

## **The early school leaver count as a policy instrument in EU governance: The un/intended effects of an indicator**

The EU has embraced the use of indicators as policy instruments for achieving common aims. One of the indicators, “early school leaver” (ESL), depicts the proportion of young people leaving education and training prematurely. Initially defined as an education policy indicator, it has been transformed into a performance indicator measuring the targets of the current Europe 2020 strategy. In this article, we examine how the indicator works as *a policy instrument* at different levels of governance applying the conceptual tools provided by the policy instrumentation approach to unpack the components, pinpoint the political effects, and reveal the power relations they produce. Thus challenging the taken-for-grantedness of comparison as a way of knowing we have intended to shift the focus of discussion concerning the role of large-scale comparisons in education towards more productive directions: moving from problematisation and deconstruction of comparison to engaging with processes of measurement.

### **Introduction**

In the EU Commission’s *Education and Training Monitor 2015* report on Finland (in the Finnish language), it is claimed that the national school interruption rate was slightly below the EU average of 9.5% in 2014. While reading the report I [the first author] found the claim clearly incorrect, but agreed with the further claim that the share of school drop-outs in Finland had remained stable over the last decade (ibid., p. 3). I was familiar both with the Finnish education system and the relevant statistics to know that school drop-out in Finland is an extremely rare phenomenon: the rate of pupils successfully completing compulsory schooling has fluctuated between 99.5% and 99.8% over the past fifteen years (OSF, 2018a). Obviously, there had been either a miscalculation or a false interpretation of the figures that had travelled from the EU back to Finland. In order to determine where the erroneous figures had originated I examined carefully the table in the report (EC, 2015b, p. 2) and discovered that the figure of 9.5% did not actually refer to schoolchildren, but to 18–24-year-olds. Nevertheless, 9.5% seemed quite high compared to the 5% interruption rate for upper secondary and higher education reported by national statistics (OSF, 2018b). Hence,

these confusing figures demanded closer investigation. Unfortunately, the report itself did not provide the exact source of the numbers, but only a reference list naming Eurostat (Labour Force Survey, UOE-survey, GFS), and the OECD (PISA, TALIS; EC, 2015b, p. 2). Further research revealed a group of “early school leavers”, a category that had no unanimous translation in the Finnish language. Furthermore, it transpired that defining who the 9.5% of 18–24-year-old “early school leavers” were needed even more clarification.

As a policy field, education is closely linked to the development of the nation state (e.g. Anderson, 2006), and the influence of nation states upon education continues despite the influence of global actors in the field (Hardy 2015, p. 24). Although global governance has proliferated in education (Robertson, 2012), it is still a field legislated and regulated primarily at the national and regional levels. As agreement is established within EU Member States according to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), the EU contribution to education policy is considered to be a mere set of joint goals and shared good practices. However, the EU uses regulatory power in the field of education through the ordinary legislative procedure: the co-decisions of EU legislative bodies, and the recognition of the right to education under the Charter of Fundamental Rights (Gynther 2017, p. 44). Moreover, along with the Europe 2020 strategy, the European Commission launched an indicator-driven monitoring system. The ESL indicator was chosen to monitor the European target of reducing the share of “early school leavers” to less than 10% by 2020. At the outset, some Member States were below the target level, but some were well above, indicating differences not only in national education systems and societal conditions, but also in school performance and data availability.

In this article, we examine “early school leaver” (ESL) count, which is an educational indicator and one of the Europe 2020 strategic indicators depicting the proportion of young people leaving education and training prematurely. According to the definition, an individual belongs to the ESL population if s/he is aged between 18–24 years, “has completed at most lower secondary education and is not involved in further education or training” (Eurostat glossary). Taking this indicator as our starting point, we aim to understand how it works as a *policy instrument* in governance from the EU strategic level to the level of national education policy.

According to Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007, p. 4), a policy instrument “constitutes a device that is both technical and social, that organises specific social relations between the

state and those it is addressed to, according to the representations and meanings it carries”. Importantly for our analysis, the concept of policy instrument allows us to analyse how indicators structure policies of EU and the Member States. As Kassim and Le Galès (2016) suggest, by investigating the instrumentation and tracking the career of instruments, we contribute to the literature on Europeanisation (*ibid.*, p. 18; Lawn & Grek, 2012), and to research on the use of numeric evidence in the education policy field (Gorur, 2017a, 2017b; 2014; Hardy, 2015; Grek et al., 2009). More specifically, we engage in the discussion of taken-for-grantedness of comparison as a way of knowing and use of large-scale comparisons in education (Gorur 2017a, p. 261) following Gorur’s argument that the education scholars’ critique of the use of numbers should be shifted towards more productive directions: moving from problematisation and deconstruction of comparison to engaging with processes of measurement (*ibid.*, p. 264). Our analysis of one indicator is an attempt to move to that direction in order to reveal invisible practices of the cross-country comparisons within the EU that nevertheless influence policy and create discursive imaginary within which policy is made (*ibid.*, p. 262). We also acknowledge the concerns highlighted by Alain Desrosières: numbers can work both as mirror images of society and as management techniques, and as such they enhance either emancipation or oppression (Desrosières, 2015).

