

# **OUT-OF-SCHOOL LEARNERS**

## **Background Information Report**

**European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education**



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Full version</b>
Agency / European Agency	European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education
EASIE	European Agency Statistics on Inclusive Education
ELET	Early leaving from education and training
ESL	Early school leaving
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
NEET	Not in education, employment or training
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OoS	Out-of-school
OOSC	Out-of-school children
OOSCI	Out-of-School Children Initiative
RNFILO	Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning Outcomes
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UIS	UNESCO Institute for Statistics
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund



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## PREAMBLE

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For the past 20 years, the international community has recognised and worked on the issue of out-of-school (OoS) learners. Through the [Millennium Development Goals](#) and moves towards universal primary education, huge steps have been taken to improve and foster access to primary school education. However, despite the considerable progress on educational access and participation, reported progress towards Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 on education indicates that 258 million learners (children, adolescents and young people) globally were out of school in 2018 (UIS, 2019).

The European Commission stated that one of the [Europe 2020](#) strategy education targets was to reduce the rates of early school leaving (ESL) to below 10%. The Education and Training 2020 ISCED 02 benchmark, that at least '95% of children should participate in early childhood education', is also relevant here (European Commission, no date).

The issue of OoS learners is apparent in a range of current education policies and strategy programmes. Therefore, it requires examination and further exploration.

Some data has been collected, indicators developed, research conducted and reports published. These have contributed to an understanding of the main issues. However, they also lead to several critical questions: What is the current situation? What data is available? Besides the data, there is the concept itself of OoS children, adolescents and young people. What does being an OoS learner mean? Which data and indicators are being referred to? What data should countries collect?

This Background Information Report aims to present an overview of information on OoS learners. This includes research studies conducted in the field, but mainly focuses on data collection at national and international levels. This report has been developed to inform future discussions and potential work within the European Agency Statistics on Inclusive Education ([EASIE](#)) work by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency). As such, it not only presents findings from the literature, but also highlights potential issues and questions for further consideration.

Three main questions guided the development of this report:

- What does the concept of 'out-of-school' mean?
- Who are out-of-school learners and what situations are they in?
- What data on out-of-school learners is being collected and could be collected?

The three main sections of this report focus on each of these questions in turn.

The [Annex](#) describes the methodology for preparing this report.

The first section presents a summary of [Key Messages](#) emerging from the examination that may inform future work on this important topic.



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## KEY MESSAGES

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1. The term ‘out-of-school’ (OoS) refers to an extremely broad topic that requires further clarification. Different terms and meanings appear in work by European and international organisations. These differences appear to be one of the limitations of applying the concept. Three terms are repeatedly used to refer to learners who are considered OoS: drop-out, early school leavers and ‘not in education, employment or training’ (NEET). Future work may need an agreement on and use of a shared definition of OoS.
2. It is important to distinguish between OoS learners at the compulsory education level and those who have completed compulsory education and moved into but not completed post-compulsory education. Different terminology may be required to clarify the different contexts, processes and consequences for learners at different stages in their education paths.
3. There is ambiguity around the notion of absenteeism. The transition from absenteeism to drop-out should be clearly defined. Temporal factors of duration and frequency require further consideration to distinguish between the two concepts. New ways of understanding and identifying drop-out processes seem necessary to develop and then implement drop-out and OoS prevention strategies.
4. Data collection on OoS learners requires different methodologies, sources and types of information from different levels (individual learner, school, regional and national levels). To give accurate information, the scope of population investigated should take into consideration individuals who are not represented in the data. Data collection methodologies and education monitoring systems should consider qualitative approaches.
5. The term ‘school’ potentially limits the OoS concept to school settings and fails to recognise other forms of provision and educational alternatives for learners. Learners enrolled in programmes in other learning settings should not be considered OoS if there is an agreement on the organisation and education planning. Non-formal education programmes, home education and forms of provision from other social sectors – such as youth detention – should be examined and considered further. ‘Out-of-**education**’ might be a more suitable term for learners without access to, or participation in, any form of education.





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# 1. DEFINITIONS OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL LEARNERS

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The concept of OoS learners is very complex, with different uses and meanings. How the concept of OoS is defined, what key issues definitions cover and what challenges these definitions present all require clarification.

This section examines the concept of ‘out-of-school’ and the question **what does being ‘out-of-school’ mean?**

Although the concept differs among regions and countries, there is a common understanding of what being ‘in school’ alludes to. This, therefore, becomes the normative starting position for examining being ‘out’ of school. Ekstrand argues that ‘It is well documented that failure in school and early dropout can have negative effects’ (2015, p. 460). The term ‘out-of-school’ suggests that the norm should be for individuals to be ‘in’ school, and learners who are not in school face a range of potential negative effects.

In 2016, in the OECD countries, 90% of the population of 4- to 16-year-olds was enrolled in education (OECD, 2018). Consequently, this could suggest that being in school and being enrolled in education are the same. However, this raises a series of key questions and important distinctions need to be made. Does being enrolled mean attending school? Can a learner be identified as OoS if they are enrolled in a school? When is a learner considered OoS? What elements need to be considered to define being OoS?

The following sections highlight the main themes and concepts linked to OoS discussions in the work of international organisations.

## 1.1 ‘Out-of-school’ and international organisations

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Among the range of studies conducted by international institutions and organisations, such as UNESCO, UNICEF, the European Commission, World Bank and OECD, there is no clear definition of the concept of ‘out-of-school’.

UNESCO clearly defines out-of-school learners as the ‘Number of children and youth who are not enrolled or attending school ... in a given academic year’ ([UNESCO](#), glossary).

The [Out-of-School Children Initiative](#) (OOSCI, no date) is a partnership between UNICEF and the UIS. It was established in 2010 to raise awareness and to address exclusion. It defines OoS children and adolescents by referring to their age and level of education:

Out-of-school adolescents. Adolescents of official lower secondary school age who are not in primary or secondary education. Adolescents in pre-primary or non-formal education are considered out of school.

Out-of-school children. Children of official primary school age who are not in primary or secondary education. Children in pre-primary education or non-formal education are considered out of school (UIS and UNICEF, 2015, p. 125).



The European Commission has made this area a priority since 2011, although the work refers to early school leavers. Early school leavers encompass learners from 18–24 years old who have completed lower-secondary school, i.e. ISCED level 2 (European Commission, 2020). The terminology is important and ESL is distinguished from other terms, such as drop-out (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019a).

UNICEF and UIS list the ‘realities’ of OoS children as those who:

- Do not have access to a school in their community
- Do not enrol despite the availability of a school
- Enrol but later than they should have
- Enrol in schools that have poor facilities / no teachers
- Drop out of the education system
- Enrol but do not attend school (UNICEF and UIS, 2015).

OoS learners encounter different realities. However, the sources of exclusion can also show different realities and dimensions. UNESCO identified four such sources:

- **Physical** resulting, for example, from issues related to geography and access to facilities;
- **Social** within a group, not everyone may be heard or encouraged to participate;
- **Psychological** regardless of the external environment, individuals may perceive themselves as included, marginalized or excluded;
- **Systemic** requirements may exist that exclude the poor (such as fees), or migrants and refugees (2020a, p. 26).

Based on these different realities, distinctions can already be made between having access to school and being OoS. The different situations a learner can experience while having access to school include:

- Access to school
- Enrolled and attend: in school
- Enrolled, but do not attend: out-of-school
- Not enrolled, but attend: in school
- Not enrolled and never attend: out-of-school.

