



RAKE



CPD ARENDUSKESKUS

Reasons for dropping off from vocational education in Estonia

Executive summary

The objective of the survey on reasons for the interruption of studies in vocational education was to find out **the main reasons for interrupting vocational training, to map the risk factors leading to the interruption and the intervention measures applied in vocational educational institutions and to assess the relevance, performance, efficiency and effectiveness of the measures**. This survey is input for the Ministry of Education and Research for the development of the required measures in the vocational education system that would support the completion of studies. The results of the survey were used for the development of **recommendations** both for vocational schools as well as for the Ministry of Education and Research. As one of the outputs of the survey, **a sample questionnaire** that schools can use in the future was completed **for interrupters of vocational training**.

The interruption of vocational training is a serious problem in Estonia. Although the organisation of studies in vocational training has been made more flexible with the help of new forms and types of study, the interruption of studies in vocational training is on constant increase. In academic years 2004/05 to 2010/11 approximately each fifth student enrolled in vocational training interrupted their studies, which makes a total of 40,063 students. Later only a tenth of them have managed to obtain vocational or higher education. Of the interrupters, those who have later successfully finished school include mainly students who had interrupted their post-secondary vocational training. Although several surveys have been conducted to study the reasons for the interruption, these have not been detailed enough to develop measures on the basis thereof for reducing the dropout rate from vocational educational institutions.

This is a very complicated survey topic as studies are often interrupted as a result of intertwinement of several problems arising from personal affairs, family, school as well as socio-economic environment. This survey is based on in-depth interviews that were carried out among the three main target groups:

- interrupters of vocational training in recent years;
- those in danger of interruption as of autumn 2012;
- representatives of vocational educational institutions (headmasters (headmistresses), teachers, support staff).

The involvement of different parties allowed the opening of the nature of the problem from various aspects as the representatives of different target groups see the problem and its main reasons somewhat differently. However, the survey provided a clear outline of the bottlenecks of the present system that need to be dealt with in order to reduce the interruption of vocational training.

The first stage of the survey provided an overview of the earlier surveys on reasons for the interruption of vocational training and on intervention measures. On the basis of **the data of the Estonian Education Information System** an analysis was also performed of the vocational educational institutions and specialties where the interruption poses a problem as of 2012. The input

was used in selecting vocational educational institutions and specialties to be involved in the survey and in developing the interview plan. **Interviews with interrupters of vocational training, those in danger of interruption and school staff** provide information about the factors that make young people interrupt their studies in vocational training, which coping strategies are used and which support has been provided/received for positive coping. Based on earlier surveys and interviews, intervention measures were mapped and their relevance, performance, efficiency and effectiveness were assessed.

In the second stage of the survey a qualitative survey based on interviews was conducted in ten vocational educational institutions. The objective was to provide an overview of the whole vocational education system in Estonia and to involve vocational educational institutions of different characteristics. The main interviewees were those studying on the basis of basic education who also obtained secondary education at the same time. The persons interviewed included 30 interrupters of studies in vocational training through 2008-2010 and 32 students in danger of interruption at the moment the survey was conducted (in autumn 2012).

The interviews conducted with interrupters and with those in danger of interruption discussed the following topics: studies, problems related to studies, relations in school and family, reasons for interrupting studies, possible activities for avoiding interruption, current activities and future plans and advantages that finishing a vocational school and obtaining education provide on the labour market in general.

To provide a more general overview of the reasons for interrupting vocational training and of the intervention measures used, 30 in-depth interviews were conducted with the staff of the vocational schools in ten vocational educational institutions, 3 interviews in each institution. The persons interviewed were people of different positions: the headmaster (headmistress), deputy headmaster (-mistress), department head/head of the field, class teacher/group supervisor/team supervisor, teacher, support network employee (psychologist, socio-educative instructor, learning coach/career counsellor), head of boarding school facility and director of extracurricular activities. As the objective was to obtain as broad-based and well-reasoned information as possible, then, as a rule, the interviewees in each school included somebody from the management, support network and at least one teacher or class teacher.

