Scholarship Scheme Guide

July 2023

OBSERVATORY FOR CHIDREN AND YOUTH RIGHTS

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PART I- A GUIDE FOR IDENTIFYING AND PREVENTING NEET

1.1 INTRODUCTION

1.1.1 Policy Context

Albanian legislation in the field of education has advanced significantly in the last decade. This achievement is also recognized by the latest European Union (EU) report, from 2020, which estimates that, *from the perspective of educational legislation, Albania is moderately prepared* in this field *as a whole for EU membership*.

The Government of Albania has recognized the need to address the employment issue. Vocational Education and Training (VET) generates the workforce of tomorrow, and, thus, plays a key role in economic growth, employment generation and social stability.

1.1.2 Aims of the Guide

While the value of being able to identify pupils at risk of disengagement is very important, there has been little consensus on how such systems should be designed and what variables should be used to identify young people at risk of disengagement. Variables used fall into the following classifications:

- Demographic characteristics: where whole groups of pupils are considered at risk of disengaging due to demographic characteristics they share.
- School-based indicators: where individual pupils are identified at risk of disengagement based on attainment, attendance and behaviour at school.
- Personal or attitudinal indicators: where specific pupils are identified based on personal or family circumstances (e.g. family breakup), as well as more qualitative information on attitudes and aspirations (e.g. self-esteem, resilience, willingness to engage in lessons).

This Guide aims to assess the extent to which demographic characteristics and school-based indicators would be effective in predicting young people at risk of becoming NEET in Albania. Although personal or attitudinal indicators are important, as data on these are not routinely available at a national level, they are out of scope of this Guide.

1.1.3 Structure of the Guide

No. of Section	What does it?
Section 1	Introduce the Policy Context and aims of the Guide.
Section 2	Sets out definitions of disengagement from learning, how this relates to NEETs and the levels of NEETs.
Section 3	Compares demographic characteristics with school-based indicators for identifying young people at risk of disengaging and becoming NEET.
Section 4	Provides a brief conclusion.

1.2 DISENGAGEMENT FROM LEARNING

1.2.1 Definitions

NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) is a term used to describe young people who are not engaged in education, employment or training. *It's essential to identify NEET individuals and reach out to them*. This can be done through surveys, community outreach, or by working with local schools and colleges.

It is one of the indicators under:

- *SDG no. 8 "Decent work and economic growth"*
  - *Objective 8.6*: Substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training. To be in line with objective 8.6, this indicator must decrease.

Disengagement from learning is a set of attitudes relating to a young person's motivation, the value they see in school and the importance attributed to school attainment. These attitudes are then translated into behaviours including effort made in completing work, attendance, behaviour and ultimately staying on in education or not. Thus, many of the indicators used to measure disengagement relate to the symptoms of a young person switching off or disconnecting from their learning rather than the act itself.

Levels of disengagement:

1. *Underachieving but not disengaged*: where underachievement was the result of an event/crisis or a more a gradual drop-off in attainment.
2. *Moderate disengagement*: where attainment and enjoyment of school varied. Factors contributing to disengagement were often complex, but less severe than those who completely disengaged. This is often prevented by the presence of some protective factors.

3. *Severe or complete disengagement:* Those that suffered a serious drop in attainment. Those who become NEET and did not pass any courses. This group often had a range of complex and multifaceted factors contributing to their disengagement.

This Guide is predominately concerned with the final category of disengagement above and focused on those who are at risk of becoming NEET. However, the other categories are of interest too, as the route for a young person becoming NEET can be a gradual process and early signs of disengagement need to be addressed to prevent a young person becoming NEET.

Young people described as NEET are not a homogeneous group. The inability of some young people to engage in labour markets or educational opportunities is complex. The term NEET spans a core of young people with deep-rooted problems; an element who are short term and who are generally able to re-engage; and those at risk either because of personal lack of direction, or because they are adversely impacted by shifting economic circumstances.
NEET classification are different according to the following circumstances:

- *Cyclical, in transition or open to learning*: young people who are likely to re-engage in education, training and the workforce in the short term, tending to have higher attainment and a more positive attitude to exploiting opportunity.
    - Young people within this group are unlikely to require any support as in most cases they are highly qualified and are not engaged in learning by choice.
- *Floating, 'at risk' or undecided*: young people who may be dissatisfied with available opportunities or are most vulnerable to economic downturn. This group also includes those young people who find themselves lacking direction and/or motivation and move in and out of the NEET group.

- Young people within this group do not have substantive barriers to employment or learning. They have relatively good qualification levels and, generally, require advice about how to secure appropriate education, employment or training. It is appropriate to identify this group in their final year of education through determining whether they have a realistic post-school destination and understand how best to realize their preferred destination.

- *Core or sustained*: young people experiencing longer-term disengagement in education, training and the labour market, and linked to a wider pattern of poor attainment and experience.

    - Young people within the core NEET group have considerable barriers to participation which, in some cases, result from generations of disadvantage. Identifying young people at risk of falling into the core NEET group will require early intervention, as the main characteristic of this group is a lack of qualifications.