### **The ESL indicator through the lens of prior research**

Statistical apparatuses enable the discovery and creation of entities that are both constructed and real, as Desrosières (1998, p. 3) has famously suggested. Like Desrosières, Rose (1999) notes that our images of political life are shaped by the realities – e.g. populations, markets, and education systems – that numerical technologies apparently disclose. The research on numbers shaping education policy has largely concentrated on cross-national surveys, mostly on the OECD-initiated PISA and TALIS, and how these surveys are used to rank nation states and population performances (Grek, 2009; Carvalho, 2012; Gorur, 2014, 2017a, 2017b). Furthermore, education scholars have described the technologies of governance, such as the common European framework, policy programmes, and funding instruments that have enhanced the “changing policy landscape” (Grek, 2008, p. 208) of education governance in Europe (Cort, 2009; Grek et al., 2009). The ‘European education policy space’ is argued to have emerged as a consequence of various interrelated processes, such as flows of ideas

through networks and the direct effects of EU policy and international institutions. The use of data and statistics has been highlighted as a particular form of governance in this new policy space, to the extent that the Europeanised educational space is assumed to be governed by people who are in control of the statistics (Lawn & Grek, 2012; Grek et al., 2009.).

Furthermore, the broadened role of intergovernmental organisations has been commented as well as the associated risks, such as the replacement of norm-setting with competitive comparison, visibility and invisibility as consequences of distancing the measured objects, and the distant agents' inability to understand the details that make the difference (Robertson, 2012, pp. 601–3).

In addition to drawing on research on calculative technologies in the field of education, we apply the concept of the policy instrument(ation) in our analysis. By focusing on instruments used in public policy, Lascoumes and others (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007; Kassim & Le Galès, 2010; Le Galès, 2016) outline their sociological approach on policy instrumentation in order to account for processes of public policy change. Our aim is not to pinpoint such a change, but rather to trace a specific policy instrument at work – i.e. the “indicatorisation” of the EU governance. As Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007) argue, this tracing of policy instruments should reveal the “theorisation of the relationship between the governing and governed”, as every instrument comprises “a condensed form of knowledge about social control and ways of exercising it” (ibid., p. 3). Experimenting with the concepts and theorisation of policy instrumentation, we examine indicators as policy instruments and bearers of values: they affect policies themselves, independently of the objectives pursued (Lascoumes & Le Galès 2007, p. 3).

Lascoumes and Le Galès conceive of policy instruments as institutions in a sociological sense. By ‘social institution’, they refer to a coordinated set of rules and procedures that govern the interactions and behaviours of actors and organisations (ibid., p. 9). As a particular type of social institution, policy instruments stabilise forms of collective action, privilege certain actors and interests, and exclude others; they constrain the actors while offering them possibilities and steer the actors' behaviour towards a more predictable and visible direction. Although indicators, contrary to the regulatory apparatus, are policy instruments based on ‘communication and consultation’ instead of directing social behaviours (ibid., p. 13), they are nevertheless used in governance to steer actors to achieve outcomes that cannot be directed by legislation or other EU regulatory means (Rydin 2007, p. 612). In EU governance, indicators are among the ‘new policy instruments’ that have partly superseded legislative and regulatory instruments (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007, p. 13). Thus, the

legitimacy of the instrument no longer rests on a legal basis, but on the indicators as bearers of the modernist and liberal image of public policy.

## **Data and methods**

Analytically, we draw on the ethnography of documents as outlined by Riles (1998). Guided by this approach, we acknowledge the functions that documents have in interactive practices such as policy processes. Consequently, our first task was to gather the documentary data on the ESL indicator for our analysis. What initially seemed to be a simple task of “finding the data” – i.e. key documents informing us about the ESL indicator – expanded into a laborious search for the key documents out of the reservoir of the EU policy documents, statistical releases and metadata. In order to cover the multiple levels of the EU governance, we gathered documents via Internet searches with the terms “Early school leaver/leaving” and “Early leavers/leaving from education and training”, and explored the Labour Force Survey (LFS) metadata in Eurostat and Statistics Finland documents. Our search on one indicator resulted in hundreds of pages of explanatory text. The amount of documentary material linked to the seemingly simple indicator – not to mention the difficulties finding it – reflects the complexity of governance and data management procedures within the EU.

