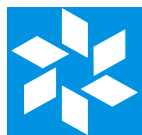
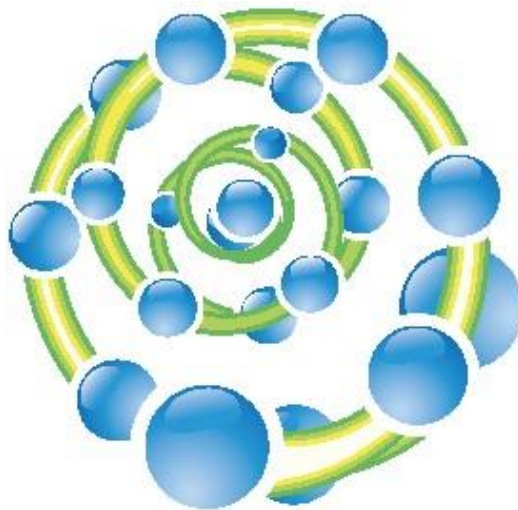


Early leaving from vocational education and training

Lithuania



This article on early leaving from vocational education and training written in 2013 is the first one of a set of articles prepared within Cedefop's ReferNet network. It complements general information on VET systems available online at <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Information-services/vet-in-europe-country-reports.aspx>.

ReferNet is a European network of national networks providing information and analysis on national VET to Cedefop and disseminating information on European VET and Cedefop work to stakeholders in the EU Member States, Norway and Iceland. The article has not been revised by Cedefop and opinions expressed are not necessarily those of Cedefop.

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Author: Qualifications and Vocational Education and Training Development Centre

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Table of contents

1. Background.....	2
2. Early leaving from education and training in Lithuania: definitions and statistics	3
3. Different aspects that may influence the decision to remain in or drop out from VET	4
3.1. Structural characteristics of the education and training/VET system.....	4
3.2. Labour market and social policy issues	6
3.3. Individual reasons that may influence the decision to discontinue VET.....	7
4. Measures to reduce drop out from VET.....	7
4.1. Measures in place to prevent drop out.....	7
4.2. Remedial measures in place within VET/related to VET	11
5. Conclusions	11
References	13

1. Background

One of the factors reducing the effectiveness of vocational education and training (VET) system is the dropping out from the training. This article aims to assess the extent and cause of dropping out from initial VET (IVET), measures within VET programmes to prevent learners from dropping out and remedial measures used for those who have dropped out from IVET in the past.

In Lithuania, IVET is organised at three different levels: lower secondary education (ISCED 2), upper secondary education (ISCED 3), and post-secondary non-tertiary education (ISCED 4). Learners have an opportunity to acquire a first vocational qualification and complete lower or upper secondary education.¹ Following the guidelines for the article prepared by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) the article concentrates on programmes at upper secondary education (ISCED 3) level.

The majority of VET students participate in ISCED 3A level VET programmes that are intended for the acquisition of European Qualifications Framework (EQF) level 4 professional qualifications and complete upper secondary general education (27,500 students in the year 2011). The least popular are ISCED 3C level VET programmes, which are designed for those students who have a lower secondary education and wish to acquire vocational qualification only (EQF level 3). Around 500–700 students participate in these programmes annually (665 students in 2011). It should also be noted that most students are attracted to traditional general education, with only 28.2% of pupils at the upper secondary education level participating in VET programmes.

The article was prepared based on available secondary sources and the survey of deputy directors for education and training of VET institutions (hereinafter – the survey). In the survey they were asked to identify the main reasons why learners drop out from VET, to describe the institutional measures used to prevent learners from dropping out, and to provide suggestions on how dropout rates could be reduced. After the assessment of the information received from the survey, seven in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives from the administration of VET institutions. During these interviews, the reasons for dropping out as well as present and suggested measures for reducing dropout rates were further specified.

In addition, further information was received from the specialists working at National Centre for Special Needs Education and Psychology (Specialiosios pedagogikos ir psichologijos centras) as well as the Centre of Information Technologies in Education (Švietimo informacinių technologijų centras).