1.2.2 Prevalence

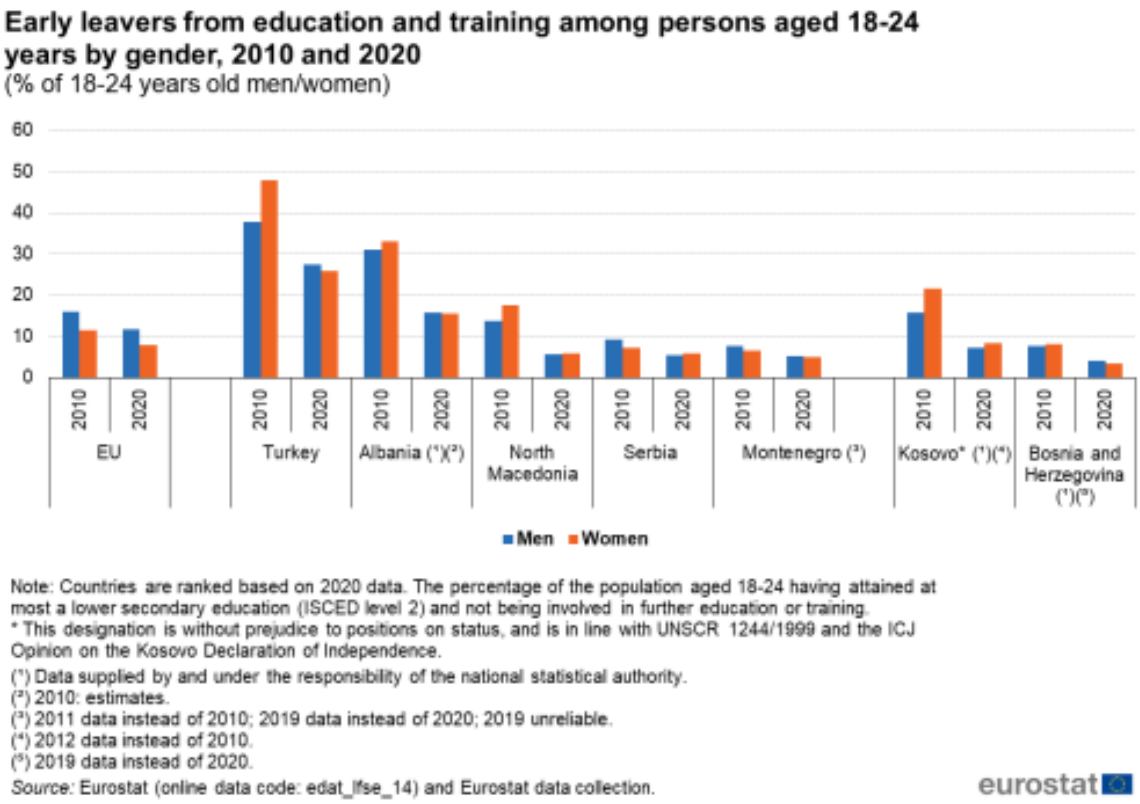
- In 2020, Albania had the lowest proportion of persons aged 20-24 having attained at least an upper secondary level of education (55,7%).[1]

- In 2020, the proportion of early leavers from education and training among persons aged 18-24 is relatively high in Albania with 15,7% of young men and 15,5% of young women, by ranking Albania the second country when first is Turkey.

- Between 2010 and 2020, Albania recorded the highest changes, the proportion of early leavers decreased by 15,3% for young men and by 17,5% for young women, reversing the gender gap from +2.0% in 2010 to -0.2% in 2020.

[1]Source: Eurostat - Enlargement countries - education statistics - Statistics Explained (europa.eu), Data extracted in March 2022.

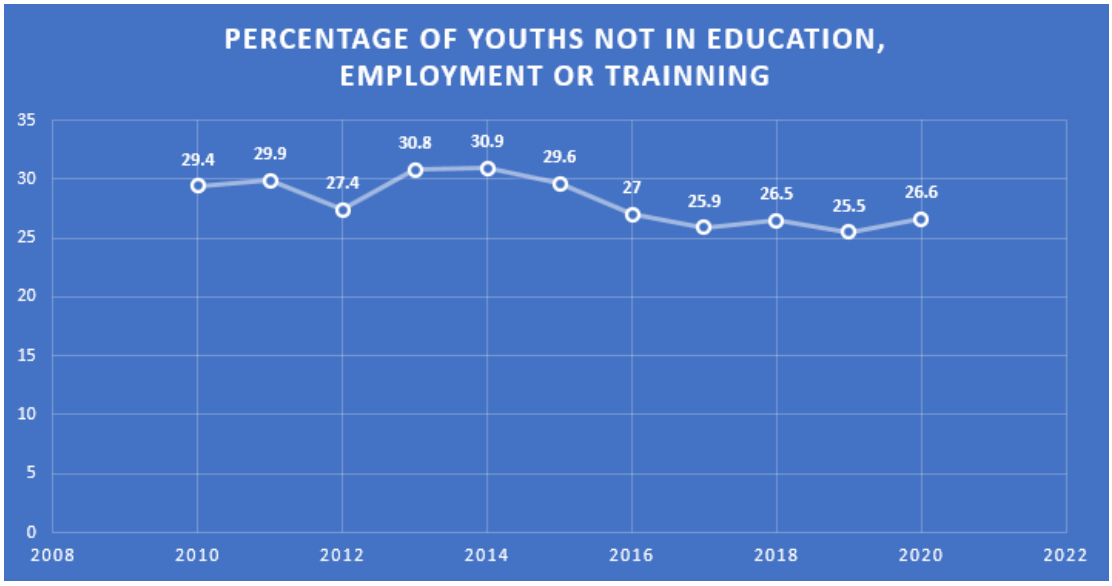
Figure 1: Early leavers from education and training among persons aged 18-24 years by gender, 2010 and 2020 (% of 18-24 years old men/women)