Having access to school does not necessarily guarantee access to education or to quality education. However, examining the dimensions of access linked to enrolment and attendance does support an initial understanding of being OoS.



UIS defines school attendance:

School participation in household surveys and censuses is commonly measured by whether pupils or students attended a given grade or level of education at least one day during the academic reference year ([UIS](#), no date).

The measurement of attendance ‘at least one day during the academic reference year’ provides potential areas for discussion and a need for a clear definition when referring to an OoS individual.

Other dimensions to consider include the learner’s age and the level of education. Both of these dimensions link to the idea of compulsory schooling and how it is understood. Section 1.2 examines these issues.

## **1.2 ‘Out-of-school’ and compulsory education**

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Looking across key studies and publications (UNICEF and UIS, 2016a; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019b; UNICEF, 2018; European Agency, 2017), it can be argued that being an OoS learner of compulsory education age does not have the same meaning and implications as being an OoS learner in the post-compulsory sector:

... for the purposes of monitoring OOSC the focus is on the school participation of compulsory-age children (UNICEF and UIS, 2016a, p. 22).

The European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice define compulsory education and training as a period of full-time education/training attendance required of all learners:

This period is regulated by the law and usually determined by the students’ age. In general, full-time compulsory education/training is provided in formal institutions/schools. However, in some education systems, certain compulsory education/training programmes can combine part-time school based and part-time workplace courses. In such cases, students are evaluated for both parts. In most countries, under certain conditions, compulsory education/training can be provided at home (2018a, p. 3).

Across Europe, education is compulsory at different ages, ranging from 3 to 19 years old (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018a). There is some variation from country to country, but on average there is an obligation to enter primary school (ISCED 1) at age six. Most European countries have compulsory education up to the age of 16. The duration of education is between 9 and 13 years throughout Europe (ibid.). However, most countries have 10 years of compulsory education.

OECD defines the end of compulsory education as:

The legal age from which children are no longer compelled to attend school (e.g., 15th birthday). The ending age of compulsory schooling is thus different from the ending age of an educational programme ([OECD, 2003](#)).



For [UIS](#) (no date) compulsory education is the ‘Number of years or age span during which children are legally obliged to attend school’.

All these definitions are linked to the right to education and even, according to the OECD and UNESCO, the ‘legal obligation’ to attend school. This emphasises the perspective of the learner’s age. It also emphasises that there is, by definition, a period before compulsory education, a period of compulsory education and potentially a period after compulsory education. This raises the issue of whether learners in each case should be considered OoS.

### **1.3 Terms related to ‘out-of-school’**

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This section looks into various aspects of what OoS refers to. A few other terms are very often used to describe OoS, such as drop-out, early school leavers and absenteeism. It is fundamental to distinguish between these terms to have a clear understanding of the notions connected to OoS.

Most of the research papers analysed for this report use the term ‘drop-out’ as a synonym for ‘out-of-school’, which can be confusing.

The following sections consider each of the main terms and concepts in turn.

#### **1.3.1 Absenteeism**

Absenteeism is ambivalent because it deals with reported attendance and OoS situations. Absenteeism is characterised by non-school-attendance while enrolled. This issue becomes complex, especially during compulsory school periods, because of the obligation to attend school. Indeed, the main question is: when does the situation become non-participation, i.e. school drop-out? Absenteeism is ambiguous because it does not refer to drop-out, which could be considered permanent leave, but does refer to temporary leave (Blândul, 2013). As such, it is quite a complex concept.

The UIS and OECD glossaries do not define absenteeism. UNICEF and UIS (2016a) distinguish between ‘absenteeism’ as non-attendance in school and ‘truancy’ as unjustified non-attendance. The term ‘truancy’ is also often used in the literature. Research often mentions absenteeism as a factor and as part of the process of dropping out. Therefore, drop-out can be one consequence of absenteeism. Most research focuses on learners of secondary school age, encompassing lower- and upper-secondary levels. Very few studies focus on the primary level.

School absenteeism can be defined as when learners leave a learning institution without authorisation (Ekstrand, 2015). This authorisation is sometimes referred to as ‘teachers’ permission’ (Blândul, 2013) and includes both long and short periods of time. If the number of learner absences is over 80 per school year, it can be described as ‘massive absenteeism’ or ‘drop-out disguise’ (ibid., p. 918). However, Blândul does not develop some of the fundamental elements in his paper, such as the meaning of ‘80’ absences or a clear distinction between ‘short’ and ‘long’ periods of absenteeism.

The literature describes different types of absenteeism, excusable and inexcusable, which apply to primary and secondary school levels. Kearney (2008) describes excusable



absenteeism as being due to medical conditions, injury, illness or disability. Inexcusable absenteeism could refer to school withdrawal and refusal behaviours, which could also be divided into subcategories such as truancy, school refusal and school phobia.

Absenteeism may be with or without the parents' consent. When it is the parents' choice, it is categorised as school withdrawal.

Kearney (ibid.) indicates possible behaviours that could be significant and common for learners who are in the process of leaving school. This continuum of school refusal behaviour shows some steps that can help to identify learner refusal behaviour before drop-out:

- School attendance under duress and pleas for nonattendance
- Repeated misbehaviors in the morning to avoid school
- Repeated tardiness in the morning followed by attendance
- Periodic absences or skipping of classes
- Repeated absences or skipping of classes mixed with attendance
- Complete absence from school during a certain period of the school year
- Complete absence from school for an extended period of time (2008, p. 453).

It is important to pay special attention to learners engaging in these behaviours. They should be supported in schools after a period of absence. These learners can be identified as persistent or casual absentees (Ticuşan, 2016).

Some studies have tried to develop programmes to identify persistent issues to avoid permanent drop-out. One study focuses on the Early Truancy Prevention Project. The project was tested in five schools in the United States of America (USA) to prevent absenteeism, especially in primary school, improve learners' school engagement and increase graduation rates (Cook, Dodge, Gifford and Schulting, 2017). The project developed four principles:

- 1) a paid mentor who spends time with the student;
- 2) systematic monitoring of attendance;
- 3) individualized intervention when needed;
- and 4) enhanced home-school communication (ibid., p. 263).

Some studies, including the Early Truancy Prevention Project, have shown that teachers are generally very involved in supporting and developing communication between schools and homes. In some situations, teachers visited families and established dialogue for better support and guidance and to prevent drop-out. The results of pilot programmes like this are positive and tend to demonstrate better school engagement for learners and their households.



The main question concerns teachers' responsibility towards absenteeism and drop-out risks and their responsibility to support learners outside the school time and environment, such as by visiting families:

Schools have limited power to change the out-of-school relationships that place students at risk of dropping out, but they have a duty to do whatever they can to ensure that every student who has the potential to graduate will do so (Terry, 2008, p. 36).

### **1.3.2 Drop-out**

Many studies and research programmes have been conducted on the topic of 'drop-out', especially in the USA. In the European setting, the research focus is more often on the concept of ESL.

The OECD characterises the drop-out rate as the 'proportion of students who leave the specified level in the educational system without obtaining a first qualification' (2004, p. 2).

The European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice take a different approach, referring to OoS as: 'discontinuing an on-going course, e.g. dropping out in the middle of school term. Dropout can occur at any time and can be experienced by different age groups' (2019a, p. 3).

It appears that, depending on the organisation and national monitoring, the terms 'early school leavers' and 'drop-outs' can both describe learners who are enrolled in and then leave school. Many studies develop learner profile characteristics and identifying factors that could explain what makes learners leave school.