After the searches, we chose a total of 36 documents for analysis. Chronologically, the documents range from 1998 to 2018. The document types include various EU policy documents, webpages, evaluation and exploratory reports, and indicator metadata (see the appendix on the examined documentary material). We then read the chosen materials as a sample of how a variety of actors with different types of expertise works jointly around the issue of ESL. The authors of the documents were:

- (1) Participants in EU strategy processes (European Commission (EC), European Parliament (EP), European Council, and national policymakers);
- (2) Various EC agencies involved in education and training (Directorate General of Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC); Directorate General of Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL); the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA); the Eurydice network; and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA));
- (3) External education experts;

(4) Data experts (Eurostat, OSF).

The analysis entailed ascertaining how the “early school leaving” (ESL)/“early leaving from education and training” (ELET) indicator occurs, is communicated, and is (re)interpreted via EU policy documents. The initial exploration that led us to educational indicators and the ESL phenomenon had begun as an engagement in examining Labour Force Survey (LFS) data for purpose of developing an intelligent decision support system (IDSS) in the field of education as part of an ongoing research and innovation project focusing on vulnerable youth<sup>1</sup>. The project is funded through Horizon 2020, one of EU Commission’s ambitious flagship initiatives aimed at securing Europe's global competitiveness.

### **Indicators as policy instruments in EU governance**

Lascoumes & Le Galès have theorised policy instrumentation to address otherwise invisible public policy dimensions. They differentiate three levels of observation by distinguishing between institution, technique and tool (2007, p. 4.). Drawing on their analytical differentiation we conceive the ESL indicator first as a policy instrument as a type of social institution in EU governance second, we understand the ESL indicator as a “technique” of performance measurement and third, the ESL/ELET indicator as a “tool” or micro-device assembled of categories and data that contain various information (ibid., p. 4–6.).

First, as social institutions indicators have become crucial for the making of the EU providing a coordinated set of rules and procedures for decision-making and governance (ibid., 9). For instance, the Maastricht convergence criteria – i.e. statistical indicators – were essential in the establishment of the internal market and monetary union, which are the cornerstones of the current Union (Alastalo, 2018). In examining how strategic indicators work in EU governance, Åkerman et al. (2018) have observed a shift in indicator use from the Lisbon Strategy to the Europe 2020 strategy. The Lisbon Strategy launched the open method of coordination (OMC), a new tool of soft governance that broadened the EU’s influence to policy areas outside its regulatory power (ibid., 2018, pp. 117–8). Despite the accelerating use of indicators, the EU had not yet set measurable and monitorable policy targets for each Member State during the Lisbon Strategy. Rather, the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty involved integrated guidelines for Member States with assessments and

recommendations, which already put pressure on the Union itself to observe the linkages of the education policy area when defining and implementing other activities (TFEU).

The first Commission framework for European cooperation in the field of education and training was established in the context of the Lisbon Strategy: it introduced 20 core indicators covering all education levels to measure the fulfilment of the objectives, from pre-school to higher education (Education and Training, 2010). The ESL indicator was introduced, among others, to indicate drop-out from compulsory schooling. Another indicator, “upper secondary graduation rates among young people”, was introduced to measure the target of ISCED 3-level education completion (C119/2, 2009). In preparing for the next strategic period starting in 2010, Member States agreed to five benchmarks in the field of education, one of which was formulated as “Early leavers from education and training” to ensure the maximum number of learners completed their education and training (C119/2, 2009). The corresponding indicator for monitoring the target was linked to the availability of LFS data that contain information on the proportion of the population aged 18–24, their education level, and current student status. However, the need to improve the quality of data and examine the feasibility of using additional data sources was acknowledged (*ibid.*; Annex I).

Second, the current Europe 2020 strategy introduced performance indicators use as a management technique for monitoring the chosen priorities: smart growth, sustainable growth, and inclusive growth. The strategic priorities have eight operational targets, and corresponding indicators to monitor the Member States’ progress. The ESL indicator was adopted as one of these eight key indicators. As Åkerman et al. (2018) show, the Europe 2020 strategy works as a communicative device to create coherence across heterogeneous Member States persuading them to take the desired strategic policy measures. Member States needed to formulate National Reform Programmes (NRP) to implement the strategy. They could opt for setting more stringent targets in their NRPs – for instance, Finland set a national target of 8% (NRP, 2011). Thus the ESL indicator became an instrument to monitor the development of the ascribed aims of EU strategy. As a monitoring technique ESL works to compare particular units of analysis (countries in this case) and evaluate their performance by reference to set standards (<10% of the target group have only lower secondary education and are not studying).