Source of information: Eurostat (edat_lfse_14) and Eurostat data collection

Based on the Labor Force Survey of INSTAT, the data for this indicator are reflected in the following chart:

Figure 2: Percentage of youth NEET within years



Source of information: INSTAT, the Labor Force Survey

Meantime, the latest data on percentage of adolescents aged 15-19 years not in education, employment or training NEET (December 2022), show the following figures:

Country	% of NEET Male	% of NEET Female
Albania	21	17
World	13	22

Some of the analytic points of the young NEET population by age group and gender[2] are listed as follows:

- The number of young NEETs is higher in the 15-24 age group, representing 61.2% of the total. In the 15-24 age group the distribution by gender is practically identical, with women/ girls representing 49% of the total in this group.
- Women are significantly more represented in the 25-29 group than men/ boys, (60% of young NEETs are women/ girls). This show that the difficulty on the transition to the labor market increases significantly for older women within this group.
- Meantime, the 20-24 age group concentrates the largest proportion of young NEETs (41.6% of the total, that includes 76.712 young NEETs).

Some of the analytic points of the young NEET population by educational level[3] are listed as follows:

- In absolute terms, the vast majority of them do not have more than an average level of education (76% with a medium and low level of education).
- NEET youth with secondary education level make up 31.4% of the total youth in this group, while NEET youth with higher education make up 27.1%. On the other hand, young people with low educational level make up 25% of this group.
- Less qualified young people are more prone to long-term unemployment.

[2] "Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan - Mapping and Profiling of Young NEETs in Albania (2022)"
[3] "Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan - Mapping and Profiling of Young NEETs in Albania (2022)"

Some of the analytic points of the young NEET population by employment level and location[4], are listed as follows:

- Only 28,7% of young NEETs were registered in the public employment service.
- The NEET distribution by region vary strongly, being the highest concentration in Tirana encompassing 35,1%% and the lowest in Kukes encompassing only 1,2% of the young NEETs in Albania.

1.2.3 Tracking Systems

Governments across the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations have developed strategies and policies to reduce the number of young people who become NEET. One such approach is the identification and tracking of young people at risk of disengaging (also referred to as early warning systems). Tracking systems are adopted for a number of reasons, including: identifying, referring and monitoring young people at risk of disengaging; targeting resources to young people at risk of disengaging; and assessing the effectiveness of initiatives designed to prevent young people from becoming disengaged. A key issue for policy makers in designing tracking systems is the lack of consensus regarding what young people are at risk of disengaging from and how to identify those young people.

[4] "Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan - Mapping and Profiling of Young NEETs in Albania (2022)"

1.3 IDENTIFYING YOUNG PEOPLE AT RISK OF DISENGAGING AND BECOMING NEET

1.3.1 Demographic Characteristics

Numerous studies have sought to identify the characteristics of young people who are disengaged and the factors that trigger young people to become NEET. The studies have identified the following demographic characteristics that are shared by young people who have become NEET:

- are in care, have left care or who are on the edge of care,
- are carers,
- are young parents,
- have a physical disability/learning disability/chronic illness,
- have a mental illness,
- experience economic disadvantage,
- have experienced homelessness and/or lived in rented accommodation,
- have parent(s) who is unemployed or in unskilled manual occupations,
- Live in high unemployment areas,
- Are members of some minority ethnic groups.

Using demographic characteristics as a way of identifying pupils at risk of becoming NEET is problematic for a number of practical reasons and for accuracy.

a. Practical issues associated with using demographic factors

A key issue for practitioners seeking to identify pupils at risk of disengaging and becoming NEET is the scope of data required to undertake a systematic assessment of risk for all young people. The range and volume of identified ‘at risk’ demographic characteristics me impossible the process of assessing every pupil against every ‘at risk’ characteristic.

Whilst some demographic data will be available to schools, other data will not be routinely collected, such as parental occupation or the tenure of their living accommodation. Some data

may not be routinely shared with schools for confidentiality/data protection reasons. Where systems rely on demographic characteristics to identify pupils at risk of disengaging, not having comprehensive data about all pupils will result in a system which is likely to miss some pupils who are at risk of disengaging and becoming NEET.

b. Accuracy

There is little evidence to suggest that using demographic characteristics is an accurate way to identify young people at risk of disengaging. Whilst the literature provides a range of risk factors that indicate whether a young person is likely to disengage, the distinction between the concept of risk and indicators of those at risk of disengaging is not necessarily clear. This distinction is important for the accuracy of systems which are designed to identify pupils at risk of becoming NEET. In particular, issues arise in attempting to use groups who are over or under represented in the NEET groups to identify individual pupils at risk of becoming NEET.

Demographic variables can be used to identify groups of individuals at risk of becoming NEET by examining how over-represented certain groups are within the NEET group, in relation to the cohort as a whole. This is often easier than identifying individuals but can result in over-targeting, which is when someone within a group identified as being at risk does not go on to become NEET.

Using demographic characteristics in this way with the possibility of inaccurate targeting can have unintended impacts in terms of taking effective action at the school level. Over-targeting could make the problem of disengagement so large that it is perceived by schools as being too big to address or that pupils are labeled as being at risk and unnecessarily 'treated' as being at risk of becoming NEET.

