**

Despite the different motivations and reasons for making particular changes and choices (across and within countries), the 'problematic' nature of most of these changes mainly stems from the fact that the young people encounter problems when making these 'new' choices. Due to a lack of career guidance and/or resources within social networks, many of these choices are not based on a long-term vision or clearly defined aspirations, nor do they necessarily reflect youngsters' (intrinsic) interests, skills and capabilities. The need for such career guidance and useful information becomes particularly apparent when, as is often the case in many educational systems, there is insufficient communication or a lack of a well-established guidance network that advises youngsters across educational sectors, programmes and tracks and follows them throughout their entire educational career. Moreover, many of the youngsters indicated that they not only made educational choices during the expected, institutionalized transition moments in their educational career (i.e., the choices that all students – successful or not – have to make, such as the transition between primary and secondary education or when refining educational choices over time). It is exactly these 'unforeseen' transition moments, for instance when having to choose a new school/track after being expelled/excluded, that are often insufficiently guided, but greatly impact young peoples' future educational and occupational opportunities. Because of the eagerness of some educational institutions to 'get rid' of students that show low levels of school engagement, the rigidity of the educational systems, and the difficulties youngsters face when making 'unforeseen' educational choices, some of these youngsters felt that their 'imagined futures' became impossible to reach, which made them feel that following their educational and career aspirations was meaningless. Consequently, these very complex, non-linear educational trajectories that often contain many non-anticipated though crucial educational and occupational choices, did not add to the youngsters' abilities, knowledge and motivation, which was an additional complexity when searching for work-based learning opportunities or redefining future goals.

- **Youngsters gradually develop complicated relationships with schooling**

The high(er) number of (educational) choices youngsters had to make and the difficulties when making them were clearly reflected in the diverse educational trajectories but cannot be seen independently from the relationships the youngsters develop with institutional actors. These relationships can be seen as a marker of how these youngsters experienced overall school life and the prevailing school culture. The school environment was frequently interpreted as a

somewhat artificial place with a lot of ‘childish’ rules and practices that do not allow one to truly prepare young people for their future lives on the labour market, which in some cases was perceived as pushing young people away from school. Youngsters frequently evaluated their treatment in school in terms of not feeling acknowledged or treated as a real and equal person – often expressed in terms of feeling treated like a child – which invariably led to a lot of negativity and frustration. This sense of powerlessness often appeared to stem from the discordance between the school and teacher culture and that of the young adults. The feeling of not having a voice or not having a sense belonging was mentioned to diminish the youngsters’ desire to put any effort into school. For some students, this unequal power relation between them and their teachers inflicted stress and frustration upon them as they feel treated unfairly, while for others it resulted in oppositional school behaviour. Additionally, due to grade retention and changing institutions/programmes/tracks and other delays in youngsters’ school careers, many youngsters feel ‘too old’ to be enrolled in (regular) secondary education. Simultaneously, when growing older, they felt they were becoming more ‘mature’ and for them it seemed that this almost automatically made them value education to a higher extent.

- **Economic and financial challenges at home jeopardize youngsters’ educational careers**

In general, the youngsters perceived economic and financial challenges to be the most dominant and the most difficult to deal with. The perceived (limited) economic perspectives and financial difficulties at home were clearly considered when making important choices in young people’s lives and when trying to figure out where to invest and which pathways they wanted to pursue in their future lives. Whether in the context of achieving a concrete plan or for more abstract aspirations or ‘imagined futures’, not having the necessary financial means was often mentioned as one of the most important obstacles to achieving those goals. Hence, there appeared to be a clear feedback mechanism – sometimes experienced more as communicating vessels rather than a mutually reinforcing mechanism – between education and work, as all choices made in one domain had an impact on the other domain. Depending on the kind of experience, working or doing internships could work as both motivating and demotivating for youngsters in terms of (re-)engaging in school. In some cases, it made youngsters re-think their future prospects and/or helped them to refine their aspirations; however, when the work load was too heavy, their jobs could hinder young people from putting effort into school.

- **Many non-linear trajectories lead to early school leaving**

As shown in Publication 6, we distinguished six ideal types of trajectories, which we labelled as follows: Unanticipated crisis, Downward spiral, Parabola, Boomerang, Resilient route, Shading out. These distinct routes demonstrate that there are many identified non-linear educational trajectories of youth at risk of early school leaving.