Third, as a tool or a micro-device within the monitoring technique, the ESL indicator is an assemblage of categories that are not insignificant: a name (“Early School Leaver”), and a collection of rank-ordered data (age group, achieved education level, and a binary variable

indicating whether the individual is studying or not). To construct an indicator, one must have suitable data available (Davis et al., 2012). The ESL indicator is compiled from EU-harmonised and regulated Labour Force Survey (LFS) data that are a pivotal part of the European statistical system (Council Regulation (EC) No 577/98). The regulation obliges Member States to provide data to Eurostat. The LFS data are gathered by national (statistical) authorities, and they are reported to be of variable quality (Eurostat, 2007). For instance, in some countries the data for certain variables are derived from administrative registers, whereas in others, all data are extracted from surveys. Overall, national data collection and the compilation of information for the ESL/ELET indicator differs from country to country (EC/EACEA, 2015, p. 28). Below, we describe the ESL indicator tool as a micro-device by analysing the statistical categories and the terminology used (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007, p. 4).

### **The assemblage of the ESL indicator as a micro-device**

The ESL indicator is composed of three LFS variables: age, achieved education level, and student status. First, the age group 18-24 years is aggregated from the LFS data variable that indicates year of birth. As the duration of compulsory school varies from nine to thirteen years in the Member States (EC/Eurydice 2016), so do school starting and leaving ages, with graduation age ranging from 15 to 19 years (Eurydice, 2017). Although the age range (18–24) does not fully correspond to the norms and expectations set by the varying national education systems it is perhaps an attempt towards “norm-setting” to accelerate labour market entrance.

Next, the variable indicating achieved level of education – “only lower secondary education” – is based on the international standard classification of education (ISCED). The ISCED standard was formulated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) to enable the compilation of cross-nationally comparable educational statistics for different national school systems (Smyth, 2008). Although the LFS instructions suggest that education level can be coded either to all ISCED levels or only to three aggregated levels (low, medium, high), the use of the three levels dominates for purposes of data dissemination and standard labour market analysis. Thus, “only lower secondary education” equals to low (ISCED levels 0–2), “upper secondary education” to



medium (ISCED levels 3–4), and “tertiary level” to high (ISCED levels 5–8) education (Eurostat, 2015a, p. 59.). Moreover, the education level variable is actually merged to binary form in the ESL indicator: an individual has either reached level 3 or not.

Finally, the dichotomously coded variable: participated/did not participate in education is derived from the LFS variables that describe the respondents’ evaluation of their participation in education during a four-week span before the interview. The associated questions cover participation in “taught learning activities”, and a set of clarifying questions concerning both formal and non-formal education (level and orientation of attended studies, and attendance and number of hours, respectively). Likewise the variable depicting the highest attained level of education variable, the merged binary variable is used for indicator and other dissemination purposes, (Eurostat, 2015a, p. 7).

### ***Naming the indicator: “Early”***

The term “early” carries a normative assumption of a certain time frame, in this case biography. The national education systems set expectations on the individual life course, and the duration of compulsory education varies across Member States. Whether a person leaves school early is thus contextual and depends on societal conditions. However, in the case of the ESL indicator, the EU links early leaving from education not only to a timeframe – an age between 18 and 24 – but also to a certain education level – “lower than upper secondary education” – which means that the term “early” is a combination of a certain age and the expected education level. Hence, as a strategy instrument, the ESL indicator pushes the Member States’ national education policy to address questions concerning the length of compulsory education, and to raise the overall educational level of the population.

### ***Naming the indicator: School or education and training***

In the proposal for a Council Recommendation (2011) on policies to reduce early school leaving, the term “Early School Leaving” was defined as including all forms of departure from education and training before completing upper secondary education or its equivalent in vocational education and training. The indicator term “school” covers a range of education and training at both lower and upper levels. The seemingly unanimous use of “school”, “education”, “training”, “lower/upper”, and “secondary school/education” in the strategy indicator narrative reveals both the contextual richness of the Member States’ education systems and the difficulties in reaching consensus on a standard terminology to describe the existing variety. The ambiguity caused by terminology was already acknowledged in early

attempts at the international standardisation of education (Smyth, 2008), and it remains unresolved. The ISCED standard and its use is thoroughly explained in European survey metadata, but for dissemination purposes, a mix of school/education/training vocabulary takes over. As an attempt to fix the problem of ambiguity due to the initial naming of the indicator as “ESL”, the term “ELET” (early leaving from education and training) was adopted. The shift is described in a Commission working document aimed at informing the public at large. The document’s statistical annex offers the following definition:

Early leaver from education and training, previously named early school leaver, generally refers to a person aged 18 to 24 who has finished no more than a lower secondary education and is not involved in further education or training; their number can be expressed as a percentage of the population aged 18 to 24. (European Commission, 2015a, p. 465)

### ***Naming the indicator: “Leaver/Leaving”***

The indicator name suggests that a person is a “leaver” if s/he is 18–24 years old, has less than upper secondary education level, and is not currently studying. However, the numbers indicating the share of this group in the total population do not reveal what is happening in the individuals’ lives. While some may have dropped out of school prematurely, others have decided not to continue their studies for different reasons. Some may have either missed or been denied the opportunity to pursue education; alternatively, they may have been “facilitated out” of school by the low expectations placed on them (de Witte et al., 2013, p. 26). Moreover, others may be occupied with more urgent life situations, such as health issues or parenthood, or be preparing to apply to their preferred field of study. These diverse alternatives contain fundamentally different elements, but it seems that in naming the indicator thus, these different phenomena are monitored through a simplifying lens that is expressed in EU documents under the titles “early school leaver” or “early leaver from education and training”.