In addition, there is a risk that schools will not perceive disengagement as something they can have an impact on, since demographic variables such as socio-economic status, disability and family structure are difficult, and unlikely, to be alterable. As a consequence, systems to identify young people at risk of disengaging should focus on factors which are alterable and which schools and practitioners can have an impact upon.

It is possible to increase the accuracy with which demographic characteristics identify pupils at risk of disengaging through understanding the relationship between school-based indicators

and resilience factors. These relate back to the personal and attitudinal indicators that were mentioned at the outset of the report. The factors related to resilience include:

- *Personal attributes*: such as motivation and goal orientation
- *Positive use of time*: including on-task behaviour, homework completion, and participation in extra-curricular experiences.
- *Family life*: such as family support and expectations.
- *School and classroom learning environment*: including facilities, exposure to technology, leadership, and overall climate.

While the examination of personal and attitudinal indicators is largely out of scope of this report, their importance should not be underestimated. Aspirations and behaviours account for approximately a quarter of the difference in attainment between rich and poor pupils at age 16. Given the link between attainment and becoming NEET, it seems reasonable that attitudinal indicators will also be important predictors of becoming NEET.

Where resilience factors are not assessed, demographic characteristics alone will be unhelpful in identifying pupils who are at risk of disengaging, who might benefit from targeted support. Using school-based indicators to identify pupils at risk of disengaging is more useful than using demographic characteristics since they can be observed by schools, are easier to change, and can usually be influenced by pupils, parents, educators, and community members who are prepared to take action.

c. School-based indicators

Research has found that key warning signals of disengaging include school attendance, behaviour, course performance (completing assignments and passing courses) School-based indicators have been found to be better predictors of dropping out of secondary education than demographic characteristics such as gender, ethnicity and poverty (Kennelly and Monrad, 2007 cited Burgette et al, 2011). Hull (2005) argues that since research indicates that absenteeism/truancy and low levels of academic achievement are the most significant common characteristics of early school leavers, if a system is only going to use a small amount of data, this is the data that will catch the majority of the at risk cohort.

Young people considered most at risk of becoming NEET are those who have disengaged from school, regularly played truant, have low basic skills levels, or have achieved no or low qualifications.

c.1 Attainment

- As early as fourth grade (age 9-10), future dropouts received lower grades than did future graduates.
- By the end of ninth grade (age 14-15), eventual graduates and dropouts were accurately identified 80 per cent of the time using an 'on track' indicator based on the number of credits earned and the number of failures in core courses.
- Failing ninth grade (age 14-15) is one of the most important predictors of dropping out. More students fail ninth grade than any other grade and a disproportionate number of students who are held back in ninth grade subsequently drop out.
- Not achieving on-grade promotion earlier than ninth grade has a similar long-term impact. Patterns of attainment are also significant. Middle school (ages 11-12 to 13-14) achievement scores, for example, are not by themselves a predictor of future disengagement. Students (aged 13-14) who are in the highest quartile in eighth grade scores but fall off track in ninth grade (aged 14-15), are far less likely to graduate than students who were in the lowest quartile in eighth grade (aged 13-14) achievement but are on track at the end of ninth grade (aged 14-15).

c.2 Attendance

The review found that the first year of high school (ninth grade, age 14-15) is a 'make or break year'. The review concludes that:

- The biggest risk factor for failing ninth grade is the number of absences during the first 30 days of high school.
- Even moderate levels of absences, one to two weeks, in the first semester of ninth grade, are associated with lower rates of high school graduation.
- By the end of the first semester of high school, course grades and failure rates are slightly better predictors of whether students will graduate.

c.3 Early identification

There is evidence to suggest it is possible to use school-based indicators to identify young people who are at risk of disengaging as early as sixth grade (ages 11/12):

- Students in the sixth grade, who failed either maths or English, had an attendance rate of under 80 per cent or had a final 'unsatisfactory' behaviour mark in at least one class, had at least a 75 per cent chance of dropping out of secondary school (Neild et al, 200714).
- Indicators reflecting poor attendance, misbehavior, and course failures in sixth grade can be used to identify 60 per cent of the students who will not graduate from high school (Balfanz et al, 2007).

c.4 Advantages and disadvantages of using school-based indicators

The advantages of using school-based indicators to identify pupils at risk of disengaging include:

- the data required is routinely collected,
- the data will identify pupils at risk of becoming core NEETs, as the data can identify those unlikely to gain qualifications, and
- using these indicators focuses on alterable variables and places responsibility with those who can detect, and who have potential to change, the destinations of young people. In particular, responsibility is placed within schools.

Using school-based indictors alone is likely to have some limitations. Whilst school-based indicators are likely to catch pupils who are at risk of falling into the core NEET group, using such indicators alone is unlikely to identify floating NEETs. Thus, it would be useful to add indicators about pupil's attitudes and intentions following compulsory education and capacity of the pupil to follow this through.

1.4 ACTIONS TO PREVENT NEET

1.4.1 Step 1. Local territory diagnosis of needs and existing initiatives

What are the territorial needs in terms of integration of young people who are NEET? What responses already exist?

This first step will allow an organization planning to implement the model to adjust all further activities to their own context and needs. To do so, the proposal is to gather information related to the territory about: number of local young people who are NEET; key local stakeholder's; labour market dynamics (to be able to inform young people and other local stakeholders and to support the identification of relevant local stakeholders); young people who are currently NEET with skills gaps and skills mismatches; young people who are currently NEET not integrated in any active employment programme; inactive young people who are currently NEET; information on the existence in the territory of community groups, official and local organizations that deliver interventions aimed at young people, or who have developed some European, governmental or local programs. Communication actions targeting local stakeholders' possible responses in the territory to identify common goals and synergies, good knowledge of labour market trends, dynamics and needs.