### Policy analyses

- **International policies on ESL largely determine local, regional and national policies**

The policy analysis has shown that the definition, steering and implementation of policies and public action is informed by the international setting and includes increasingly more stakeholders in and with the state in a multiple scale governance (super-national, national and sub-national). Europeanisation takes place on the basis of countries' diverse interpretation and implementation of a common grammar, by means of the national policy and under the framework of programs of cooperation, support, research and development set by different international organisations and with EU funding, evaluation systems and soft law.

- **In policies on ESL, economic concerns prevail over educational and social ones**

Despite some variability across countries, the policy analyses of the RESL.eu project indicate that economic concern prevails over educational and social goals. Nevertheless, there is a close relationship between social and economic policies, on the one hand, and educational policies, on the other. In line with the Lisbon Strategy, education is pointed out simultaneously as a factor of economic competition and a factor of social cohesion. In this sense, 'drivers' and 'rationales' identified are to be seen in a continuum where tensions between social and educational goals and new labour market needs are present to diverse degrees. Notwithstanding, educational and social drivers and rationales addressing equality of opportunities and educational development are uncommon.

- **Current socio-political and economic crises put ESL policies under pressure**

The current socio-political and economic crisis, together with migration processes and the labour market volatility, have reshaped the ways in which different countries address the educational problem and ESL and try to make the best of EU funding schemes through rhetorical resistance to its ideas and implementation. Even if EU influence on ESL policies and measures is neither visible nor recognised by policy makers, the 'soft' introduction and development of EU ideas is present in all countries involved. Most countries state that there is a widespread view that education is a national remit, an idea stemming from the fact that the EU does not have the power to legislate on education. The rhetoric changes in education were pulled by the EU and were used even in countries where ESL is not identified as an urgent issue, let alone a problem to be addressed.

#### Evaluating school-based intervention and prevention measures and compensatory pathways to reduce ESL

- **Contextual preconditions for school-based interventions have to be considered by policy makers**

The analyses of school-based policies and interventions in 28 schools across 7 EU member states has shown a wide variation of measures undertaken by schools with the aim to improve students' school careers and chances at graduating from upper secondary education. We identified measures that could be labelled as early warning systems, cognitive support, emotional and behavioural support, as well as measures that focus on students' career guidance. For all of these types of support measures, we reported main findings from international academic literature, gave an overview of the scope and aims of the studied measures and

articulated the main issues linked to the discursive (in)congruence different stakeholders had regarding the awareness, participation and outcome of the measures. However, stakeholders have put contextual preconditions to the fore that should be seen as factors for successful school policies and interventions. These contextual preconditions entail addressing the basic needs of students, promoting parental involvement, professional development and support of staff, supportive student-teacher relationships, student voice and ownership, and taking on a holistic, multi-professional approach.

- **School staff needs more support and professional development to detect and monitor early signals of risk of ESL**

School staff emphasized that tackling ESL requires staff to be able to detect and monitor early signals of risk. Many staff members indicated that they did not feel equipped to take up this role. Further professionalization and in-service training is needed. However, such services are often restricted due to financial cutbacks.

- **Pupils voice and ownership is insufficiently considered in education**

Our findings show that pupils are often left out of the design and implementation of measures, yet it is important to understand whether they share a similar view on the scope and aims of the measures since the effectiveness of measures improves when pupils are motivated to participate. Several focus schools gave us interesting examples of how giving pupils a say and ownership made the measure more effective. This finding suggests that moving towards a more participatory educational system could have beneficial effects for all pupils.

- **The importance of promoting supportive teacher-pupil relationships**

Teachers are still the most important actors in their pupils' educational trajectory. Schools that invest in teacher-pupil relationships tend to introduce regular one-on-one talks between pupils and specific teachers or support staff members in the form of regular feedback, interviews with classroom teachers, and talks with mentors, youth coaches and student counsellors.

- **The need for incentives to promote parental involvement**

Taking a more positive and less stigmatizing approach proved to be a successful way of promoting parental involvement in schools. Some schools have been able to engage parents more successfully by being more pro-active and inclusive. This has also had a positive effect on their children's school involvement.