¹ Detailed information about VET system in Lithuania is provided in the country report on VET in Lithuania; available online at http://libserver.cedefop.europa.eu/vetelib/2012/2012_CR_LT.pdf

2. Early leaving from education and training in Lithuania: definitions and statistics

The terms used to describe a student who has dropped out from the educational system are not consistent. As stated in the report entitled “Ankstyvojo pasitraukimo iš švietimo sistemos prevencija” (PPMI, 2007), several terms are used in Lithuania to define who should be considered as an early leaver. After a consideration of the terms used in legislation and official statistical data, it can be stated that in Lithuania the term “early leavers from education and training” is understood as proposed by Cedefop.² In Lithuania, the information provided on drop-outs from VET usually contains of the data on the change in the number of students who stopped learning at VET institutions, i.e. the focus is placed on the learning process rather than the learning outcome (i.e. if qualification is acquired or not acquired). Since the aim of the article is to provide information that would help to understand the reasons for dropping out from VET programmes at upper secondary education level, the term used for analysing the data will be the one that is suggested by Cedefop: “The term drop-outs refer to young people who started an upper secondary VET programme but did not successfully complete it”.

National data about students is collected in the pupil register (Mokinių registras). Together with other data about learners, the register contains the dates of and reasons for dropping out. The data collected in the pupil register is provided by educational institutions and is administered by the Centre of Information Technologies in Education. A summary of information about drop-outs is published in the Education Information Management System (<http://www.svis.smm.lt>) and submitted to the Statistics Lithuania (Lietuvos statistikos departamentas). The statistical data provided on an annual basis contains only information about the total number and share of drop-outs from IVET, without differentiation among the different ISCED level programmes (Table 1).

Table 1. Students who dropped out from VET institutions

Academic year	Number of drop-outs in one academic year	%
2009–2010	7,130	14.7
2010–2011	8,281	16.5
2011–2012	7,731	15.7

Source: Education 2012, Statistics Lithuania, 2013.

The data used at the institutional level is usually the same that is provided to the pupil register. Some institutions collect additional information that enables one to understand the reasons why students choose to drop out from VET. Analysis of the data available from the pupil register showed a wide variation in drop-out rates amongst different VET institutions, varying from several percent to 30% per annum, which proves that there are VET institutions that have good practice in applying preventive measures.

² % of population aged 18-24 who have attained max. ISCED level 2 and 3c

3. Different aspects that may influence the decision to remain in or drop out from VET

The data on drop-outs that is provided to the pupil register also contains information about the reasons for students to drop out from VET. Still, it remains unclear what lies behind such reasoning as “voluntarily” or “other reasons”. Therefore, a goal of the survey was to identify what those “other reasons” are. The survey participants specified various reasons (e.g. difficult financial status of the family, relocation, personal, family reasons, etc.), with the most common being: moving abroad (to live and/or work), lack of motivation to learn and employment.

Further in this chapter we will analyse the main reasons and factors for dropping out looking at structural characteristics of the education and training system, labour market and social policy as well as personal factors.

3.1. Structural characteristics of the education and training/VET system

Duration of compulsory education

As stipulated in the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania (1992), education is compulsory for persons under the age of 16. Upper secondary education level VET programmes are designed for persons above the age of 16. A hypothesis proposed before the preparation of this article was that one of the reasons for students to discontinue learning is that education is compulsory only until the age of 16 and that students would remain in education if the duration for compulsory education was prolonged. This hypothesis was rejected as the survey results showed that only a very small number of students choose to drop out because of the duration of compulsory education. On the other hand, because of this constitutional provision, the preventive and remedial measures at the national level are targeted only at those individuals who do not attend school and are under the age of 16. VET institutions, in the meantime, are left to deal with the older students by themselves.

Offer of VET programmes

Two-type VET programmes are available at upper secondary education level: programmes for students having completed lower secondary education and not leading to upper secondary general education (ISCED 3C, LTQF level 3) and programmes for students leading to completion of upper secondary general education (ISCED 3A, LTQF level 4). Analysis of data gathered from the pupil register showed that over 20% of students drop out from ISCED 3C programmes and 13% drop out from the ISCED 3A programme per year. It can therefore be assumed that students are less interested and motivated to complete ISCED 3C programmes. This could be also because there are few ISCED 3C programmes offered.