Develop communication activities to introduce the project to the local community; develop a communication plan for young people who are NEET locally; develop contacts with young people, through interviews to apply the various instruments like initial individual contact and communication actions with young people who are currently NEET to clarify expectations.

What local employment networks already exist for social inclusion?

The diagnosis of the territory, the communication plan with local entities, municipal companies, and strategic partners can be used to understand if they already are part of local networks that develop projects/activities, training, which promote the socio-professional integration of young people who are currently NEET. It is important to be aware of the existence of networks for social inclusion, promoted by governmental and local entities in the area of employment or employability; know what the requirements for integration into the network are; know who in the territory already integrates these networks. Also, important to know about the development of project-inspired networks (e.g., for the implementation of the Youth Guarantee funded measures). Initial individual contact and communication actions with young people who are currently NEET can also be used to clarify expectations.

Which relevant stakeholders could be involved?

All those who are willing to form a cohesive partnership for the social and professional (re)integration of young people who are currently NEET; who develop projects, training and/or promote job responses aimed at this population, whether they are local entities, central and local public administration bodies, NGOs, potential employers (public and private companies) and strategic organizations that may have similar and / or complementary interventions, namely:

Stakeholders with legal or statutory responsibilities vs. youth, companies, employers, training providers, among others.

The role of the public bodies should be to guarantee an institutional commitment nucleus for the joint intervention between public and private organisations safeguarding the respect of their roles.

An important stakeholder in the network are companies. They have a huge role in the local training system. They are engaged in skill needs analysis and in training in all the dual on-the-job forms of training. One of the most important characteristics of the network should be the ability to engage companies in the insertion of young people who are currently NEET in the labour market. Personalization is not just for the person. There is also the need to customize the relationship with the company.

What are the specific needs of local young people in NEET situation?

It is very important, to listen to young people, to know what their personal and social needs are; the difficulties they have in accessing employment and other responses to professional insertion; their aspirations and expectations.

Develop contacts with young people through interviews to apply the various instruments such as Initial individual contact and communication actions with young people who are currently NEET to clarify expectations; group sessions for train soft and employability skills – key competences); mentoring sessions (guidance by a professional); information about different pathways to the education and training system.

1.4.2 Step 2. Activate local stakeholders and plan intervention

Which common goals could this intervention reach? What kind of approach could be taken?

To guarantee and to promote the social inclusion of young people in NEET situation; to promote the creation of new work and learning opportunities; to improve employability, social and personal skills of these young people.

Promote meetings with entities that promote employment/training/internships to young people currently who are currently NEET. Various actors have different approaches and competences which must be used in a targeted way. In particular a closer cooperation with youth support services, schools, employment agencies and employers.

- A multidimensional approach, integrating all the organisations promoting employment and social development;
- A bottom-up methodology that enhances territorial experiences;
- A series of formal commitments capable of conveying, rationalizing and enhancing, with adequate and consistent tools and paths, all local resources for the common purposes of employment development and social and economic cohesion.

What kind of support will be provided to young people who are NEET?

Development of an integrated plan for each youth, including the participation of young people in planning, as "experts in their situation"; mutual knowledge of resources; thus, creating a logic of potential action for all stakeholders.

Organizing activities outside the formal classroom/training context (for example, job fairs, internships, visits to companies and monitoring of professionals). Companies have a huge role in the local training system. Personalization is not just for the person. There is also the need to customize the relationship with the company.

Building and maintaining a good network of partners to provide opportunities for work-based learning and further referrals. **They can provide**:

- On-job experiences (e.g. job-shadowing; informative interviews);
- Job tours;
- Internships;
- On-the-job training; workshops;
- 'Build and expand' apprenticeship-type training opportunities (dual system);
- Preparation for national and European mobility;
- Empowerment for self-organization, embedding entrepreneurial thinking;
- Building and expansion of apprenticeship-type training opportunities;

- Preparation for national and European mobility; Reintegration in the E&T or employment system.

What is the intervention action plan?

Use the principle of case management: to develop and follow an individual guidance and integration plan for each monitored young person that can be implemented by many institutions. The "client" should be included in the development of the plan.

How will the activities be organised?

Develop an overall plan of social and educational inclusion. Engage all relevant community stakeholders in developing and implementing the plan; build mutual knowledge of resources, logic of action and potential of all actors; activate the local partner network, to establish a communication plan with a local network of partners; assemble a definition of the intervention plan and respective timing; clear leadership, wide network; which will allow sufficient time to develop network procedures and trust, consistency and stability.

Follow ***a multi-stakeholder multi-agency approach***: a close cooperation between all relevant actors on the local level it is very important. The work with the partners is fundamental for the development and implementation of an intervention plan as well as for future work. In many places, voluntary work is integrated in forms of cooperation, as are NGOs and universities. Sometimes there are unforeseen circumstances; partners can back down for various reasons, such as lack of funding or lack of human resources, in which case it is necessary to assess the need to choose other.

How will you involve young people who are NEET in this intervention?

