

# VOCATIONAL SCHOOL DROPOUTS' PERSPECTIVE OF DROPOUT RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

**Kristi Kõiv, & Liis Leilop**  
*Institute of Education, University of Tartu (Estonia)*

## Abstract

Early leaving from vocational education is both an individual and societal problem that has been the focus of researchers' attention for over a decade, and a previous metanalytic review (Böhn, & Deutscher, 2022) indicates that former research has mainly focused on dropout drivers within the individual and less on the learning environment in the workplace, with the proportion of qualitative research being relatively limited. The aim of this study was to gain insight into the risk and protective factors of dropping out from vocational training by vocational school dropouts' perspective. This study followed a qualitative and descriptive research design stemming from semi-structured personal interviews with 12 adolescents (8 males and 4 females) who have left initial vocational training before achieving a formal qualification in Estonia. Deductive qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the data gathered through transcribed interviews. Dropping out from vocational schools was associated with multiple specific risk factors based on a dynamic framework model (Böhn, & Deutscher, 2022), while there was a clear focus on learner, learning activities, learning supportive networks and flexible career choice as protective factors and less focus has been placed on the workplace environment and contextual factors from the perspective of dropouts' own reflections.

**Keywords:** *Early leaving from vocational education, dropout risk factors, dropout protective factors, qualitative study.*

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## 1. Introduction

Vocational education and training (VET) is a part of ensuring a flexible and skilled workforce who is capable of making changes according to the labor market (Spotlight on VET Estonia, 2017). This aim is disrupted by the challenge of premature termination of contract by the students in VET (Böhn & Deutscher, 2022). Early school leaving from vocational education has been a widely discussed problem in Europe for a few decades (Schmitsek, 2022).

High dropout rates in turn lead to higher unemployment, poverty and poorer health and are therefore costly for the society as a whole (e.g. Böhn & Deutscher, 2022; Glokowska et al, 2007; Psifidou et al, 2021; Rumberger, 2011; Salva et al, 2019).

While much research focuses on the apprentice's perspective and factors related to them, environmental and workplace/ vocational school related factors are less researched (Böhn & Deutscher, 2022). The decision to terminate the contract with the vocational school before graduation is a long-term process (Böhn & Deutscher, 2022). This decision is the result of a long-term process where the apprentice has intention to terminate the contract with the vocational school and where intention turns into action and the apprentice leaves school early (Beekhoven & Dekkers, 2005; Samuel & Burger, 2020). Research suggests that the critical time in this process is the transitional year from one education level to another where the students at risk can be more vulnerable to risk factors (Elffers, 2012).

The aim of this study was to gain insights into the risk and protective factors of dropping out from vocational training by vocational school dropouts' perspective. The research question was addressed: What are, according to young people who have interrupted vocational training, the risk and protective factors for dropping out of vocational schools?

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study design and sample

The study follows a qualitative research design. The sample was based on the information that one Estonian vocational college was able to provide on the students who had studied there for a year but not graduated. Out of the potential 122 participants, 12 were included in the research. All of the participants had dropout experience from vocational education. The sample consisted of male (n=8) and female (n=4) participants who were in between the age of 18-23 years and had studied at the vocational schools for 1-3 years.

### 2.2. Data collection

The questions were presented to the participants during semi-structured interviews. The measure focuses on participants subjective experience and perceptions which have to do with risk and protective factors for dropout that are connected to school, home, the self, and peers (for example: *What circumstances related to the school have influenced your interruption of your studies at the vocational school? What circumstances in relation to the school influence it to prevent the interruption of studies from the vocational school?*).

All the participants were contacted individually by the second researcher. After an informed consent process the participants agreed to the semi-structured interviews and a meeting was set up at a neutral place. Confidentiality of the findings and protection of their identities were explained to the participants upon agreements and before the interview. Despite the sensitivity of the topic, mutual trust was established. The semi-structured interviews lasted between 25-45 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

### 2.3. Data analysis

Findings were analyzed with deductive content analysis based on conceptual models of dropout categories as the core of qualitative meta-analysis Böhn & Deutscher (2022) differentiating learning/working condition factors, professional factors, school factors, learner factors, activity factors, and context factors. The data gathered through transcribed interviews in the evaluation of keywords, meanings, and themes during the data analysis: data was segregated, grouped and re-linked in order to find categories and subcategories for the risk and protective factors of vocational education dropout. To strengthen the study investigator triangulation was used.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Risk factors

The first category consists of descriptions of overall good learning conditions with workplace learning at a practical site and work-based learning, but the combination of the learning and working condition in the case of simultaneous employment was described as a risk factor of dropout by the respondents in the case of a lack of adequate training personnel at the VET schools.

Based on the data analysis, the professional factors of dropping out of vocational education were divided into two subcategories: (1) career choice decision-making process – dropouts described their wrong career choice as the main risk factor of dropping out, whereby there the expectation that their interests may change during training period was mentioned; and (2) support for career choice – the career choice process without the support from families and/or personal career counselling at vocational school was perceived as a risk factor for dropping out from vocational training by the respondents.

The analysis shows that school factors influence the decision to leave VET school. Namely, poor academic performance as falling behind with assignments, bad grades and failing exams was perceived as risk factor of dropping out by respondents; and relations with teachers and peers were perceived as conflictual and rejecting with signs of teacher-targeted and peer-targeted bullying behavior.

The research results elicit numerous learner factors influencing dropout from vocational learning with following subcategories: (1) demographic – marital status, parentage and having children; (2) parental – parents' low income and socio-economic status; missing of parental financial support; parental divorce/death. (3) personal – low self-efficacy regarding school and self-confidence; low language and mathematical skills; (physical) health problems; misconduct, absenteeism, drug use and abuse; low learning motivation, whereas the last mentioned was the overriding factor.