Depending on the national legislation on compulsory education, a 14-year-old learner who drops out is in a different situation to a 21-year-old who drops out of higher education. In both situations, there is an uncompleted school level and no certification. Most of the studies focus on ISCED levels 02, 1, 2 and 3. Academics are more likely to use the term 'drop-out', whereas Eurostat, for example, only uses 'early school leavers' to refer to 18–24-year-olds. Common definitions and criteria are essential to deal with drop-outs.

The school climate is often presented as a potential contributor to drop-out (Peguero and Bracy, 2014). In some countries, teacher absenteeism can discourage learners from attending school. Rural and poor regions are more likely to face this issue (UNICEF and UIS, 2015).

Minimal involvement in school and academic activities, poor academic achievement, unexcused absences and difficulties interacting with school peers and staff can be defined as a disengagement process (Kemp, 2006). This could lead to drop-out.

Some studies acknowledge that learners with a sibling who left school early are more likely to drop out (Rumberger and Ah Lim, 2008). Similarly, learners who work more than 20 hours a week are significantly more likely to drop out (*ibid.*). Additionally, in many cases, drop-outs from secondary school are dealing with poverty and need a job to support their situation (Batini, Corallino, Toti and Bartolucci, 2017).

Some studies show that family is the main reason that learners report for dropping out. For example, in Bulgaria, 47.9% of all learners who dropped out gave family reasons as



their justification. This justification is the most common. The same study showed that 76% of learners who dropped out reported that it was for family and socio-economic reasons, with educational reasons cited in only 16% of cases (Teneva, 2017). This study reveals a very close connection between a learner's personal environment and their school trajectory, as previous studies have demonstrated.

### 1.3.3 Early school leavers

The UIS and Eurydice definitions clarify the notion of early school leavers often used in similar contexts to drop-out:

Early school leaving or *ESL* is a term often used synonymously with dropout, but it is important to distinguish between the international and national definitions of these terms for monitoring purposes (UNICEF and UIS, 2016a, p. 22).

... 'early leaving from education and training' refers to all young people who cease attending any type of education or training institution before completing the upper secondary level (ISCED 3) (Eurydice, 2015, p. 4).

Early school leavers are usually defined as learners not enrolled in education after ISCED 2. The literature usually refers to early school leavers as drop-outs, describing the same movement of quitting school. The European Commission, for example, only refers to early school leavers for the specific age group of 18–24-year-olds: 'Early school leavers are therefore those who have only achieved pre-primary, primary, lower secondary or a short upper secondary education of less than 2 years' (European Commission, 2011).

Leaving age refers to the statutory age at which students are expected to complete compulsory education/training (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018a, p. 3).

Focusing on the age of the population leaving school is significant when evaluating young people's entry into society in relation to education and the labour market, employability, career opportunities and trajectories. The Agency (2017) distinguishes between 'formal' and 'functional' early school leaving. 'Formal' refers to an early school leaver who has not completed the school level expected by policy. 'Functional' indicates early school leavers who have not completed or reached the expected qualification level.

Table 1, as published by UNICEF and UIS (2016a), gives clear perspectives on the difference between:

- OoS children, monitored during compulsory school age according to national policies, and
- early school leavers, which can be monitored nationally – as is the case in the Netherlands – or as defined by Eurostat, which refers to 18–24-year-old learners.



**Table 1. Differences in the definition of OoS children and early school leavers**

Definition	Age range	Attainment	Training
OoS children (national monitoring, proposed definition)	Compulsory school age range according to national legislation	Did not complete the last grade of compulsory schooling (typically the last grade of ISCED 2)	Those in training (not participating in the formal school curriculum) are considered OoS
OoS children (international comparability, UIS definition)	ISCED 1 primary school age and ISCED 2 lower-secondary school age	Attainment of school-age population not considered	As above
Early school leavers (national monitoring, Netherlands example)	Depends on country (e.g. 12–23-year-olds in the Netherlands)	Depends on country	Depends on country
Early school leavers (international comparability, Eurostat definition)	18–24-year-olds	Completed no more than ISCED 2	Those in training in the past four weeks are not considered early school leavers

Source: adapted from UNICEF and UIS, 2016a, p. 23

In the European Union, ESL progressed positively between 2009 and 2020: in 2009, the average rate of ESL among 18–24-year-olds was 14%, but it decreased to 10.2% in 2020 (European Commission, 2020). Nineteen countries met the 2020 target of an early leaving from education and training (ELET) rate of less than 10% (ibid.).

The *Education and Training Monitor 2020* report also presents disparities between educational environments. Learners from rural areas are more likely to leave school early. Young men are also more likely to be early school leavers. Native-born learners are less likely to leave school early (ibid.).

### 1.3.4 Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET)

NEET refers to young people who are not in education, employment or training. As with early school leavers, NEET refers to individuals aged 16 or 18 to 24, who are above the compulsory education age. As with early school leavers, NEET does not seem to be treated separately to OoS in compulsory education age. Even though many studies have explained who these young individuals are and the reasons for their NEET situation, this group must be distinguished from OoS learners of compulsory education age. The notion of NEET gives perspectives on inclusion in society for a specific age group.

In particular, the support offered to this group of individuals should be considered. Furthermore, the type of vocational education and training and employment possibilities they have access to must be determined.





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This group is very heterogeneous. It may include young people who dropped out of school before completing upper-secondary school or even earlier, those with special needs or disabilities, and individuals suffering from illness. It may also include those brought up by young parents. People could also be NEET because of a lack of guidance in their trajectory and orientation to tertiary education. The NEET group may also include students who could have completed a bachelor's degree or students who dropped out of a higher education programme.

The age group that is targeted varies from one country to another. An Italian study shows a lack of structures to support and guide young people who are NEET (Batini et al., 2017). The study interviewed employment centres to question their understanding of NEET and the results show a significantly negative opinion of these young people. It underlines the misconceptions or lack of knowledge about young people who are NEET. Some connotations of NEET are unproductive and sometimes appear very negative, as individuals are perceived or labelled as 'lazy' and unwilling to study or work.

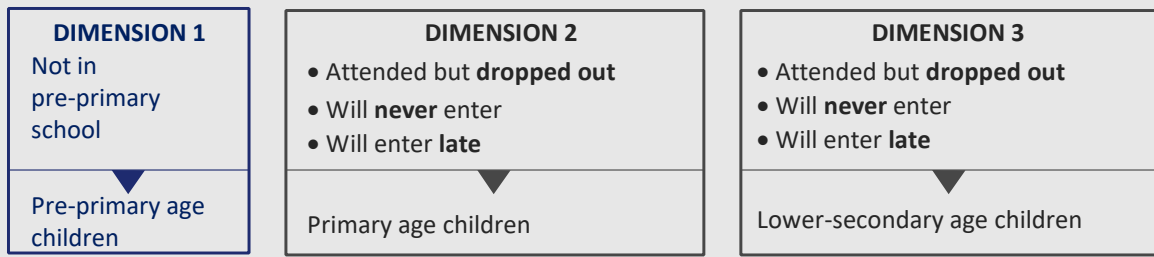
#### **1.4 'Out-of-school' and the Five Dimensions of Exclusion**

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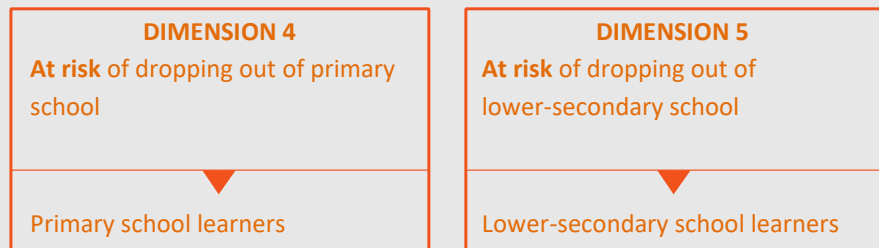
The OOSCI's Five Dimensions of Exclusion (UNICEF, 2018) presents a broad picture of the situations of OoS learners and learners at risk of drop-out. In addition, it categorises the levels of education and highlights the need for preventive actions around learners who are in school, but are considered 'at risk'.