Starting dissemination to young people with a community event that gives them a sample of the whole project can be a good way to motivate young people to participate and prepare online and via on-site dissemination actions. It is important to build a communication plan with the youth leaders, adjusting the way of communicating the project - formats, language, and focus, among other things, in a way that will be more attractive and purposeful for the young people who are currently NEET. Make a global outreach strategy for an integration in the environment. Build a relationship with the diverse communities/"tribes" of customers. What are you looking for?

1.4.3 Step 3. Aggregate job, training, education and work-based experiences offers and support the «transitions»

Who are the local entities that can provide job, training, education and work-based experiences and training? How can you contact them?

Intervention must be functional within a "chain of education, social integration and training" with the final aim of acquiring a stable social situation. The main means to this is achieving a level of qualification which is in demand and sufficient to be competitive in the marketplace and gaining sufficient income.

Insertion into appropriate apprenticeships is one model of achieving such qualification, while other models of work-based vocational training can effectuate the same if it is ensured that there is employer demand for the qualification. This can be provided by training providers as well as in-company training schemes run by employers. Build and maintain a good network of partners for referrals and for work-based learning: particularly to employers, sectorial organisations and NGOs.

How can you formalize this cooperation?

Establish formal and informal partnerships; build and maintain a good network of partners to provide opportunities for work-based learning and further referrals; increase contacts, making use of a plan for community facilitation, build trust. The Communication Plan is a document that provides answers to the following questions: What actions will be put in place to disseminate the project to local young people in NEET situation? What is the schedule of each action? What are the resources involved in each action? Who is responsible for each action? What actions can be implemented if our original communication plan doesn't work? Developing this communication plan can be and should be included in all activity's preparation by your local stakeholder's network, since other organizations can contribute to dissemination actions.

1.4.4 Step 4. Engage monitor and support

How will you manage the intervention to ensure everything goes as planned? Once you have identified your key local stakeholders and different roles and responsibilities are set, you can plan project activities together. This planning is important for disseminating among potential participants because it must be clear to participants what will they do and what the project will offer. Testing partners must be able to decide:

- What kind of orienting activities will they offer besides individual coaching-based sessions (group sessions? mentoring sessions? both?);

- What kind of work-based experience will they offer (e.g. job-shadowing? VET fairs? in company-classes?);
- To which stakeholders/support areas will it be possible to refer participants?

1.4.5 Step 5. Follow up, analyze and plan sustainability

How will you keep in contact with your target group?

Develop a communication plan for young people in local NEET situations; Individual coach-based sessions; Group sessions (train soft and employability skills – key competences – example the organization of a boot camp and a multiplier event with youngsters and entities). Follow-up can be done by phone, email, on-site meetings, etc. Testing partners can choose the more suitable channels to use and to register information.

How will you present the results of your intervention?

Through a stakeholder meeting (multiplier event); local or national seminaries; on-line meetings, among other things.

What is the sustainability strategy?

Guarantee an institutional commitment nucleus for the joint intervention between public and private organisations, safeguarding the respect of their roles; expectations about project involvement should be clear; advantages of being a part of the network should be evident; goals to be reached must be well defined; tasks should be scheduled; moments of contact between partners should be anticipated and scheduled; communication channels should be defined; respect among all partners is crucial (respect for
everybody's time, resources, agenda, etc.). Promote close cooperation between all relevant actors on the local level. Creating a sustainable network between organisations with different institutional and social tasks that can support young people who are currently NEET that are seeking integration in the job market.

1.5 CONCLUSION

The evidence shows that a focus on attendance, behaviour and attainment will identify the majority of young people who are at risk of becoming NEET and therefore should be used by early identification systems. However, the importance of personal and attitudinal indicators should not be underplayed. If local level data on these indicators are available to practitioners, then they will also have a role to play in identifying pupils at risk of becoming NEET.

Possible steps to be undertaken:

1. MES in complementing the existing data framework and develop a monitoring system for the identification of students at risk of early leavers from education and training in Albania;
2. Collection of national, regional and local data, while ensuring that high quality analysis and monitoring is carried out in order to guide future policy making and implementation;
3. Carry out on-going monitoring of strategies, policies and programmes emanating from this strategic plan; analyze their impact and performance, and on the basis of empirical evidence submit recommendations for their improvement;
4. Be responsible for the monitoring of education provision for children and young people who are disengaged or at risk of disengaging from school;
5. Work with the agencies and schools to ensure that teachers and support staff are well equipped to occupy centre stage in the drafting and implementation of strategic responses to educational disadvantage;
6. Work with schools, education and training institutions, NGOs, parents, persons with a disability, members of minority groups, local communities, civil society organizations, trade unions and the business community in order to develop structured mechanisms to tackle the challenge of NEET;
7. Seek to promote partnership between parents, teachers and the community in order to enhance pupils' learning opportunities and to promote students' engagement in the education system.

PART II- HOW TO ADAPT PRIMARY SCHOOL SCHOLARSHIP SCHEME TO PREVENT DROPOUT IN SECONDARY EDUCATION

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SCHOLARSHIP SCHEME AGAINST SCHOOL DROPOUT

2.1 INTRODUCTION & ISSUES IDENTIFICATION

Government of Albania spends about 3% of its GDP on education. Access to education despite this low expenditure level has expanded in the last decade. This expansion has not reduced the level of disadvantage especially for those residing in rural areas, including poor people. According to the National Institute of Statistics in Albania (INSTAT), currently in Albania the NEET group comprises 25.5% of the 15-24 age group and 26.6% of the 15-29 age group (INSTAT, 2020). One of the measures proposed internationally and that has a direct impact on the reduction of the number of students dropouts and reducing the number of NEET while improving the quality of public education is demand-side financing. Through this mechanism public funds are channeled directly to individuals or institutions based on demands, performance and / or attainment of low rates and drop out.