Whether intentional or not, “early school leaving” can therefore be easily interpreted in multiple ways, especially when translated back into national contexts. The numbers can indeed be perceived as referring to the complex issue of dropping out of school and thus connected to various societal problems or life conditions. However, the numbers also include people who are active and productive without possessing formal education diplomas, and

migrants who have moved to Europe from countries with lower educational standards. Indeed, 18–24-year-olds who have less than an ISCED 3-level education and who are not studying have not necessarily left school, education, or training; they may have chosen not to continue their formal education after finishing compulsory school or they may have not yet been accepted to the studies that lead to their dream profession. The indicator does not capture their ambition and future expectations, employment status, or other activities, and thus it may completely fail to indicate their contribution to smart growth or the knowledge-based economy. It also does not reveal the prevailing problems of minority groups like the Roma, who have unequal opportunities to access even primary education.

### **Effects of the ESL/ELET indicator in EU governance**

As shown above, the ESL/ELET indicator reconstructs the phenomenon in a simplified manner in order to make it commensurate and comparable across Member States. Consequently, this complexity reduction opens up space for new interpretations and potentially creates unintended effects (Alastalo & Pösö, 2014). Next, to trace the effects of the indicator at the levels of strategic EU governance, European education policy, and the Member States, we return to Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007), who identify three effects that the policy instrument creates, namely the inertia effect, the particular representation of the issue the instrument is handling, and the specific problematisation of the issue. First, by the inertia effect, they refer to the instrument's enablement of resistance to outside pressures, such as conflicts of interest between actor–users, allowing them to come together on issues and agree to work on them jointly. Second, the instrument yields a specific representation of the issue and furthermore constitutes a new object (“ESL”) to be acted upon (Desrosières 1998). Third, the instrument leads to a particular problematisation of the issue by creating a hierarchy for the variables, and it can even lead to an explanatory system (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007, p. 10–11).

#### ***Inertia effect***

At the strategy level, ESL/ELET indicator functions as one of eight performance indicators monitoring whether Europe is on the right track compared to its international rivals (EC, 2010). Education is included as one of five Europe 2020 strategy areas in the EU's agenda for growth and jobs. This strategy is monitored through performance indicators related to the

corresponding targets, as objects of calculation, that are described as interrelated and mutually reinforcing, implying thus, for instance, that educational improvements increase employability and enhance smart growth. At the strategic level, the indicator embraces a wide range of issues, from reducing poverty and the societal disadvantages of schoolchildren to improving the skill levels of Europe's younger generation (Council Recommendation 2011/C191/01), and the range of actors that are harnessed to work on this issue jointly represent various levels and sectors of governance.

Although education is a policy area that falls under national jurisdiction and is regulated mostly at the national level, the European Commission proposes actions in the education policy area according to subsidiarity rules – i.e. when the EU-level approach provides added value (Villalba, 2015, p. 71). The current Strategic Framework for Education and Training in the EU (ET2020) states: “Each EU country is responsible for its own education and training systems”. However, the framework identifies common challenges that should be addressed at the European level and with EU support: ageing societies, skills deficits in the workforce, technological developments, and global competition. The task of addressing these challenges and supporting the EU's education-related policies falls to several decentralised agencies (Gynther, 2018, p. 24). For instance, the Centre for Research on Lifelong Learning (CRELL) currently works on the Europe 2020 headline targets, early school leavers, and tertiary attainment; the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) is responsible for the Eurydice Network that provides information on Europe's different education systems; and the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) provides advice on issues of fundamental rights, including educational rights.

The indicators work as instruments steering these various agencies to focus their work and communication around a common issue. As such, they create an inertia effect, enabling resistance to outside pressure (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2007, p. 10). For example, in EU Member States, illiteracy is non-existent except in the Roma population. Roma people form Europe's largest ethnic minority, and many Roma have barriers to exercising their fundamental rights, such as the right to education (FRA, 2014). Introducing targeted efforts aimed at the Roma people and setting up regulatory instruments to protect human rights is one way to address the problem. However, since the issue is politically sensitive, the framework and indicators provide a means for new problematisation that allows heterogeneous actors to work on the education-related issues broadly, thus reformulating, for instance, the problems of Roma illiteracy, ethnic school segregation, and discrimination into the more neutral conceptualisation of early school leaving.