## OUT OF SCHOOL



## IN SCHOOL



**DIMENSION 1**  
Children of pre-primary school age who are not in pre-primary or primary school

**DIMENSION 2**  
Children of primary school age who are not in primary or secondary school

**DIMENSION 4**  
Children who are in primary school but at risk of dropping out

**DIMENSION 3**  
Children of lower-secondary school age who are not in primary or secondary school

**DIMENSION 5**  
Children who are in lower-secondary school but at risk of dropping out

**Figure 1. The Five Dimensions of Exclusion**

Source: *adapted from UNICEF, 2018, p. 6*

Sometimes, some learners leave school due to the institution's organisation and structure, which can lead to learners being 'pulled' and/or 'pushed' out of school (Bradley and Renzulli, 2011). 'Pull-out' refers to learners' commitment to education in relation to their own situation, such as financial issues or parenthood. 'Push-out' focuses on the school organisation itself, in which the learner does not feel they belong. The source of the problem is in the school system, for example, lack of motivation or academic disinterest (ibid.).



The Agency's project on Early School Leaving and Learners with Disabilities and/or Special Educational Needs also highlights these push-out and pull-out forces, along with another possibility: 'fall-out':

**Table 2. Sources of action and foci of action in push-out, pull-out and fall-out**

<b>Sources of action and foci of action</b>	<b>Push-out</b>	<b>Pull-out</b>	<b>Fall-out</b>
Source of action	School organisation	Learner or learner situation	Interaction between the learner and the school
Focus of action to target ESL	School improvement	Improving learners' lives outside of school	Improving learners' academic success, motivation and sense of belonging

Source: *European Agency, 2017, p. 21*

The Agency work mentions some factors that may help to identify at-risk learners. Such learners often:

- come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds;
- are male rather than female;
- come from vulnerable groups, such as the 'Looked After', those with disabilities, those with SEN, teenage mothers and those with physical and mental health problems;
- have had a history of disengagement from school;
- have achieved poorly in school;
- come from minority or migrant backgrounds;
- have experienced high rates of mobility and/or;
- live in areas of concentrated disadvantage (European Agency, 2016, pp. 26–27).

Being at risk does not necessarily lead to being out of school. Not all learners who are officially identified as being OoS are from these at-risk groups.

Section 2 examines the groups of learners who are most often considered 'out-of-school' in more detail.



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## 2. OUT-OF-SCHOOL LEARNERS

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The previous sections highlighted that different institutions and organisations have different approaches to conceptualising 'out-of-school'. National, European and international organisations apply these conceptualisations in different ways to identify groups of learners who can be considered OoS.

Section 2.1 presents the main groups of learners who can be considered OoS.

### 2.1 Groups of learners considered out-of-school

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#### 2.1.1 Learners receiving home education

Some families decide to be in charge of their child's education and instruction. In most countries, this is called home education or home schooling.

The European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2018b) report that policies on home education across Europe vary from one country to another. However, in most countries, home education is permitted. It is either authorised at the parents' request or authorised only in exceptional circumstances.

Parents are heavily involved in decisions about home education. The policy framework is pivotal for supporting home-schooled learners.

The European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice report (ibid.) also raises a fundamental point about the qualification of the instructor, which needs more attention. In some countries, such as France, the person in charge of instruction is not required to hold a specific teaching qualification. In Denmark, the instructor does not need to hold a teaching qualification, but must provide qualified teaching. In Norway, parents need approval from the municipality to choose home schooling.

In most European countries, a policy framework defines the context and requirements for home education. Home schooling is most often a choice made by the child's family. However, in some cases, home education is proposed as an alternative to school-based education, because the school is not suitable for the learner's condition (especially for learners suffering from long-term illnesses). The policy framework should mention the instructors' training and required qualifications. It should also develop policy on curriculum and national exams and specify the department, service or authority responsible for home education.

Although the report (ibid.) mentions improving the monitoring of home education, there is no data to acknowledge this. This needs to be addressed in future work. No data means that these learners do not exist in monitoring system databases, which makes them invisible.

One element raised is the confusing system that deals with home education. In some countries, local authorities, such as the municipality or council, are responsible for granting permission for home education. In other countries, higher authorities in a national institution deal with it.



In countries where no qualifications are required to provide instruction, there should be an opportunity for individuals who would like guidance to enrol in training.

### **2.1.2 Learners with health conditions and in hospitals**

The organisation of education programmes in hospitals is quite unknown. Can learners receive education in medical institutions? Who provides the education? Is this data part of the data monitored for special needs education?

In some countries, home education is authorised for learners with health conditions. This is the case in Croatia, where:

... teaching is organised at home or in a health institution for students who cannot attend school because of severe motor disorders or chronic illnesses for a longer period of time. The teaching activity can be organised as distance learning with the use of digital technology (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018b, p. 5).

The Croatian policy framework indicates that education should be provided by a lower-secondary school teacher for learners from grades 5–8. For learners enrolled in the first four grades, a new teacher will be employed to provide instruction at home or in the health institution. The school is responsible for organising the instruction and arrangements between teachers and homes. There is no information provided for exams and evaluation.

### **2.1.3 Young people in detention**

UNICEF and UIS highlight the importance of collecting data from juvenile justice centres:

Information exchange on children in conflict with the law is not just important for monitoring OOSC, but also for children at risk of dropping out. It is important that the ministry of education is able to monitor school-age children who leave juvenile justice centres and ensure they return to school or are otherwise enrolled in a suitable education programme (2016a, p. 50).

More data on this topic is needed to better understand the situation in every country. Do underage individuals go to detention or incarceration centres? For those underage individuals, is education still compulsory by law and how is it organised? Who provides education? How is it adapted to the setting? Can the young people in those situations take national exams? Is there a specific policy framework that deals with this context? Is data collected and from which institutions?

### **2.1.4 Learners in non-formal education**

By definition, non-formal education takes place in areas that are not recognised as 'formally' educational.

The UIS definition refers to:

Education that is institutionalized, intentional and planned by an education provider. The defining characteristic of non-formal education is that it is an



addition, alternative and/or a complement to formal education within the process of the lifelong learning of individuals. ... Non-formal education mostly leads to qualifications that are not recognized as formal qualifications by the relevant national educational authorities or to no qualifications at all ([UIS](#), no date).

This first distinction between formal and non-formal education in this definition deals with different aspects. 'Addition, alternative and/or a complement to formal education' provides various possibilities and meanings. 'Alternative' education programmes could be interpreted as a choice of a different educational approach or as a possible solution offered to a learner who has left formal education.

The OECD has been working on this area since 1996 by developing lifelong learning for all strategies. It distinguishes three levels: formal learning, informal learning and non-formal learning. Non-formal learning is referred to as a mid-point between formal and informal. For the OECD, the distinctions between these learning settings are intentionally-fixed objectives (skills, competences, knowledge) and the organisations and structures ([OECD](#), no date).