According to literature related to NEET, schooling is influenced by socio-economic, political and cultural factors. The offer of free education and the existence of schools in the vicinity are not sufficient factors to bring children from poor families to school. Demand-side financing channels public funds for public and/or private education to the individual or his/her family. In this way the resources are in the hands of those who demand education and not those who supply it. The barriers that prevent children from attending school are removed through this financing mechanism.

In Albania the demand-side financing schemes are limited. Currently the national government allots funding for need-based and merit-based scholarships. The mechanism for approving and distributing these scholarships is based at the local government and the decision is taken by the municipal council following proposals of the education unit of the local government. Scholarships are mainly distributed among high school and university students who study away from their hometown or village – in Tirana or in any other big towns. Another part of the scholarship supports vocational education. The scholarship covers living expenses in dormitories.

Recently, through the implementation of government decree 666/2019, the Ministry of Education supported local level approved scholarships in the form of stipends[5] for children risking dropout at the primary level of education (grade 1 - 9). The implementation of this decree, performed by Observatory for Children and Youth Rights, was accompanied by several processes of consultations with local government and education offices as well as training for the municipal staff involved in the process of providing the stipends. The work was based on well-defined criteria and was completed in collaboration with local agencies and in smaller geographical areas to

[5] *Stipends* are cash payments that a public agency makes to a family to either offset a child's schooling expenses or to compensate a family for the loss of the child's labor. Generally, core expenses such as books, tuition, and transport, and incidental expenses such as materials, game fees, and clothes are covered. A stipend enhances equity by enabling poor children to attend school. This mechanism is particularly effective in enabling girls from poor rural families to attend school. While possible, cases of misusing the scheme through directing stipends at non-target beneficiaries are rare.

minimize some risks. The stipend covers all school related needs of a child and provides an extra incentive in upper grades to reduce high dropout rates.

2.2 INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE WITH DEMAND-SIDE FINANCING SCHEMES FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION

Scholarship schemes aimed at supporting poor children to attend school have been implemented in various parts of the world, and they have yielded valuable policy insights that can be summarized as follows:

Increased Access to Education:
- Scholarship schemes have proven effective in improving access to education for disadvantaged children
- By providing financial assistance for school fees, uniforms, books, and other related expenses, these programs remove the financial barriers that prevent many children from attending school

Poverty Alleviation
- Scholarship schemes targeting poor children help break the cycle of poverty by equipping them with the knowledge and skills necessary to secure better employment opportunities in the future.
- This, in turn, has a positive impact on their families and communities.

Empowerment and Social Mobility
- Scholarship programs give disadvantaged children a chance to enhance their knowledge, develop their talents, and build a better future for themselves
- Education also opens doors to social mobility, allowing children to transcend their circumstances and achieve upward mobility.

Improved Academic Performance
- Scholarship programs often require recipients to maintain certain academic standards to retain their support.
- Scholarship recipients tend to exhibit improved attendance, engagement, and overall academic performance.

Long Term Impact
- Studies have shown that children who receive scholarships and complete their education are more likely to enjoy improved health outcomes, higher income potential, and increased opportunities for personal growth.
- They are also more likely to invest in the education of future generations, thus creating a positive cycle of development.

Collaboration & Stakeholder Engagement
- Effective scholarship programs often involve collaboration between various stakeholders, including governments, NGOs, educational institutions, and communities.
- Engaging local communities and parents in the process also fosters ownership and ensures the program's long-term success.

Continous Monitoring & Evaluation
- Regular monitoring and evaluation of scholarship programs are essential to assess their impact, identify areas for improvement, and ensure accountability.
- Data collection and analysis help measure educational outcomes, track student progress, and inform program adjustments.

Overall, scholarship schemes supporting poor children to attend school have shown that targeted interventions can make a significant difference in breaking the cycle of poverty and providing opportunities for a brighter future. By removing financial barriers and providing comprehensive support, these programs empower children and contribute to their overall development.

2.3 LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE APPLICATION OF NEED BASED SCHOLARSHIP IN PRIMARY SCHOOL SYSTEM BY THE OBSERVATORY FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH RIGHTS

The Observatory for Children and Youth Rights, funded by UNICEF, and in cooperation with central (Ministry of Education and Sports) and local (education departments) government structures facilitated the process of need-based scholarship distribution among families whose children were risking school drop-out. The monitoring of the process of distributing need-based scholarships (stipends) indicates the lack of accurate and reliable statistics for NEET for each municipality. This is strongly challenged by the inaccurate figures of people in circular migration or permanent migration and those trying to migrate. Establishing a sustainable system of norms, procedures, criteria, and institutional and community responsibilities to reduce secondary school dropout and increase the level of education of young people remains a challenge for Albania, although steps have been taken to consolidate the educational system, to increase the qualifications and training of pedagogical staff, and to inform parents about financial support for NEET.