### *Representation of the issue*

The instrument-engendered representation is based on two components: first, it provides a frame for describing the social, and second, it contains the potential to develop strong controversies around the key categories of the indicator. ESL as a term appeared already in the indicator development process for monitoring the ET2010 programme. In preparations for the follow-up mechanism to the defined ET2010 objectives, the first list of 29 indicators was released in 2003. Among them was an ESL indicator to monitor objective 2.2: “Making learning more attractive” (EC, 2003, p. 65). However, the narrative of the ESL indicator described the proportion of the population aged 18–24 with only a lower secondary education who are outside education and training (EC, 2003, p. 78). Thus implying that the European standard concerning the expected education level was set at upper secondary education – and not so much on completing compulsory “school” as the title would imply.

The broad range of issues covered and the ambiguity caused by naming the indicator “early school leaving” emerged in the iteration of the ESL definition in the Thematic Working Group on Early School Leaving report (EC, 2013). The working group acknowledged that ESL is defined and measured differently among Member States. Furthermore, ESL can refer to leaving education and training systems at various stages, either before the end of compulsory schooling or before reaching upper secondary education. The Council Recommendation on the policies of reducing early school leaving (C 191/4) uses the term ‘ESL’ for those who leave education and training with only a lower secondary education or less and who are not in education and training. However, the following policy text uses ‘ELET’ (early leavers from education and training) in reference to both ‘children’ and ‘young adults’. Furthermore, problems causing difficulties in education performance and leading to drop-out from school are linked to disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and the risks of exclusion.

The various EC agencies that work on education-related issues conceive ELET as ‘a serious issue’ (EACEA, 2015, p. 3) and ‘a problem to be tackled’ (ibid., p. 20) rather than as an indicator showing the development in performance. However, as a monitoring technique it represents the performance of Member States with exact figures visualising their development. Despite the complexity reported by the education experts, the indicator representation is disseminated in simplistic manner: as figures, columns, and charts that demonstrate the success or failure of the Member States’ performance, as shown in the pictures below.

## **Picture 1. & Picture 2.**

### ***Problematisation of the issue***

The indicators were chosen as technical devices using annual statistical analyses for monitoring the Europe 2020 strategy. In 2014–15, the Commission performed a mid-term review of Europe 2020, including a public consultation that showed the strategy was still seen as an appropriate framework to promote jobs and growth. In the education section of the mid-term review, the communication about the educational level states, “Nowadays upper secondary education is considered the minimum desirable educational attainment level for EU citizens” (Eurostat, 2016, p. 110).

The Europe 2020 target to raise the education level in Europe suggests that 90% of the population should attain ISCED level 3 by the age of 24. Thus at the strategic level, the targets of smart, inclusive growth are expected to be achieved through improvements in education. The target level has been accepted, suggesting that leaving education before reaching the desired level constitutes a major problem and a threat to European competitiveness. The aim is to raise the overall education level regardless of the evidence of a mismatch: both under- and over-qualification have been identified as labour market problems. Still, ESL as a strategy indicator is leaning on the assumption that future labour markets will function in the same way they do now – i.e. attaining a certain formal education level guarantees a route into the labour market. However, the interpretations of the indicator are not sensitive to labour market differences or the mismatch of formal qualifications and education inflation in the EU. The performance target depends on the available LFS data and the formal qualification variable (ISCED level 3).

Moreover, even though the ESL indicator draws its data from the group of 18–24-year-old “early leavers”, it does so with such a broad scope that it fails to reveal the most severe problems, and on the other hand puts unnecessary pressure on successful systems. In doing so, indicator use as a policy instrument avoids politically sensitive questions, such as the educational rights of the Roma and poorly educated migrants, which are demonstrating inefficiencies affecting the national education field. As stated by Tilbury (2016, p. 593) “what is measured becomes valued”, and, moreover, communicated. Thus, in relation to the indicator the powerlessness to alter failures as well as consequences for national education

systems that are already doing well can be surprising. For instance, Robertson (2012) has pointed out the risk of implementing changes in good national education systems, just because they are not the “right” ones (ibid., p. 603).

### **Discussion: Unintended effects**

As described in the opening section the demand for complexity reduction can yield new interpretations as the indicator becomes communicated and travels between actors. Although the indicator allows the various actors to work jointly, however different their understanding of the issue, the communication of indicator performance escapes to new levels of interpretation. First, misinterpretations originate from the vocabulary: initial naming of the indicator as ESL (early school leaver), previously identified in education studies as a complex phenomenon. Next, use of commensurate and comparable data indicator means losing the details that make the difference. Then, the mode of representation used in indicator releases is presented as scientifically justifiable but it can lead to a Member States ranking that is impossible to control.