The recognition of non-formal education is a profound debate. Werquin (2012) refers to it as the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes (RNFILO). He asserts that non-formal education programmes are not as developed as they should be because of a lack of recognition by formal, academic and institutional structures. The only widely accepted way to develop recognised competences and qualifications is through the formal education path.

Some countries, like Spain and Hungary, foster RNFILO by encouraging formal education programmes that exempt academic perspectives. They aim to provide a qualification as a valid recognition because of the label of the formal setting. This issue of recognition of certifications or qualifications from non-formal programmes is linked to differences in how qualifications from different award systems are organised (*ibid.*).

This issue of competences recognition also restricts the employability and employment mobility of individuals who have enrolled in non-formal education programmes. National governments should look more closely at this problem. Furthermore, education institutions should provide – or at least support – structures and programmes to enable learners to reintegrate into school after a period of absenteeism.

For example, in Denmark, the Ministry of Education is responsible for continuous supervision and development of guidance services in the education sector. The Consolidation Act on Guidance is primarily targeted at young people up to the age of 25, but it also covers services for adults wishing to enter a higher education programme. The Act defines seven main aims of guidance:

- help to ensure that choice of education and career will be of greatest possible benefit to the individual and to society and that all young people complete an education, leading to vocational/professional qualifications;



- be targeted particularly at young people who, without specific guidance, will have difficulties in relation to choice and completion of education, training and career;
- take into account the individual's interests and personal qualifications and skills, including informal competencies and previous education and work experience, as well as the expected need for skilled labour and self-employed individuals;
- contribute to limiting, as much as possible, the number of dropouts and students changing from one education and training programme to another and ensure that the pupil or student completes the chosen education with the greatest possible academic/vocational and personal benefits;
- contribute to improving the individual's ability to seek and use information, including ICT-based information and guidance about choice of education, educational institution and career;
- help to ensure coherence and progression in the individual's guidance support;
- be independent of sectoral and institutional interests. Therefore, guidance shall be provided by practitioners with an approved guidance education or recognised competencies at the same level ([Eurydice, 2019](#)).

## **2.2 Groups considered highly vulnerable to being out-of-school**

Reasons for leaving school can differ greatly from one learner to another. However, some groups of learners appear more vulnerable to educational exclusion. 'Certain vulnerable groups require a strategic focus for supports for inclusive systems in and around schools' (Downes, Nairz-Wirth and Rusinaité, 2017, p. 56).

Within the literature (UIS, 2017; UNESCO, 2018, 2020b; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2016), two groups of vulnerable learners seem particularly vulnerable to being OoS:

- Migrants, refugees and unaccompanied children and youth
- Learners with disabilities and/or special educational needs.

At the global level, both of these groups appear to face specific difficulties in terms of accessing schools and/or educational opportunities.



### 2.2.1 Migrants, refugees and unaccompanied children and youth

Displacement reduces access to school:

More than half of all refugees are under the age of 18. At least 4 million refugee children and youth aged 5 to 17 were out of school in 2017 (UNESCO, 2018, p. 54).

The population groups that move across countries are very broad, and their situations include displacement, international migration and numerous others:

There are 87 million displaced people in the world: 25 million refugees, 3 million asylum-seekers, 40 million internally displaced due to conflict and 19 million displaced due to natural disasters. Their vulnerability is exacerbated when they are deprived of education (ibid., p. 54).

Eurydice recently collected data from 42 different education systems. It shows some issues in dealing with the inclusion of learners from a migrant background. These learners:

... are defined as newly arrived/first generation, second generation or returning migrant children and young people ... they may be citizens, residents, asylum seekers, refugees, unaccompanied minors or irregular migrants (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019b, p. 11).

The data shows the complexity of the process of including learners from a migrant background and giving access to quality education. The two biggest obstacles are the language of instruction and social-emotional support (ibid.).

In some countries, access to education and to mainstream education is different for children, adolescents and young people, and specifically for newly-arrived learners. In five countries – Czech Republic, Latvia, Slovakia, the United Kingdom (Scotland) and Montenegro – all newly-arrived migrant learners 'are placed in mainstream classes for all lessons, at all education levels' (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019b, p. 15). In other countries, learners are included in certain lessons, such as physical education or art. In other cases, learners have most of their lessons in the mainstream class and are separated for some lessons. Finally, some learners are completely separated from all mainstream classes.

It is difficult to monitor learners in irregular situations. Nevertheless, as a universal right, education should be accessible regardless of legal status. Asylum-seeking learners should have access to education within three months of arrival in the host country (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019b). The same Eurydice report declares that in eight countries, some categories of migrant learners have different rights and obligations to learners born in the country.

... as evidenced throughout this report, systematic data on the education status of migrants and refugees are patchy, including in otherwise data-rich countries. In the World Bank's Microdata Catalogue, as of mid-2018, over 2,000 out of almost 2,500 household surveys include information on education, but only around one out of seven of those include migration, and





only a small fraction of those include information on refugees and/or displacement (UNESCO, 2018, p. 116).

In these cases, data collection should also be adapted to the national policy framework. In contexts where migrant learners of compulsory school age in the host country are not obliged to attend school, are they being counted as OoS? These questions are essential because they include many cases. The situation is the same for learners who have not completed compulsory education.

These differences in rights and obligations can evidently increase the risk of drop-out. Feeling part of the school environment and interacting with peers and school staff are essential to feeling included in the mainstream system. These conditions foster self-confidence, self-determination and achievement for better inclusion in society.

### **2.2.2 Learners with disabilities and/or special educational needs**

Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) underlines the need to address the right to education of all individuals with disabilities. However, learners with disabilities are more likely to be OoS or to leave school before completing primary or secondary education than their peers (UIS, 2017).

Children, adolescents and youth with disabilities accounted for 12% of the in-school population, but 15% of the out-of-school population. In general, the lower the out-of-school rate, the more likely it is that children with disabilities will be among those out of school, suggesting that those with disabilities are among the hardest to reach (UNESCO, 2020b, p. 71).

Those with a sensory, physical or intellectual disability were 4 percentage points more likely to be out of school than their primary school age peers, while the figure for lower secondary age was 7 points and, for upper secondary, 11 points (ibid., p. 64).

Being enrolled in school does not necessarily mean attending school. Physical access remains one of the barriers to school access:

The education of children with disabilities hinges on the removal of the many barriers that come between them and the chance of an education, from the lack of physical access to classrooms to the stigma that keeps them hidden away at home. It also requires the provision of appropriate support and an understanding of their functioning and needs, all backed by robust and comparable data (UIS and UNICEF, 2015, p. 104).

School infrastructure and the appropriateness of facilities and conditions are crucial issues, as the *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020* demonstrates (UNESCO, 2020b). There is a wide range of institutions and every country has its own structure.

In such cases, a number of questions arise: Is the learner considered enrolled in school? How is attendance regulated and calculated? Crucially, how is the data collected used within countries' education monitoring systems?



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Section 3 examines who collects what types of data relating to learners who are considered OoS.



### 3. DATA ON OUT-OF-SCHOOL LEARNERS

This section mainly focuses on the types and uses of data relating to learners who are considered OoS. [Section 3.1](#) presents available international data. [Section 3.2](#) discusses issues around data collection systems and methodologies. [Section 3.3](#) presents a monitoring system model. Finally, [Section 3.4](#) introduces data and categorisation practices.