ISCED 3A programmes are organised around 2+1 model (i.e. the first two years the main focus is placed on the general education subjects that are required to complete upper secondary general education, and the last year is devoted to acquiring the professional skills required). A hypothesis made before the preparation of this article was that quite a significant number of

students tend to leave the ISCED 3A programme after two years, i.e. after having obtained the maturity certificate. This hypothesis was not supported by the survey results. According to the representatives of VET institutions, only a minority of students leave VET immediately after obtaining a maturity certificate.

The flexibility of VET

According to the Description of Order of Formal VET (Lithuanian ŠMM, 2012), on the request of a student and if VET institution provides such a possibility, the student may change VET programme he or she has chosen to another one. The learners are provided the opportunity to both learn and work, i.e. to agree on individualised learning schedule, to adjust theory training time-schedule to work time, to organise practical training at the student's workplace. Nevertheless, as shown by the survey results, failure to combine work and school is one of the main reasons for students to drop out from VET. Also, repetition of school year is not applied for IVET learners. Students are allowed to individually prepare and account for the failed course by the end of the running school year. On one hand, repetition of school year is associated with higher drop-out rate, but on the other hand, not all students manage to prepare individually for failed subjects and choose to leave education anyway.

Partial qualification and modular training

Under the current legal framework, a student who fails to complete VET programme is awarded a certificate of learning outcomes. If the student decides to return to the educational system, his or her previous learning experience would be recognised based on this certificate.

In order to improve the flexibility of the system, Lithuania is introducing a modular VET model. The legal framework states that all the programmes designed to acquire the qualification should be modular. The modular training gives individuals a better opportunity to customise their learning pathway in order to acquire or improve their qualification. The modular model also helps to shorten the training duration by recognising and validating the knowledge and competences acquired in the past. It also allows students to return to VET and continue training in another educational institution or even another country. According to the concept of the modular VET system in Lithuania, modular programmes will be designed to gain partial qualifications. The individuals who complete a VET programme module will be issued a certificate. A national project to design the modular programmes is currently implemented by Qualifications and VET Development Centre (Kvalifikacijų ir profesinio mokymo plėtros centras).

Implementation of an apprenticeship system

Even though the new edition of the Law on VET (2007) legitimates apprenticeship as a form for the organisation of VET, this form of training is rarely applied in VET in practice. It is foreseen to promote this form of organising VET, as it should attract students who are more inclined to practical training and would facilitate school/ work combination.

Other factors

Some survey participants claimed that the lack of proper career guidance is a reason for dropping out from VET. Some students are not able to assess their skills and capacities or do not receive the required counselling while still at a general education institution. For these reasons, they later tend to have difficulties in choosing a profession that suits them, which leads to emigration or unqualified jobs.

A less frequently mentioned reason was the “competition” between general education and VET institutions for the so-called “pupil’s basket” (the amount of funding allocated to the schools for each pupil). It was noted that general education institutions sometimes manage to convince their past pupils to discontinue their training at a VET school and return to the general education institution.

The opinion was also expressed that students drop out from VET because of weak preparation at their previous general education school, which results in poor performance and lack of motivation, which in turn affects their attendance.

3.2. Labour market and social policy issues

The survey results showed that major reasons for students to drop out from VET are of a financial (economic) nature. Students at VET institutions often come from poor families, and to improve their quality of life, they, alone or with their families, move abroad or seek a job in Lithuania. This forces them to discontinue education due to the inability to combine both school and work.

Currently conditions for young persons to find jobs with low qualifications are rather favourable. According to data provided by the Lithuanian Labour Exchange, from 2009 to 2011 the number of the available job positions at International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) 5–9 major groups has increased from 71,000 to 144,000. One-third of these job positions did not require any qualifications (22,000 in 2009 and 47,000 in 2011).

According to data provided by the Statistics Lithuania, the average salary for an unqualified worker is around 40% lower than that for a qualified worker (according to data for 2010, LTL 1,084 and LTL 1,519 respectively). Nevertheless, young people who do not generate any income and are used to their parents living on allowances only consider this as sufficient money and leave the education system to be able to work. This was also confirmed by the survey. According to respondents, some companies do not require any proof of qualification or competences acquired. Furthermore, some companies (e.g. those operating in the metalworking industry) offer the same salary to both unqualified and recent VET graduates. Workers deserve salary increase in stages: starting from the minimum salary for the lowest quality jobs and gradually earning more by performing more sophisticated operations. There are cases when VET institutions receive phone calls from companies looking for workers for loading, product assembly, packaging, or other

unqualified jobs. Some companies send staff to meet with students at VET institutions to invite them to work in their companies irrespective of their qualification (acquired or not).