### ***Misinterpretations caused by vocabulary***

As shown in the analysis, the complexity of the ESL phenomenon enters into the workings of the strategy indicator in various ways. The research has presented ESLs as children or young people who leave school prematurely before completing their compulsory education. It is often connected to “drop-outs” – i.e. individuals who withdraw from an activity before its completion – but also other interpretations occur, namely linking early leaving to certain qualification levels, as in the case of EU strategy indicator (Dekkers & Claassen, 2001). Although the social conditions and processes leading to the ESL phenomenon are poorly understood, the explanations given are often connected to various problems focusing on “youth at risk” and school performance. In addition, the constraints of a publicly valued credential system have been reported (Smyth & Hattam, 2004; De Witte et al., 2013).

Next, the different national contexts as well as various definitions and interpretations of “school” have been acknowledged and widely discussed during the long history of the international standardisation of education classification. The need to improve international understanding and the long process of developing comparative statistics have revealed the manifold difficulties in overcoming national differences to enable cross-national

comparisons. For instance, applying the English terms for different kinds of schools to different national settings opens up space for ambiguous interpretations (Smyth, 2008). Thus, “an artificial terminology” was needed – the level-based ISCED system. Nevertheless, first the English term “school” was harnessed to the indicator title to refer to both “lower secondary education”, and “upper secondary education”, even though the terms “education” and “training” had predominated in the indicator narrative, both in LFS metadata and Education and training expert documents. Furthermore, given the many languages spoken in Europe, this language issue is not insignificant. Even if at the European strategic level, the terms “ESL” and “ELET” (or even “drop-out” as shown in Picture 1.) are sometimes used interchangeably to refer to the performance indicator, translating the terminology into the national languages and contexts gives opportunity for misinterpretations.

### *Lost details that make the difference*

Returning to the fact that education is still nationally regulated and implemented and hence the education systems in Member States vary in content, duration, and structure, the need for commensurate measures at the European level can be interpreted as an attempt to gain control of the educational field via data management and performance comparison. As national education systems differ, so does the way education intertwines with normative life courses and societal expectations in each country. These institutional differences become flattened in the indicator data. The data variables express particular concerns (young people, education level, continuing education) that are encoded in numeric representations (age groups such as 18–24 years, dichotomous variables of education level, and studying/not studying). The complex procedure consequently makes visible certain issues (such as the importance of ISCED 3-level education as a European standard and youth as the time of studies) while others remain hidden (the Member States’ differences in compulsory education and school leaving age, unequal education opportunities, e.g.). The political rationale for the indicator however aligns with the OECD’s ideology of the knowledge-based economy (Åkerman et al., 2018), which highlights production, distribution, and the use of knowledge as the drivers of economic development (Godin, 2004, p. 20).

As stated earlier, what is meant to be an EU strategy indicator can be falsely interpreted, as in recording the proportion of drop-outs. To be able to interpret the numbers, one must know what and how data are gathered, and how the ‘problem’ is framed. For instance, the national statistics in Finland – showing that school drop-out is quite rare and the



discontinuation rate in upper secondary school is approximately 5% – are drawn from administrative sources. Both the school drop-out and the discontinuation of education counts are based on following the individual's participation and qualification twice yearly from enrolment until graduation and the latter figure includes students of all ages. However, the European LFS data have different sources and variables and do not yet contain the information which would allow tracking people across waves (Eurostat 2018, p.69).

### ***Ranking of Member States produced by indicator representation***

The specific representation of early school leaving, namely the ESL indicator, creates a performance-evaluating ranking of Member States. Although the rankings are intended for the purposes of European policy-making, it is impossible to control their broader communication and the interpretations that may occur. Høyland et al. (2012) have argued that when the scores of international index rankings are taken literally, the indexes may be poor guides for policies, as each link between indicators and scores is noisy and uncertain (as we have showed too), but presented as definitive. The belief in accuracy in the presence of inaccuracy may lead to a shift in focus among reformers from what really counts to what the makers of these rankings count. This is the tyranny of international index rankings (ibid., 2012, p. 12.)

### **Conclusion**

We have examined the role of the indicator as a social institution, technique, and tool in EU governance by exploring the ESL/ELET at work. The policy instrument approach has helped uncover how control in the education policy field is exercised not only through networks and data flows, as suggested by Grek et al. (2009), but also through representation and problematisation of the issue. As education experts are focused on explicating the full complexity of the phenomenon and the differing interpretations of the indicator's variable components, statisticians warn of data deficits, bias, and insufficiency. However, as is the case in utilising indicators as technologies of quantification for making knowledge to be used in governance (Rottenburg & Merry, 2015, pp. 11–12), the ESL/ELET indicator is an attempt to quantify what seems to be the problem: insufficient qualification of the population to enable Europe's smart and inclusive growth. This is a highly diverse issue, which covers areas that are hardly quantifiable. However, the developers of the measure have applied

economists' principles – i.e. an accounting framework that leaves the activities themselves as a “black box”, as emphasised by Godin (2007, p. 1390). Quantification of the performance of Member States is determined by the ESL/ELET indicator, which has been worked on by education and training experts who are familiar with the phenomenon itself. As the title of the indicator has been derived from educational expertise, the information it delivers still carries the narrative of deprivation; moreover, it is still constrained by the available data and the resources invested in data production and analysis. Finally, the promise of the policy instrumentation approach lies in its provision of the conceptual tools to further explore how indicators work in governance by unpacking the components, pinpointing the political effects, and revealing the power relations they produce.