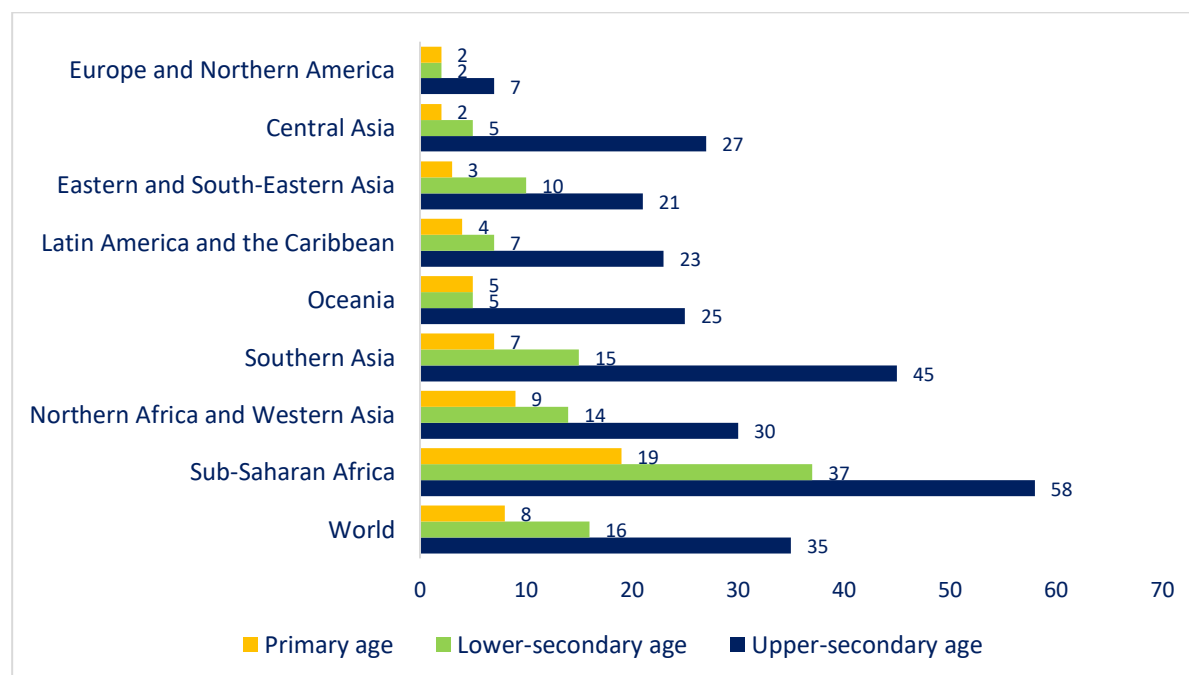
#### 3.1 Available data on out-of-school learners

The topic of OoS learners is a global one. Although the situation varies between regions, every region has children, adolescents and young people who are OoS.

Although access to school has progressed, it remains uncertain in some cases and can change from one year to another. UIS and UNICEF stated that among the 58 million OoS primary age learners in 2012, ‘23% attended school in the past but left; 34% are likely to enter school in the future; and 43% are likely to never enter school’ (2015, p. 18).

The OoS numbers include individuals who miss out on schooling completely, delay entry or drop out (UNESCO, 2018). This reinforces the idea that OoS data deals with different situations. During a school year, data can change, taking into account drop-outs, temporary school leavers, etc.

Figure 2 shows that the OoS phenomenon does not affect regions equally. Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rates of OoS, whereas Europe and Northern America show the lowest rates.



**Figure 2. OoS rate by region and age group in 2018 (regions sorted by primary OoS rate)**

Source: adapted from UIS, 2019, p. 8



In addition to differences between regions and although OoS occurs at all education levels, upper-secondary age learners are more likely to be OoS than those of primary age.

### 3.2 Data collection systems and methodologies

Between 2018 and 2019, UIS published different OoS numbers. In February 2018, UIS (2018) stated that one in five learners (children, adolescents and young people) was OoS, based on the 263 million OoS learners declared in 2016. In September 2019, another publication stated that 258.4 million children, adolescents and young people were considered OoS, based on data from 2018 (UIS, 2019).

Table 3 presents the two datasets from 2016 and 2018.

**Table 3. Numbers of OoS children, adolescents and young people – 2016 and 2018**

Education level	Number of OoS learners (millions) – 2016	Number of OoS learners (millions) – 2018
Primary school age	63.3	59.1
Lower-secondary school age	61.1	61.5
Upper-secondary school age	138.5	137.8
Primary, lower-secondary and upper-secondary total	262.9	258.4

Source: *adapted from UIS, 2018; 2019*

UIS developed a different calculation method for the OoS rate in 2018, and data between 2018 and 2019 was calculated differently. The OoS rate is therefore defined as:

Children, adolescents and youth of primary, lower secondary and upper secondary school age are now considered out of school if they are not enrolled in pre-primary, primary, secondary or post-secondary education (UIS, 2019, p. 5)

The new methodology was elaborated as children of primary school age were not considered as in school if they were enrolled in pre-primary education. As SDG 4.2 reinforces universal access to early education, care and pre-primary education, the methodology needed to be reconsidered.

A comparison of the calculation methods for the different out-of-school rates used until 2018 shows that the treatment of pre-primary education was inconsistent with the treatment of participation in other levels of education. While adolescents and youth of lower and upper secondary age enrolled in primary education were counted as in school, children of primary age in pre-primary education were considered out of school, thus inflating primary out-of-school rates in countries where children tend to stay in pre-primary education beyond pre-primary age (UIS, 2019, p. 5).



It is important to mention that data collection methods must be redefined and improved to adapt to educational developments. Data collection methodologies must also develop to adequately reflect the situation of OoS children (OOSC). UNICEF and UIS reported:

... a general lack of adequate tools and methodologies to identify OOSC, to measure the scope and describe the complexity of exclusion and disparities, to assess the reasons for exclusion, and to inform policy and planning (2016a, p. 7).

Research studies have mostly been conducted by academics in specific locations, at school level or to compare schools in different countries. However, such methodologies rarely work only with data provided by governments. Research highlights the need to conduct longitudinal studies (Alivernini and Lucidi, 2001). Data collection must be carried out over a certain period of time to be significant enough to analyse.

There is an expressed need to also combine quantitative and qualitative data (UNICEF and UIS, 2016a). Statistics and indicators cannot stand as the only data available to develop an accurate analysis.

Currently, there are two ways to calculate OoS: data from education management information systems, and household surveys. The first approach uses administrative data to calculate the difference between enrolment as captured by schools and the population of specific age groups. The second approach uses household survey data, which typically captures attendance rather than enrolment. It is possible for children to be enrolled but not attend school, and resulting figures may therefore differ (Carr-Hill, 2012; UNICEF and UIS, 2016b, p. 3).

UIS raises an issue with the attendance rate calculation approach. Its definition of 'attendance' considers a learner as attending school if they go to school at least one day per school year:

Therefore, indicators of school participation derived from household survey data refer to attendance: e.g. "net attendance rate" or "total net attendance rate". An out-of-school child is a child who did not attend formal primary or secondary school at any time during the reference academic year ([UIS](#), no date).

### **3.2.1 Education management information systems**

Data from ministries of education or other authorities is based on data collected in schools. The indicator of reference is school enrolment, according to the data source for the UIS 'out-of-school rate' definition:

Administrative data from schools or household survey data on enrolment by single year of age; population censuses and surveys for population estimates by single year of age (if using administrative data on enrolment); administrative data from ministries of education on the structure (entrance age and duration) of the education system (UIS, glossary).



Within this reference, there are two indicators: the enrolment rate and gross enrolment. The first gives information about the level of education for a specific age group. The second demonstrates the proportion of children from the school-age group enrolled in school. Most of the time, these calculations do not give accurate information.