The topics discussed in interviews with the school staff were as follows: the role of the interviewee himself/herself at school (incl. the relations of the interviewee with students and the rest of the school staff, satisfaction with work, teacher's motivation and development opportunities at school), the interrupters and reasons for interruption (incl. the main reasons for interruption and whether it is possible to bring out the image of a "typical interrupter", working habits of interrupters, the issue of being absent from school and school aversion, the impact of interrupters on fellow students) and coping strategies, provision of help and intervention measures (incl. which coping strategies are mainly used by those in danger of interruption, how often students turn to school for help and which role the latter plays in providing help, how much the school is engaged in supporting the resistance of interrupters, career counselling and values education).

Both earlier surveys as well as interviews held under this survey with interrupters of vocational training, those in danger of interruption and representatives of schools refer to several bottlenecks finding a solution to which is a prerequisite for reducing interruption in vocational training. As the focus of the survey was on students who continued vocational training on the basis of basic school, the problems intrinsic to this group and possible measures aimed at preventing their problems are discussed as follows.

An important reason for interrupting vocational training is **an incorrect choice of specialty** that indicates to weak career counselling at basic school that a vocational educational institution cannot compensate for either. It must be taken into account that a lot of basic school leavers are socially too immature yet in order to independently map the opportunities for further studies and to realise their strengths and weaknesses according to which their future career decisions should be made. At the same time such decisions have a huge impact on the future life of a young person, his/her success on labour market and social position in the society. Therefore, **at the basic school stage schools have a very important role in guiding young people in order for them to choose the area where to continue their studies according to their abilities and interests while being aware of different opportunities.** This increases considerably the probability that studies are finished successfully and a suitable job is found on the labour market.

More and more attention is paid to the systematic development of career counselling in Estonia and, according to the national curriculum for basic schools (RT I, 14.01.2011, 1) lifelong learning and career planning is one of the topics dealt with throughout teaching and education and one of the subject syllabuses of elective subjects in the subject syllabus of career studies. At the same time the interviews held with interrupters of vocational training, those in danger of interruption and employees of vocational schools indicate that currently the work of schools at the basic school stage is inadequate in this field. Therefore, young people choose their specialty and school without having an overview of their opportunities.

It is important to have a broad-based approach to career counselling in basic school. Career counselling at the basic school stage must include both the provision of an overview of different jobs, opportunities for further studies (vocational schools and upper secondary schools) as well as individual career counselling of basic school leavers. Taking a career test must involve a substantial analysis of the test results by a career counselling specialist and the discussion must be held in the presence of both the student as well as his/her parent. When introducing various jobs and schools, it is important to pay more attention than today to introducing different jobs and opportunities for further studies at the last stage of basic school. An important role here is played by cooperation of basic schools, vocational educational institutions and companies. It is important to gain a wider perspective in this context: e.g. closer involvement of employers in curriculum development in order to ensure the capacity of the offered specialties on one side and the compliance of masters finishing vocational school with the needs of the labour market on the other.

Career counselling must also continue in vocational educational institutions. It is important to ensure that, when choosing a specialty, young people were aware of what it means in practice to work in the given specialty. For the purpose it is expedient to consider the opportunity for organising curricula so

that in the first year the main focus in vocational training is on general subjects and on introducing the content of various specialties. It is important to stress here that teachers see a clear need to maintain a balance between general and specialty subjects in the curriculum structure in order to provide adequate variation at the beginning of the curriculum. However, it is clear that the first years must provide students with adequate information about different specialties. The results of the survey indicate that there are cases where students have discovered the unsuitability of their specialty only in the course of practical placement. Introducing different specialties in the first year allows avoiding such cases. The system would also make it possible for a young person who finds that he/she has still made an unsuitable career choice to change his/her specialty without losing a year of his/her studies.

Such a system would allow the harmonisation of the level of knowledge of students. Previous surveys have pointed out that **the problem in vocational training is a weak level of students**. Focussing on general subjects in the first year would enable to organise work in groups that have been formed on the basis of the level of knowledge of students and to improve thereby the quality of knowledge as well. Such a differentiation would improve students' learning motivation as the results of the interviews indicate that the bottleneck of the system today is the so-called average student's approach, which means that for some students the level is too low and for some students it is too high, which eventually leads to dissatisfaction in both of the groups

Focussing on general subjects at the beginning of studies would also allow finding out the potential of a young person for successful coping in the desired specialty on the labour market according to his/her personal qualities, intelligence and interests and to improve his/her knowledge and skills in those fields of study that are required to acquire specialist knowledge.