The category of activity factors consisted of descriptions of risk factors in two areas: (1) workplace learning tasks at a practical site were complicated to combine with the vocational training process in terms of time and distance; and (2) social interaction in the student dormitory was overloaded psychically and psychologically hindering the professional studies process.

Two kind of context factors of dropping out from vocational training were mentioned by respondents of the study: (1) distance from home as restrictive framework conditions for vocational training, and (2) alternatives to VET training as a permanent job or occupation with higher wage or alternative career pathway training/military service.

### **3.2. Protective factors**

Individual pathway to combine practical training at the workplace with work-based training at a vocational school was perceived as a protective factor integrating learning and workplace conditions by respondents.

The evaluations of the subjects divided into three kinds of protective factors in relation to professional career choice: (1) dropping out was viewed as a successful strategy to adjust to a wrong career choice by choosing a more fitting training program/career path/occupation reflecting a deliberate and conscious career decision-making process; (2) second protective factor was connected with support – emotional and motivational support from family members (especially from mothers) for vocational studies, and career guidance and financial support as study grants from vocational institutional level; and (3) third protective factor for dropping out of vocational training was connected with the peers' and friends' support to strengthen personal professional identity.

Analysis of the results showed that school-related protective factors were opposite to school-related risk factors for dropping out of vocational studies: successful academic studies and positive teachers' and peers' attitudes and relationships.

At the individual level, participants of the study strongly emphasized self-efficacy, self-confidence, self-discipline, and intrinsic learning motivation as protective factors for dropping out of vocational studies.

In relation to contextual protective factors, one was emphasized – future aspirations: to find another training curriculum during vocational studies, to decide to enroll in vocational school full-time, to go to university or enlist in military service.

## **4. Conclusions**

A comprehensive and structured overview as meta-synthesis about the reasons for dropping out from VET within a dynamic framework model was based mainly on retrospective qualitative and quantitative research (Böhn & Deutscher, 2022) with focus on learner factors. External risk and protective factors and their influence should be considered more to gain more detailed insight to dropout from vocational education.

This study focused on young peoples' viewpoint who have experienced dropping out from vocational training to gain insights into the risk and protection factors for dropout of vocational training.

Based on our results, we conclude that, from the vocational training dropouts' points of view, the possible risks for dropouts are diverse and heterogenous, but with specific emphases. It was revealed that dropouts describe multiple learners personal (connected with low motivation, lack of self-regulating skills, behavior problems) and professional risk factors (problems in the career choice process, lack of support for career choice), followed by school (academical problems, problems related to relationships with teachers and peers), context factors (distance from home, alternatives to VET training), and activity factors of the training process (process interruptions of the practical training at the workplace, social interaction disorders in the student dormitory) with less focus on learning/working condition factors.

Dropout youth emphasize the influence of learners' personal (high motivation, competent self-regulating skills), and professional factors (flexible path of the career choice process, support for career choice) as dropout prevention tools in vocational education, followed by school (academic success, positive relationships with/attitudes toward teachers and peers) and context protection factors (alternatives to the VET training) with less focus to learning/working condition (balance between the proportion of practical training at the workplace and work-based training at a vocational school) without focusing on activity factors of the training process.

Drawing on dropouts' views on dropout risk and protective factors, the main commonality is that they represent a conglomerate of reasons where the learner goes through a decision-making process within the framework of vocational education, where different options are considered in relation to the career choice and finally the decision to leave training early is made (Aarkrog et al., 2018). Previous research claims that the decision-making process is influenced by various time-varying factors that can have a stronger or weaker effect depending on the amount of supporting protective factors of dropout in vocational education (Samuel & Burger, 2020).

At the individual level, from VET dropouts' point of view, dropping out can be a successful strategy to adjust to an unsuitable career choice by choosing a more fitting educational pathway or career. On the other hand, dropping out from vocational training causes academic failure, increases both the risk of demotivation and the need to re-orient vocational career choices. Therefore, the opportunity to create an individual educational pathway is needed by the students at-risk of dropout from vocational education (Schmitsek, 2022). The participants of this study described their willingness to continue their education on another training program which agrees with Schmitsek (2022) whose research claims that second chance education is an effective protective factor and method to keep the at-risk group in education. However, the support is most effective when it is personalised and takes the student's profile into account (Psifidou et al, 2021).

The participants with VET dropping out experiences in the current study pointed to the need and existence of individualized career guidance support at the VET institution level that helps them build resilience (Schmid & Haukedal, 2022) to the risk factors that they are facing. Guidance and counselling can be aimed at students as prevention for those who haven't chosen their training programme yet, as intervention for those at risk of dropping out or to assist in bringing the former students back to vocational education with support in finding the suitable program (Psifidou et al., 2021).

Intervention at the individual level connected with individual study plans, second-chance programs, a combination of education, employment, counselling, and social services as possible focus of prevention programmes can meet different needs and conditions of the target group of risk of dropping out from vocational education (Psifidou et al., 2021; Schmitsek, 2022). Since the decision to leave vocational education early is influenced by factors even before entering the vocational education system, career counselling and support should be provided earlier as well (Krötz & Deutscher, 2022), but focusing on VET dropout risk and protections factors form dynamic framework model it seems particularly fruitful to have a multi-side focus integrating learners' factors, training quality and conditions and also context factors with emphasis to activity factors connecting both the working process and social interaction context in vocational schools with larger community.

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