Establishing such OOSC indicators requires population estimates by single year of age (which should be available from the latest population census), as well as enrolment data for all (compulsory) school-age children and adolescents by single year of age (UNICEF and UIS, 2016a, p. 17).

Methodology guidance is one issue. For example, the time during the school year when data is collected sometimes varies. This will therefore provide different material (at different times). Questions about how and which education staff collect data and how they are trained and informed must also be considered.

Key functions have been defined as fundamental foundations to develop a strong monitoring system:

1. Recording of enrolment by date of birth, or single year of age (required for the calculation of many key education indicators).
2. Recording of absenteeism, distinguishing between excused and unexcused absenteeism.
3. Cross-checking enrolment records with population registers to identify school age children who have never been to school.
4. Recording of dropout as well as reason for dropout (UNICEF and UIS, 2016b, p. 6).

### **3.2.2 Household surveys**

Household surveys can be used to collect quantitative data and limited qualitative data. However, questions regarding the limitations of this methodology (how data is submitted and to whom) are worth raising. According to Carr-Hill, household surveys do not provide accurate data because some individuals are excluded from the data collection processes. He lists individuals who may be excluded, not represented or under-represented in the data samples:

(1) Those not in households because they are homeless; (2) Those who are in institutions (including refugee camps); (3) Mobile, nomadic or pastoralist populations; (4) Many of those in fragile or disjointed or multiple occupancy households; (5) Those in urban slums; and may (6) Omit certain areas of a country where there are security concerns (Carr-Hill, 2012, p. 192).

### **3.3.3 European data collection systems**

The European context presents a rich diversity of policies, education system structures and monitoring data processes. However, most European countries and regions have developed specific data collection systems to monitor ESL rather than OoS learners. A



Eurydice report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2016) mentions that a large number of countries base their national data collection on ELET:

ELET data from student registers is collected automatically from school administration systems based on students' personal data. They can be used for an ad hoc assessment of the scale of early leaving at different public authority levels. Quantitative and qualitative surveys are other tools being used for gathering ELET data, which can also contribute to a better understanding of the reasons for early leaving (ibid., p. 7).

The student register's main purpose might not be to monitor ESL, but it can produce the data required to obtain the number of early school leavers. 'An exact number of early leavers can be obtained by comparing records from one school year to the next' (ibid.). The majority of national ELET data in Europe is collected from student registers (ibid.).

The student register can also be used to monitor absenteeism. In Finland, the [VIP special support networks survey](#), funded by the Finnish National Agency for Education, monitored lower-secondary school attendance in the 2019–2020 school year. The survey revealed an increase in absenteeism (Määttä, Pelkonen, Lehtisare and Määttä, 2020).

National quantitative data collection systems are fundamental, but qualitative data collection may also play a significant role in understanding issues of OoS.

Identifying children who are out of school is often an exercise in improving data quality. Careful analysis can reveal gaps in a country's data on out-of-school children, which may be resolved by improving records, linking multiple databases (UNICEF and UIS, 2015, p. 37).

Eleven European countries and regions have developed or are currently developing quantitative data collection systems covering the specific area of ESL. Two of these countries have complemented the quantitative data collection with additional qualitative data:

In the Czech Republic, for example, the National Institute for Education (NUV) has been carrying out several surveys on an ad-hoc basis providing in addition to quantitative data, facts and contextual information on early leaving from general education and vocational education and training. The latest one, the 2013 'Study on early leaving from education' (*Zpráva o předčasných odchodech ze vzdělávání*), ... provides an overview of the current state of the problem as well as best practices at both national and international level in reducing it, with particular emphasis on success factors. It also provides recommendations for measures to tackle the problem at school level, service provision level and policy level (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2016, p. 8)

In the United Kingdom (Scotland), the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) records the qualification attainment of Scottish school leavers, and Skills Development Scotland (SDS) undertake an annual destination of school leavers survey. The SQA database and the SDS survey are complementary; they are



combined to present a picture of how achievement at school influences what happens within the first year after leaving (ibid.).

European countries are tackling this area by improving and developing their data collection systems. This allows them to better understand the situation and develop and implement adequate policies to address ESL specifically and OoS more generally.

### 3.2.4 Preventing barriers to accurate data and indicators

The OOSCI identified some barriers to enable it to develop accurate data collection systems. The main barrier is referred to as 'incomplete' information on OoS learners and those at risk of dropping out (UNICEF and UIS, 2016a, p. 17). The OOSCI's work highlighted four main issues:

- **Unavailability:** *Indicators* and *data* on OOSC and children at risk of dropping out are unavailable.
- **Incorrect definition:** For the *indicators* which do exist, the definition or method of calculation is incorrect.
- **Inconsistent interpretation:** *Indicators* and their definitions are ambiguous and interpreted differently between and within ministries and/or between national, local and school levels.
- **Insufficient disaggregation:** The *data* are not or cannot be sufficiently disaggregated to be useful for analysis (ibid.).

Therefore, when developing strong monitoring systems, particular attention should be paid to the definitions. Specific and precise definitions of the concepts and methods of calculation avoid misinterpretation and confusion. The OOSCI incorporates learners at risk of dropping out into the OoS data and indicators.

Another aspect to consider is the communication of information between different schools, institutions and ministries at local and national levels:

It is important that information on OOSC and children at risk of dropping out encompasses all school-age children in the country, regardless of the kind of school or institution they are attending, if any. Otherwise, these indicators will fail to capture exactly those children they are intended to capture: vulnerable and disadvantaged children who are not in the regular school system (ibid., p. 18).

## 3.3 Monitoring system model

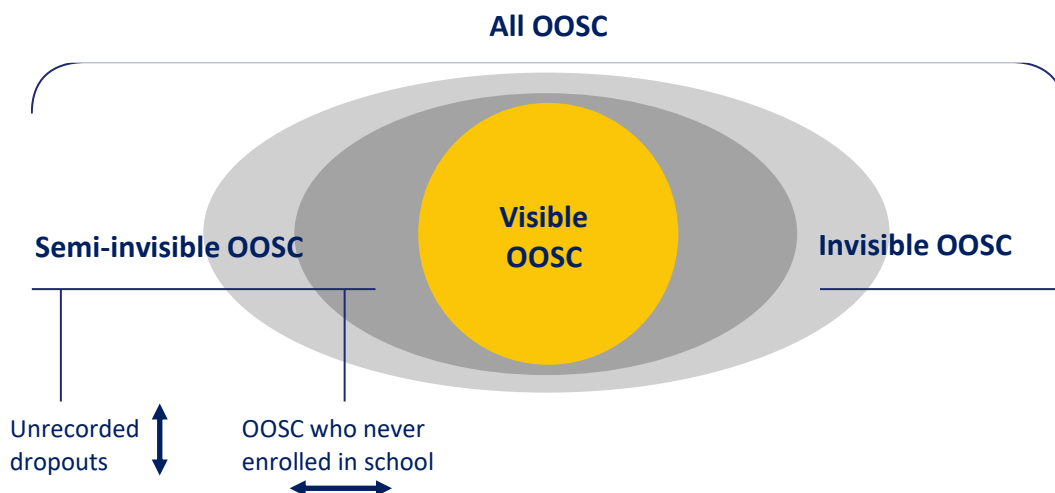
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Collecting data on OoS learners is particularly difficult, as some data refers to learners physically present in school, while other data refers to learners potentially physically out of school, which makes them less visible and 'countable'. Some learners' participation and attendance in school is easier to track than others'.