- **Taking on a holistic multi-professional approach is crucial to reduce ESL**

A comprehensive approach can be instituted by not only responding to cognitive and behavioural risk factors, but also by targeting potential emotional disengagement from school. Holistic policies are more recommendable as they do not approach ESL as a rational decision made by an individual, but as a process leading up to a potential ESL decision that is always embedded within a broader and more complex context. Our findings show that it is important not to lose sight of the influence of other dimensions on the institutional and structural level. Furthermore, the most elementary contextual precondition for schools to keep pupils on track

to attain an educational qualification is to ensure that basic human needs such as nourishment and shelter are provided for. Some schools argue that the poor living conditions of some pupils made this factor an important precondition for successfully supporting their educational attainment. We found that “alternative learning pathways” make a crucial contribution to establishing a caring environment and providing for basic needs due to their flexible and individualized approach.

- **Work-based learning approaches are stigmatised, but could provide for a good alternative to keep students in education and training**

Work-based learning pathways usually have a dual aim: to provide opportunities for gaining professional skills and to work towards an educational qualification. Most work-based learning pathways are, however, perceived as “second best” or “last resort” options in most of the countries involved in the RESL.eu study, as they are frequently chosen following negative experiences in mainstream education. Often they compensate for the lack of practical training and individualized support in mainstream education systems. Both pupils and project staff of such programs said often and emphatically that schools did not provide sufficient and correct information about dual learning options and their labour market opportunities. Our study showed that work-based learning pathways could provide a good alternative for pupils who are more interested in practical learning and gaining work experience.

- **Innovative pedagogical approaches are too often focused on ‘fitting in’ rigid structures**

Pedagogical approaches used in regular secondary education often do not meet the needs of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. While more pupils could benefit from more innovative pedagogical approaches, it seems that particular groups encounter many difficulties in ‘fitting’ into the rather rigid structure of regular secondary schools. Therefore, many of the innovative approaches used in alternative learning arenas introduce flexibility to learning pathways and focus more explicitly on experiences of success. They also provide more practical learning methods and access to the transferable skills, such as communication, presentation, leadership skills or networking skills that young people need in order to be able to continue their education and succeed in the labour market. The goal of these innovative pedagogical approaches is to increase pupils’ motivation and ownership by giving them a say in the learning process. In general, such measures have been relatively successful in reaching out to vulnerable youth yet they are frequently associated with negative stereotypes and are assigned a lower status by society in general than other educational programs or institutions.

- **Solutions to reduce early school leaving are country-specific**

Each educational measure and practice should be considered within the educational structures and existing educational practices. It is rather the combination of particular measures that decides the final outcome or side-effects of a specific measure.

Cost-Benefit Analyses

- **Cost Benefit Analyses demand clear-cut definitions**

As already clearly noted when writing the amendment, the initial content of WP7, namely to carry out a cost benefit analyses on early school leaving and all educational alternatives ourselves, greatly exceeded the scope of this project. However, a revised version of this work package resulted in an interesting and unique publication (Deliverable 7.1.). This is not surprising as this would require **substantial philosophical thinking about and the theoretical underpinning of the definition and value of education, and its costs and benefits, for European societies**. These reflections are also clearly presented in Publication 9. Nevertheless, the RESL.eu project could already add to a better understanding and reflect upon what is needed to conduct a cost benefit analyses, at various levels of policy making, and by comparing and contrasting data and experiences of different European contexts altogether.

- **Cost Benefit Analyses require the collaboration with local, regional and national governments**

Apart from the definition of which costs and benefits exactly need to be calculated, there is also a great need to **get access to the financial side of each of these costs and benefits**. Obtaining access to this financial information varies greatly across countries. Additionally, the estimated costs and benefits could be situated at different policy levels, but still be applicable to the same individuals. For instance, as education is regionally organised in Flanders (northern part of Belgium), health care and unemployment costs are partly located at the national and partly at the regional level in Belgium. Hence, the governmental structures of the educational systems of the countries in which youngsters go to school, or have left school early, also matter for the feasibility of the calculation of the costs and benefits across countries.

- **Cost Benefit Analyses on issues related to ESL should be considered within their context and educational market**

Calculating the costs and benefits of a particular educational institution, cannot be considered together without including the rest of the **‘educational market’**. For example, small alternative learning arenas may prove to yield very good benefits, however, these benefits could be also due to the lack of the existence of other alternative learning arenas or the presence of a very rigid system of regular secondary schools. Hence, the evaluation of regular secondary schools and alternative learning arenas, based on a cost benefit analyses, should always consider the local educational market and context.