Opportunity to get social support is a motive to drop out from VET for some students. Interviews revealed that there are cases when students leave the education system so as to be able to register with the labour exchange and apply for social benefits. There are also cases, when students register with the labour exchange and then they are sent back to their previous VET institution to continue their training. This proves that there is a lack of coordination of the policies and measures applied by educational, employment and social security institutions.

3.3. Individual reasons that may influence the decision to discontinue VET

The survey participants often mentioned two personal reasons that influence students' decision to discontinue their education: lack of motivation and weak previous preparation at general education institutions.

Other personal reasons indicated were poor performance, difficulties in adaptation, asocial lifestyle, conflict behaviour, health problems, and lack of support from family. VET institutions claimed that impact of these reasons is being reduced by preventive measures applied (see Section 4).

It should be noted that personal reasons are quite often intertwined with social and financial reasons and structural education system factors. For example, a lack of motivation to learn may be influenced by the poor financial status of the family and poor performance may be caused by the inflexible organisation and poor individualisation of training.

4. Measures to reduce drop out from VET

4.1. Measures in place to prevent drop out

In this section, we will provide an overview of the most common preventive measures taken at the institutional level. As already mentioned above, national preventive and remedial measures are aimed at individuals under the age of 16. The responsibility for the preventive measures targeted at older students therefore rests with VET institutions alone. In many cases, VET institutions have adopted systems for tracking students' attendance, they design action plans to improve attendance and performance. The survey showed that VET institutions put a lot of effort into retaining their students. Most of them have established child welfare commissions (vaiko gerovės komisija) as specified by the Ministry of Education and Science (ŠMM) in 2011. Establishment of these commissions resulted in better coordination of the preventive measures. According to the regulation (Lithuanian SMM, 2011), a child welfare commission organises meetings with the students at-risk, their parents and group mentors, identifies reasons for students absence and poor performance; designs necessary actions and arranges for support required; evaluates cases of breach of code of behaviour, acts of violence, bullying, addictions, and legal offences, etc.

Institutions providing IVET programmes have adopted internal quality management systems (for example, ISO9001). Review of quality manuals (i.e. documents that specify the procedure for implementing the quality management system) showed that schools are committed to observing and assessing dropout rates and their causes, the support available to students, and acting to improve the situation.

The information about the preventive measures applied at the institutional level was gathered during the survey. The effectiveness of such measures was later assessed during the interviews conducted.

Social, educational and psychological support

According to the representatives of VET institutions, social, educational and psychological support is the most effective preventive measure. A key success factor for working with students at risk of dropping out is a group mentor (grupės vadovas). Group mentors are usually the ones who first see signs of problematic behaviour and have the closest relationship with the students. They can therefore detect the early signs of difficulties faced by a student; initiate a meeting with the parents (guardians), administration, or child welfare commission; or visit the student's family. Most VET institutions have employed social pedagogues who are of great assistance when trying to understand the reasons for students not attending school, the causes of bad behaviour and conflicts and finding efficient ways to deal with the problems; providing advice to parents and teachers; creating a proper learning environment; cooperating with the community, state or non-governmental institutions that provide social, psychological or legal support. Many VET institutions also employ psychologists who evaluate the psychological, personality or development issues of students at risk; provide counselling to students and their parents; prepare individual recommendations for dealing with the problems.

There is also support available for students having learning difficulties. There are extra hours allocated for additional tutoring and consultations for those who have the gaps in their knowledge or have missed too many lessons.

Special attention is given to preventive work with students who have addictions and behavioural problems. Additional counselling is provided by social pedagogues and psychologists. Some educational institutions are implementing various projects to prevent addiction.

Working with parents

The survey participants emphasised the importance of building relationship with the parents of students at risk of dropping out. It is increasingly difficult to maintain these relationships, sometimes because of the number of parents who have moved abroad. Educational institutions have various tools for attracting parents to school life: formal and informal meetings, inviting parents to various school events.