UNICEF and UIS have developed a model that includes visible, semi-visible and invisible learners at risk of dropping out of school, as well as OoS learners (Figure 3). The model prompts countries to ask how these learners are monitored and how data collection procedures can be improved to identify them.



**Figure 3. Visible, semi-invisible and invisible OoS children**

Source: adapted from UNICEF and UIS, 2016a, p. 12

Visible OoS children are recorded as having been enrolled in school and thus are recorded as having left the school.

Semi-visible OoS children are the unrecorded drop-outs and individuals who have never enrolled in school.

Invisible OoS children are invisible in databases, which makes them uncountable. They cannot be identified from any data or monitoring systems. They are not represented in any database.

To prevent the barriers previously mentioned, the OOSCI has identified eight steps to develop more a precise monitoring system for education participation. The steps are organised into three phases: collect; collaborate; create and respond:

- Collect:
  1. Establish indicators, definitions and benchmarks
  2. Prevent, detect and resolve data inaccuracies
  3. Update EMIS [education management information systems] to incorporate new indicators and methodologies
- Collaborate:
  4. Close gaps in vertical information flows between local and national level



5. Close gaps in horizontal information flows through cross-sector collaboration
- Create and Respond:
    6. Create an early warning system
    7. Create automated reporting and analysis routines
    8. Develop and establish evidence-informed policies and interventions (UNICEF and UIS, 2016a, p. 14).

This model shows the importance of combining different data sources from different levels, such as local and national. Collaboration between education stakeholders, as the model outlines, is fundamental for future work development in this area:

Identifying children not in school or at risk of dropping out may require information on vulnerable children from several sources, such as the police or the ministry of labour and social protection (ibid., p. 48).

Looking at the overlaps and confusions between absenteeism and drop-out mentioned in the OOSCI model, early warning systems could be difficult to consider in further work. As the OOSCI mentions, an early warning system also identifies the support a learner needs:

An early warning system does more than prevent dropout: it is also a system for identifying students in difficult circumstances who need support, regardless of whether or not they will drop out (ibid., p. 57).

Absenteeism due to a health condition or special needs should not be included in drop-out data. Chronic absenteeism due to a disability is not perceived as absenteeism because it is regular and arranged between the education institution and the learner's household (UNICEF and UIS, 2016a).

The OOSCI model shows that the local level, such as school staff, teachers and head teachers, plays a crucial role in data collection. Therefore, some key areas must be clearly defined to help the data collection at every level:

- The compulsory school age range, according to legislation, during which children or youth can be classified as dropouts (and OOSC).
- The reporting date on which schools are required to submit enrolment and dropout information.
- A clear specification of the kinds of absenteeism which are considered to be excused (such as suspension or school-approved illness).
- A clear list of education programmes that are or are not included in the dropout calculation (which programmes students may attend and be



considered as ‘in school’– for example, whether night school or other alternative education programmes are included).

- A list of exclusionary conditions, for example: migrating abroad, transferring to another government-approved education programme (including a list of such education programmes), completed compulsory education, and death (ibid., p. 26).

### **3.4 Data and categorisation practices**

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The data collection and monitoring system orientations and definitions tend to categorise learners as, for example, identifying their potential risk of exclusion. Over-identification and categorisation could lead to segregation. Labelling learners and classifying them under criteria to avoid school exclusion needs balance.

The categorisation of learners could be a potential area of future work. On this topic, Portugal has developed a non-categorical approach, which shows that new orientations towards more inclusive practices are currently being developed:

Portugal recently legislated a non-categorical approach to determining special needs ... Such moves, in a break from categories defined in terms of medical conditions, focus instead on level of support given. The medical approach promotes a ‘wait to fail’ attitude: Diagnosis outside the learning setting is accompanied by an expectation that the student will fail without intervention (UNESCO, 2020b, p. 76).



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## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

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This Background Information Report aimed to raise awareness on the topic of OoS learners. It provides information around data, concepts and definitions that can be used to inform future data collection on OoS learners. It also highlights a number of key issues and questions for further consideration in future work.

This work has aimed to cover all the areas needed to address the OoS issue in its entirety. Some issues highlighted in the work do not have answers and therefore need further examination:

- 'Out-of-school' must be defined through detailed approaches to limit ambiguity with other connected terms.
- Data collection and education monitoring systems need to vary sources between qualitative data and quantitative information.
- Non-categorical data collection needs to be explored.

Further work on these issues will potentially contribute towards the shared goals of improving equity in education and access to more inclusive educational environments for all learners.



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## ANNEX: METHODOLOGY

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The starting point for this Background Information Report was one of the findings from the analysis of the [European Agency Statistics on Inclusive Education](#) (EASIE) 2014/2016 data: the issue of out-of-school learners needs closer examination (European Agency, 2018). As the *European Agency Statistics on Inclusive Education: Key Messages and Findings (2014 / 2016)* report states:

The situation of learners who are out of school for different reasons and under different circumstances (i.e. formally enrolled in education but do not attend, or not enrolled in any form of education) is unclear in almost all countries. This requires further examination, as data for most countries is often limited or missing (European Agency, 2018, p. 8).

In 2018, the Agency's Representative Board members agreed that data on OoS learners was an area for further examination. Possibilities for EASIE data collection on this issue were initially discussed with the nominated EASIE data experts in 2018. During a working meeting with the experts in 2019, the issues were discussed in detail. As a result of that meeting, it was agreed that two inter-connected information-gathering activities would take place:

- first, desk research to compile relevant European and international background information on and around the concept of OoS learners;
- then, drawing on the desk research findings, a survey for national data collection experts on current and future possibilities for data collection on OoS learners.

This report is based on the desk research. It aims to inform developments in future EASIE work on OoS data collection and analysis.

To prepare the desk research, previous EASIE work was scanned to identify key words that could guide a search for resources. Key terms closely related to out-of-school, such as early school leaver, drop-out and not in education, employment or training (NEET), were identified.

Using the key words, two types of document searches were completed: examining international organisations' resources, and exploring research papers, articles and publications dealing with OoS learners and related issues.

The first resource search was based on the key term 'out-of-school'. Publications and databases from the Agency, the European Commission, Eurydice, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) and the World Bank were examined.

The second resource search focused on gathering studies and research publications on the OoS theme. Online academic platforms ([Google Scholar](#), [Cairn](#), [ERIC](#)) were consulted using the same key words as the first search.



Both searches considered publications from the years 2000 to 2020. Very specific national studies were not included in the desk research.

The document scanning in the first stage of the desk research work was guided by the question '**What does being out-of-school mean?**'. Difficulties with finding a clear definition and approach to the OoS issue were underlined at this stage. As a result, a third search was added, centred on OoS definitions as operationalised in online glossaries from Eurydice, OECD, UNESCO and UNICEF. These online resources identified some groups of learners considered OoS, such as those who are home schooled or educated in non-formal education or in youth detention.

Specific searches using the same online academic platforms resulted in additional papers and resources to be considered in the complete analysis. In total, 26 publications from international organisations were selected for analysis, as well as 34 research papers and articles. These covered various areas, including concepts, data, monitoring systems, groups of learners and education systems.

Three main questions framed the analysis of all of the materials:

- What does being out-of-school mean?
- Who is considered as being out-of-school?
- What existing data is available?

The write-up and structure of the final Background Information Report is in line with these three key questions:

- What does the concept of out-of-school mean?
- Who are out-of-school learners and what situations are they in?
- What data on out-of-school learners is being collected and could be collected?

The [References](#) section lists all the materials cited in this report. The [Bibliography](#) lists related materials that were considered but not included in the final report. All main reference [websites](#) consulted are also listed.