### Potential impact and main dissemination activities and exploitation results

The RESL.eu project aimed to provide insights into the mechanisms and processes that influence a pupil's act to leave school or training early as well as into the decision of school leavers to enrol in alternative learning arena's unrelated to a regular school. These alternative locations of knowledge and skill transfer helped to gain insight in and provide us with creative or innovative methods of learning or training. In addition to this, RESL.eu also focused on the pupils that left education or training early, and are identified as NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training), because these are the most vulnerable among European youngsters. Furthermore, the RESL.eu project aimed to identify and analyse the intervention and compensation measures that did succeed in transferring knowledge and in keeping pupils in education or training, although they showed high (theoretical) risk of ESL. Where the available research data on ESL only explains isolated aspects of the evolution towards ESL, the project analyses ESL from a holistic and multilevel perspective (see conceptual model project paper 2). By framing the complex and often subtle interplay of factors influencing ESL on a macro-, meso- and micro-level; and by deconstructing these different configurations of influencing factors in the specific contexts where they occur, the project uncovers specific configurations of variables and contexts influencing the processes related to ESL. This allows the formulation of conceptual models useful for the development and implementation of policies and specific measures to influence ESL, making the project relevant not only to academics, but also to policy makers, school staff and representatives from the civil society.

Studying traditional educational contexts, such as schools provides data on the perceptions and interactions in a school context. The RESL.eu project takes this notion a step further and collects and analyses data in alternative learning arenas which will provide insights into what works for those students that left the traditional educational context as it did not connect with their personal aspirations. Moreover, studying early school leavers not participating in any formal educational institution reveals how these 'drop outs' engage with the challenges they are confronted with due to important economic and social transformations. These empirical data help to innovate educational systems from a user/student's perspective. Last but not least, elaborating on these issues, this research project focuses on the implementation of European educational policy on the national and local level, and tries to identify and understand processes of resistance to change initiated by educational actors or policy makers at all levels. Due to the fact that the RESL.eu project was inspired by the EU policies on the reduction of Early School Leaving by 2020 (European Commission (2013). Reducing early school leaving: Key messages and policy support. Final Report of the Thematic Working Group on Early School Leaving. Retrieved from [http://ec.europa.eu/education/schooleducation/leaving\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/schooleducation/leaving_en.htm)), the project findings and especially the translation thereof is of huge interest for many local policy makers, which also became clear during the National Action Platforms. The data was received with large interest by many policy makers, at distinct levels of the educational sector (national, regional and local, governments, schools, educational organisations etc.) and presented at the conference for Policy makers in Brussels (16<sup>th</sup> of November 2017) and the Closing Conference (22-24<sup>th</sup> of January 2018, hosted by the University of Antwerp).

Overall, the main strategy of the RESL.eu project was to disseminate the findings of the project through diverse channels, with distinct target groups. We undertook the following actions to fully exploit the potential of the project and have an impact on policies in Europe.

First, we increased the visibility of the project by designing a recognizable lay out and logo, so it would be easier to recognize by policy makers. We developed a clear strategy to communicate our findings and events to a wider audience, namely by designing a mail format, clear folders to hand out to people who are potentially interested in the findings of the project and (potential) respondents and schools. Over the course of the project, these folders were updated with some additional findings. Finally, a twitter account was set up, in order to group together all tweets based on the RESL.eu project.

Second, we aimed to write all project papers and publications in such a clear way that also non-academics would find it useful to read and could get access to additional information. These papers and project papers were disseminated through the RESL.eu website.

Third, joint papers and publications (special issues in academic journal, book published by Routledge) were published and presentations and symposia were organized in international European conferences (ECER, ABJOVES conferences, etc.) to spread the findings of the project, and to present the project as such. The final academic and policy conference can be seen as one final way to present all findings and to spread knowledge gained in this project to a variety of stakeholders and academics.

Fourth, in order to accommodate local policy makers, from each respective country, National Action Platforms and local final conferences were organized, to fully be able to exploit the potential of this project, in each local language and considering the local context. This was sometimes even accompanied with the presentation of adapted/local or translated policy briefs, to ensure impact.

Fifth, when organizing conferences, the press was often invited and informed, which led to references in the local press.