Financial support and incentives

Free meals, accommodation and transportation is offered to students facing financial difficulties. The school can provide financial support to socially or financially disadvantaged students, students having children or in other similar cases.

Scholarships are available to students who are performing well, depending on their grades. Some institutions have implemented policies whereby all first year students receive a scholarship for a certain period.

Some of the institutions stated that they provide financial bonuses as an incentive for students who are performing well academically, have a high attendance rate, are involved in extra curriculum activities, and participate in events, competitions, etc. For example, the groups with the highest attendance rates are sent on school trips.

There are also cases where students receive scholarships from companies.

Flexible scheduling

As shown by the survey, one of the main reasons for students to drop out from VET institutions is employment and inability to combine work and learning. Some of the schools are managing this problem successfully: they allow students to learn theory individually, complete separate modules or subjects at a time suitable for them, apply various teaching methods (as well as virtual classrooms), organise morning and evening classes, and recognise the competences acquired at work as a part of the learning programme.

Learning for students having children

Students having children are quite vulnerable since the birth of the child usually has a negative effect on the financial status of the young family or a single mother. Furthermore, it becomes really difficult to handle both education and taking care of the baby. In these cases, the educational institutions allow students to have a customized learning plan or, if necessary, to take the academic leave. Also, more and more educational institutions are providing childcare facilities. The first child day-care facility was built in Vilnius Vocational Training Centre for Business Service Specialists. It is interesting to note that at the same time, the child day-care facility is used as a practical training facility for nurses.

Academic leave

Students are provided with the opportunity to suspend their studies by taking academic leave where there are valid reasons for doing so (military service, pregnancy and maternity leave, care for a family member in need, employment due to a difficult financial situation, inability to combine work and learning, temporary stays abroad). Academic leave is normally granted for one year with the possibility of a further extension. During the academic leave students maintain their student status.

Adaptation programmes

First-year students who have just enrolled a VET institution are offered adaptation programmes of various duration. These programmes provide new students with opportunities to

get to know each other, to create a comfortable and friendly environment for both students and teachers, to agree on the norms and rules for internal communication and behaviour, to inform students about the courses available and VET institution. Some institutions have introduced special adaptation questionnaires for students and teachers to gather information. Another successful initiative is the social passport that is completed and periodically updated by social pedagogues. This document contains information on the students, i.e. disadvantaged students, parents who live abroad, addictions, special needs etc.

Career education

The aim of career education is to assist students to acquire the competences that are required for the successful completion of the training, future career, lifelong learning as well as to secure the smooth transition from education to work. VET institutions have career centres, employ career consultants and implement career education programmes. According to the survey participants, appropriate career guidance motivates students to learn and acquire a qualification. In order to inform students on their career prospects, VET institutions organise meetings with employers or graduates, who can give personal examples on how the acquired qualification helped them to find job and how it contributes to their career development.

Extra-curriculum activities and participation in projects as a preventive measure

Educational institutions organise extra curriculum activities where students can fulfil their social, self-realization needs, follow their hobbies and interests and improve their practical and social skills. Schools organise art, sport, technical and other activities. This also helps to keep students occupied, makes school life attractive to them, and, in turn, improves the attendance.

Most of the educational institutions involve students in various projects. Some of the survey participants emphasized the role of project activities in motivating students to attend school and perform well. Students are especially attracted to mobility projects, as trips organised within projects are often their first trip abroad.

Improvement of learning environment

Student motivation rises when the school provides for a high quality learning environment, especially modern practical training facilities. Currently, a number of VET institutions are implementing projects for the establishment of sectoral practical training centres that will be furnished with the modern technologies and equipment in specific sector. It is foreseen to establish 42 new sectoral practical training centres by the year 2014.

Professional development of teachers working with at-risk students

VET institutions organise teachers training so that they are able to detect at-risk students in time. The training involves topics on how to identify the reasons for students being absent from school, how to distinguish the students that have emotional or psychological problems, how to improve student motivation and improve their attendance rates. Some VET institutions identify work with at-risk students as a top priority in teachers training plans.

4.2. Remedial measures in place within VET/related to VET

Individuals who have dropped out in the past may apply to a VET institution directly to start or renew their education. Most VET institutions have instruments in place to recognise competences previously acquired while learning or working. Many VET institutions have programmes of less than one-year's duration for continuing VET. These programmes are becoming an attractive alternative to IVET programmes which last from two to three years. On completion of the programme, students acquire a professional qualification and are awarded with a vocational qualification certificate.