Placing a low value on studying, education and teachers by students is a good ground for being absent without reason and for the non-performance of study assignments, which in turn will bring along arrears and eventually school expulsion. **It is important to apply measures to prevent being absent from school**. It is worth considering the introduction of a system where in the case of being absent from school the topics dealt with in the lessons must always be retaken. Such a system would decrease the motivation for being absent without a reason and would not cause any gaps in knowledge as a result of absence. Another possibility is to always require advance notification of absence, which would contribute to disciplining students.

The results of interviews also indicate that an important role in avoiding absences and also other impediments leading to study problems, in identifying them at an early stage and in applying a suitable intervention measure by the school is played by the course supervisor/class teacher. Thus, it is important to ensure that **the course supervisor would have enough time to focus on the role of supporting students**. At this point the activities of a group supervisor in avoiding the interruption of students are very important (both in respect of keeping an eye on absences, "searching for", guiding and supporting students, elimination of their study arrears, motivation of students, etc.). It would be ideal if vocational schools had **professional group supervisors** who do not have any other tasks except those of group supervisors. In schools applying such a system the school staff has achieved good results in preventing absences and study arrears, which eventually help reduce interruption.

The introduction of the system requires **the existence of teaching materials** that allows learning the topic of the lesson independently. According to the results of the survey, in certain cases the lack of modern teaching materials has posed a problem and relates to a wider concern: **teachers' outdated teaching methods**. This in turn reduces the interest of students in learning. As teachers play the key role in generating interest in their subject, it is important that they command modern teaching (incl. active teaching) methods, are informed about the topic they teach and are able to associate it with the specialty (i.e. establish for students an association why it is necessary to teach the subject).

Furthermore, it is important to pay attention to **the curriculum development and update**. The set requirements need not always be in agreement with the capability of students and the challenge posed by the specialty, especially in current situation where vocational educational institutions need not in general be able to compete with upper secondary schools due to the reputation of vocational training.

An important role in generating interest in studies is also played by hobby education. Interviews with interrupters of vocational training and with those in danger of interruption indicate that **hobby groups related to the learned specialty where the theoretical knowledge can be applied immediately in practice** help reach an understanding whether the studied specialty is in the future the desired field to work in, generate interest in studies and are important in supporting social network (as fellows have a similar area of interest). Such a system would work the best if the responsibility and abilities have been transferred to the students themselves: thus the students can decide both on the topics of the hobby groups as well as on their implementation.

Several interviews carried out under the survey with interrupters and those in danger of interruption revealed very worrying cases of school bullying. The interviewees provided examples where the teacher used indecent expressions in lessons or shed negative light on a student in front of the whole class. In order to produce an adequate response to such cases, it is important that **a system be introduced in schools for obtaining feedback on teachers' work**. Such a system would work only if schools take into account the results obtained from feedback when planning their activities.

To obtain information about school bullying and other problems potentially leading to interruption on time, it is important that **the system of individual student evaluation conducted at least once a year also be introduced in vocational training**. It should be carried out by the so-called neutral party, i.e. a specialist (a psychologist, a socio-educative instructor) with whom the student is not in contact in everyday schoolwork as in such a case favourable atmosphere would be created for talking frankly about the problems arisen in relations with fellow students, teachers, course supervisor, etc., school staff, about difficulties in adaptation, financial problems, personal and family concerns, etc., problems that hinder studies. It is important that such discussions **ensure the confidentiality of the issues** as it is the basis for trustworthy communication. Such a system would also allow the detection of problems before they grow too serious so that a student cannot cope with them independently and, where necessary, provide help in solving the problems. This would also make it possible, where necessary, to provide more long-term support for overcoming the problem, refer to a specialist (a social worker, a psychologist), where necessary, and also create a good ground, while generating trustworthy relations, for students' own referral to a specialist when problems arise.

In the case of economic problems it is particularly important that information about various supporting opportunities reaches students. It is essential **to develop cooperation with local social officials**. Good opportunities are also provided, e.g. by the school lunch and grant application programmes. When providing support, schools should be able to proceed from the individual needs of students (e.g. paying the rent of the boarding school facility, providing clothes for practical placement, foodstuffs, etc.).