Finally, the changes in WP5 were organized in such way that a set of tools was developed that could be easily adapted to the local context (of various countries) and guide policy makers when setting up actions to reduce early school leaving. This set of tools could also be incorporated in other platforms of the European Commission, as well as local platforms at various levels.

A complete list of all dissemination activities and publications are attached hereby.

## [RESL.eu Publications and Project Papers](#)

### **Publications**

**Publication 1:** Araújo, H.C., Magalhães, A., Rocha, C. & Macedo, E. (2013). *Policies on Early School Leaving in nine European countries: a comparative analysis*. University of Porto, Centro de Investigação e Intervenção Educativas (CIIE),

<https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/RESL%20Publication%201.pdf>

**Publication 2:** Kaye, N., D'Angelo, A., Ryan, L., & Lőrinc, M. (2016). *Attitudes of school personnel to Early School Leaving*. Middlesex University, [https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/Publication%202\\_revisedfinal.pdf](https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/Publication%202_revisedfinal.pdf)

**Publication 3:** Nouwen, W., Van Praag, L., Van Caudenberg, R., Clycq, N., & Timmerman, C. (2016). *School-based Prevention and Intervention Measures and Alternative Learning Approaches to Reduce Early School Leaving*. CeMIS, University of Antwerp, [https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/RESL\\_Publicatie\\_A4\\_v5.pdf](https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/RESL_Publicatie_A4_v5.pdf)

**Publication 4:** Kaye, N., D'Angelo, A., Ryan, L., & Lőrinc, M. (2017) *Risk and Protective Factors. Findings from the RESL.eu international survey*. Middlesex University, University of Sheffield, <https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/Publication%204%20final%20version.pdf>

**Publication 5:** Van Caudenberg, R., Van Praag, L., Nouwen W., Clycq, N., & Timmerman, C. (2017). *A Longitudinal Study of Educational Trajectories of Youth at Risk of Early School Leaving*. CeMIS, University of Antwerp, <https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/RESL%20eu%20Publication%205%20FINAL%202.pdf>

**Publication 6:** Tomaszewska-Pekala, H., Marchlik, P., & Wrona, A. (2017). *Finding the way: how to prevent ESL and school disengagement. Lessons from the analysis of educational trajectories of at-risk youth from nine EU countries*. Faculty of Education, University of Warsaw, [https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/Deliverable%205\\_1\\_Publication%206\\_final\\_final\\_27\\_10\\_2017.pdf](https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/Deliverable%205_1_Publication%206_final_final_27_10_2017.pdf)

**Publication 7:** Clycq, N., Nouwen, W., Van Caudenberg, R., Orozco, M., Van Praag, L. & Timmerman, C. (2017). *Theoretical and methodological considerations when studying early school leaving in Europe*. CeMIS, University of Antwerp. [On the finalization of theoretical framework on the process and tackling of ESL](#)

**Publication 8:** Lenaerts, K., Kilhoffer, Z. & A. Silva (2017). *Exploring Possibilities of Performing a Cost-Benefit Analysis of Preventive, Intervention and Compensatory Measures Addressing Early School Leaving*, Brussel, CEPS. [https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/WP7\\_FINAL\\_CEPS.pdf](https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/WP7_FINAL_CEPS.pdf)

## Project papers

**Project paper 1:** Araújo, H.C., Rocha, C. & Macedo, E., Magalhães, A., & Oliveira, A. (2013). *Formulation of a Common Working Definition of ESL: International Contributions*. University of Porto, Centro de Investigação e Intervenção Educativas (CIIE), <https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/Project%20Papers/Project%20Paper%201%20-%20Final.pdf>

**Project Paper 2:** Clycq, N., Nouwen, W., & Timmerman, C. (2014). *Theoretical and methodological framework on Early School Leaving*. CeMIS – University of Antwerp, <https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/Project%20Paper%202%20-%20final%20version%20-%2009%2005%202014.pdf>

**Project Paper 3:** Kaye, N., D'Angelo, A., Ryan, L., & Lőrinc, M. (2014). *Early School Leaving in the European Union: Data Availability and Reporting*. Middlesex University, Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC), <https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/Project%20Paper%203%20-%20final%20version%20online.pdf>