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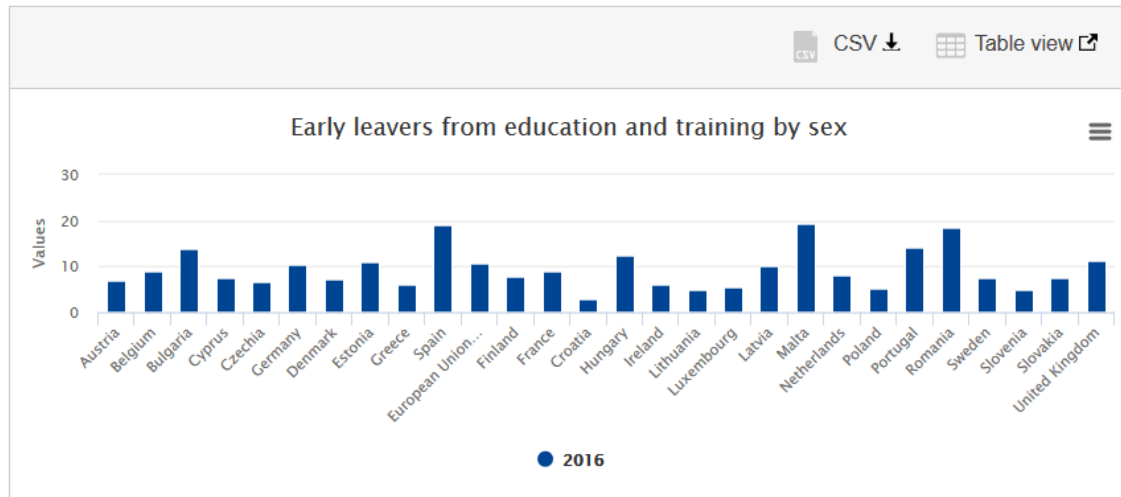
[https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/file\\_import/nrp\\_finland\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/file_import/nrp_finland_en_0.pdf)TFEU. Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Article 165). Consolidated version. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12012E%2FTXT>

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i. EduMAP-project <http://blogs.uta.fi/edumap/>

# Early leavers from education and training

(% of population aged 18–24)

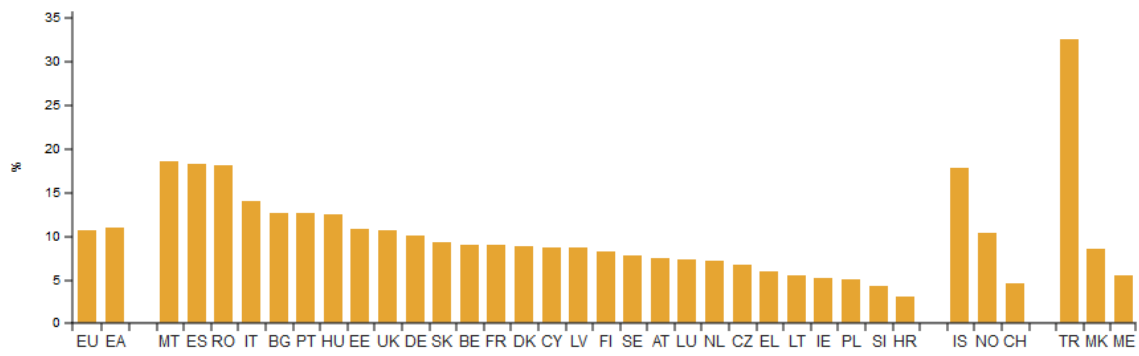


EU target: <10% drop-out rate

Picture 1. An example of obscure representation of the ESL indicator as a Europe 2020 performance indicator. Retrieved on 7<sup>th</sup> January 2019 from: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester/framework/draft-europe-2020-strategy/europe-2020-targets-statistics-and-indicators-eu-level\\_en#early-leavers-from-education-and-training](https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/economic-and-fiscal-policy-coordination/eu-economic-governance-monitoring-prevention-correction/european-semester/framework/draft-europe-2020-strategy/europe-2020-targets-statistics-and-indicators-eu-level_en#early-leavers-from-education-and-training)



## Early leavers from education and training, 2017



Picture 2. An example of ESL indicator presented as a ranking of countries within EU. ESL as an education as an education policy indicator. Retrieved on 7<sup>th</sup> January 2019 from: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Early\\_leavers\\_from\\_education\\_and\\_training](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Early_leavers_from_education_and_training)