According to VET institutions representatives, some students, who have previously dropped out, return to education after having learned that having a qualification is important to the employers. Some of VET institutions representatives claim that they stay in touch with drop-outs and their families and take the initiative to bring them back to school whenever possible. There are also cases where employers suggest to their unqualified employees to return to VET institution.

In cases where an individual, who has previously dropped out of a VET institution, is registered with the labour exchange as a job seeker, he may participate in unemployed training (both formal and non-formal). All graduates of the formal learning programmes are issued with a vocational qualification certificate while those who have completed non-formal learning programmes are issued with a certificate of the competences acquired.

Charity and support organizations, such as Caritas, crisis centres and other organisations providing social support and working with socially vulnerable and excluded groups, may also provide students who have dropped out with the opportunities to return to VET system. The services provided or the projects implemented by these organisations are targeted towards the integration of socially vulnerable and excluded individuals into the labour market, their social and psychological rehabilitation, vocational training (usually, non-formal). In most cases, socially vulnerable and socially excluded individuals do not have a qualification, therefore it is very important to improve the cooperation between these organisations and VET institutions by offering a variety of flexible learning opportunities.

5. Conclusions

According to official statistics, around 16% of students drop out from IVET each year. This evidences that dropping out from IVET is an important issue, however deeper analysis of this problem is not being carried out systemically. Situation is complicated by the fact that VET system on its own is not capable to neutralise the main reasons for dropping out that have been identified during the survey of VET institutions.³ This can be achieved only in cooperation with other education sectors and taking integrated education, social security, labour market policy measures with input from social partners.

³ Moving abroad, lack of motivation to learn, employment

When preparing this article the following national education sector reforms and measures at provider level have been identified to reduce dropping out from IVET:

- Data about dropping out and its reasons is collected in the national register of pupils. Having relevant instruments for analysis in place, this data enables detailed analysis of dropping out from IVET, for example it was already identified that differences in drop-out level among VET institutions varies from several percent to 30 %.
- When modernising VET, a big focus is put on the flexibility of learning. The main measures for achieving flexibility are implementation of the Lithuanian Qualifications Framework and transition to modular VET. According to the Description of Order of Formal VET (2012), learners in IVET programmes are provided the opportunity to combine learning and working, they may change VET programme and they are not left to repeat the course another year but are provided opportunity to self-prepare and account for the failed course. However, the survey of VET institutions signals that not all provisions of this procedure are being fully realised.
- Initiation of child welfare commissions in VET institutions has led to a better coordination of internal institutional measures for prevention of dropping out. Introduction of internal quality assurance management systems at IVET institutions, that cover systems for tracking of dropping out, its reasons and assistance for learners, should become additional impulse for making prevention more effective.
- Back in 2001-05 a programme for establishing social pedagogues positions in education institutions was implemented to make social assistance and prevention more effective. The programme addressed VET sector too. The survey of VET institutions has confirmed that social, pedagogical and psychological assistance is the most efficient measure to prevent dropping out.
- In recent years national budget and ESF investments focused on the modernisation of VET practical training infrastructure and updating of VET teachers competences to work with new technologies. This improves VET image and quality, contributes to the strengthening of motivation of learners to gain a qualification. It is important to ensure the efficient usage of this infrastructure as well as its access, especially for persons at risk of dropping out.
- Legal basis (Lithuanian ŠMM 2012 a, b) oblige VET institutions to implement career education but only a small share of VET providers has mentioned career education as an efficient measure.
- Statistical data shows that number of adults who have no professional qualification is increasing in VET institutions. This tells that VET institutions are open for those who dropped out from education earlier. Another path for returning drop-outs to VET is the unemployed training organised according to formal VET programmes. Nevertheless, interviews with VET providers have revealed that re-engagement of drop-outs is not considered to be a priority.
- Analysis of data of national students register has revealed huge differences in drop-out rate among different VET institutions; the survey and interviews showed variety of measures applied and all this evidences that VET providers have good practices in place to prevent dropping out from VET. Dissemination of these practices would be beneficial.

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