**Project Paper 4:** Clycq, N., Nouwen, W., Braspenningx, M., Timmerman, C., D'Angelo, A., & Kaye, N. (2014). *Methodological approach of the qualitative fieldwork*. CeMIS – University of Antwerp, <https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/WP4/RESL%20eu%20Project%20Paper%204%20-%20CeMIS%20%20UA%20-24%2011%202014%20-%20Final%20version.pdf>

**Project Paper 5:** Kaye, N., D'Angelo, A., Ryan, L., & Lőrinc, M. (2015). *Students' Survey (A1): Preliminary analysis*. Social Policy Research Centre, Middlesex University, [https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/Project%20Paper%205\\_FinalVersion\\_revised.pdf](https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/Project%20Paper%205_FinalVersion_revised.pdf)

**Project Paper 6:** Nouwen, W., Clycq, N., Braspenningx, M., & Timmerman, C. (2015). *Cross-case Analyses of School-based Prevention and Intervention Measures*. CeMIS, University of Antwerp, <https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/RESL%20eu%20Project%20Paper%206%20-%20Final%20version.pdf>

**Project Paper 7:** Van Praag, L., Nouwen, W., Van Caudenberg, R., Clycq, N., & Timmerman, C. (2016). *Cross-case Analysis of Measures in Alternative Learning Pathways*. CeMIS, University of Antwerp, <https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/RESL%20eu%20Project%20Paper%207%20FINAL%2026-09-2016.pdf>

## **RESL.eu Policy briefs**

**Policy Brief 1:** Crul, M. & E. Keskiner (2017). *Promising Practices Inside and Outside Formal Secondary Education*. Rotterdam: Erasmus University of Rotterdam.

[https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/RESL\\_Policy%20Brief%201\\_final.pdf](https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/RESL_Policy%20Brief%201_final.pdf)

**Policy Brief 2:** Crul, M. & E. Keskiner (2017). Policy Brief for National and Regional Level Policy Makers. Rotterdam: Erasmus University of Rotterdam.  
[https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/RESL\\_Policy%20Brief%202\\_final.pdf](https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/RESL_Policy%20Brief%202_final.pdf)

**Policy Brief 3:** Crul, M. & E. Keskiner (2017). Findings of the Project: protective factors in high-risk educational contexts and other important findings for tackling school disengagement and ESL. Rotterdam: Erasmus University of Rotterdam.  
[https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/RESL\\_Policy%20Brief%203\\_corrected%20final%20version.pdf](https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/RESL_Policy%20Brief%203_corrected%20final%20version.pdf)

### Other deliverables of the RESL.eu project:

D5.2: ((Set of) evidence-based risk assessment tool(s) Jasińska-Maciążek, A. & H. Tomaszewska-Pękała (2017). Reducing early school leaving: toolkit for schools: How to identify and monitor students and schools in need of additional care and support. Warsaw: University of Warsaw.  
[https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/Deliverable%205\\_2\\_FINAL\\_9\\_12\\_2017\(1\).pdf](https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/Deliverable%205_2_FINAL_9_12_2017(1).pdf)

D8.1: List of all publications by all partners  
[https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/RESL\\_eu%20-%20D8\\_1\\_List%20of%20all%20publications%20by%20all%2029012018.pdf](https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/RESL_eu%20-%20D8_1_List%20of%20all%20publications%20by%20all%2029012018.pdf)

D8.2: List of the Action Platform meetings and publications  
[https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/RESL\\_eu%20-%20D8\\_2\\_List%20of%20the%20Action%20Platform%20meetings%20and%20publications\\_28012018.pdf](https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/RESL_eu%20-%20D8_2_List%20of%20the%20Action%20Platform%20meetings%20and%20publications_28012018.pdf)

D9.1 Consortium & Management Team  
[https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/RESL\\_eu%20-%20D9\\_1\\_ConsortiumManagementteam\\_Summier\\_08122017%20OPM%20LVP3.pdf](https://www.uantwerpen.be/images/uantwerpen/container23160/files/RESL_eu%20-%20D9_1_ConsortiumManagementteam_Summier_08122017%20OPM%20LVP3.pdf)

Address of the project public website and relevant contact details

Official public website: <https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/projects/resl-eu/about-resl-eu/>

Social media: [https://twitter.com/RESL\\_eu](https://twitter.com/RESL_eu) (general account), [https://twitter.com/RESL\\_eu\\_es](https://twitter.com/RESL_eu_es) (local Spanish account to inform local stakeholders)