Poverty is the common denominator of all typologies of out-of-school children created through the analysis of survey responses of 140 out of school children that the Observatory for Children and Youth Rights closely monitored during the school year 2021-22. These children were supported with scholarships and interviewed as part of the monitoring processes. However, all other elements such as ethnicity or living in a violent environment should be taken into consideration in both identifying the problem and assessing and addressing it. The analysis showed that children from the Roma and Egyptian communities face more prejudice and are less engaged in school life. Meanwhile children coming from the violent environment need greater protection as they feel more insecure. The cultural context in which Roma and Egyptian children live makes them more vulnerable as their parents are less educated and less employed but at the same time their community affiliation offers them a greater sense of support and care. This perception helps them cope better with the different forms of bullying.

Even more in-depth analysis is needed for NEET, as they have and represent different backgrounds and the approach to have them stay in school needs to be tailored to the characteristics of each group. Clear identification of quality and groups of NEET is also necessary to determine the criteria on which the decision is made for service recipients.

The community, parents and every member of society have a direct and indirect impact on the empowerment and effectiveness of the dropout prevention scheme. Continuous information of these actors can affect family and community safety, whether to motivate children to go to school or to refer cases of children who are in a school dropout situation. *Raising ongoing awareness and information on child support programs with scholarships or services to facilitate their school attendance should be an integral part of informing and raising public awareness on dropout issues.*

The work of identifying NEET requires that each actor coordinates and organizes joint efforts to identify secondary school students risking school dropout. The psycho-social

sector in the school, among others, has the task of identifying cases of children who have long absences from school for no reason, or come from families with social problems and families which may affect their attendance at school. The study shows that this sector has very little presence in identifying these children risking dropout and building individual development plans to help them. Also, their partnership with the teacher in assessing the status of the Child in dropout situation is almost absent in all the experiences reported in the report. *One of the study recommendations is to strengthen the role of the school psychologist and social worker in coordinating joint institutional efforts to identify and assess children at risk of school dropout. Also, a more active involvement of the entire psycho-social service network in the process of identifying, evaluating, and supporting all cases.*

According to our study data, the most vulnerable groups of children left out of school are children with various social problems, children of Roma and Egyptian minorities, children who work to help their families, children who are not registered in the civil registry, etc. Educational institutions can play an irreplaceable role in preventing school dropout. These children are the ones who are often absent from school, sometimes for long periods of time. However, the definition of "school dropout child" is perceived to be not very clear among professionals implementing the scheme by identifying the need to clarify the characteristics of children at risk of dropout. *Prevention by institutions requires training focused on understanding and clearly identifying characteristics of children who do not attend or are often absent from school and who may be at risk of dropping out.*

In the case of Albania, a relatively small country, incidence of NEET can be completely reduced if all these stakeholders work to optimal capacity. Better inter-governmental cooperation and effective cooperation of actors at the local level – would contribute directly to the lowering of school non-attendance. Moreover, without systematic impact assessments of policies aimed at boosting participation and fighting drop-out, it is impossible to accurately indicate priority areas of intervention for improving the situation of these children or means to make current programmes and strategies more efficient and more effective.

The facilitation of the scholarship distribution process allowed us to reflect and draw several lessons that are summarized below. Although these lessons are applicable to all the five dimensions of exclusion[6], the main focus is placed on dimensions 2 and 3 corresponding to primary and lower secondary school children risking school dropout.

- **Without the effective participation of government agencies, collecting and reporting drop-out data may be a challenging procedure.** If all parties engage in the process and allow the educational authority to take the lead, it can be rather simple. On the other side, the slow adoption of a digital data education system is impeding progress across the entire nation. To maintain the positive momentum brought on by the requirement to address NEET, quick action is required to develop the system.

- **Developing a Country Wide Survey about NEET following international standards.** The time is right to make changes to the way INSTAT gathers

[6] For more information on these please see: The dimensions of exclusion framework (unesco.org)

educational statistics about student presence, participation, and school drop-out. We believe that the changes will be rapid and successful if we build a nationwide survey based in schools and then follow it up with a national training programme connected to NEET that focuses on the application of governmental legislation and efficient data collection.

- **Strict School Monitoring of Truancy, Drop-out and Children never attending school.** It is crucial to closely monitor school attendance as well as truancy, drop-out rates, and children who never attend school to decrease and recover the number of out-of-school preschoolers and schoolchildren. As local cooperation with organizations gets consolidated to include school and health mediators, unofficial community leaders, child protection structures, and representatives of NGO's that manage pertinent local initiatives, it is also necessary to hold schools and local authorities accountable.
  From this perspective, it is recommended that schools keep an eye on the circumstances of kids trapped in circulatory migration. It is appropriate to implement a fly grade book/academic passport at the national level for those children and young people in migration.

- **Appropriate Human Resources Training on a Curriculum Adapted to the Needs of Children at Risk of Dropping Out**
  Teachers are encouraged by the existing evaluation system to produce kids who perform well on standardized examinations. On the other hand, pupils from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds perform at much lower levels than the national average in terms of education, making it difficult to assess any progress they make unless it matches the standards set by the country.

  Additionally, there is not enough development in teacher-training programmes geared towards working with learners with limited opportunities. Projects that recognized the value of curriculum modification for the prevention of drop-out and truancy produced excellent outcomes in this regard. It was necessary for projects like those to generate training guidelines that should be better integrated into the national teacher training programmes because initial training programmes do not adequately prepare students in class-specific and catch-up teaching techniques.

  From this vantage point, it is critical to acknowledge the significance of and the necessary abilities for working with children at risk of dropping out as well as to raise the profile of educators who work in the schools where most of these kids attend class. For teachers to take on new obligations outside of those directly relevant to the subject matter they teach, motivation is crucial.

- **Valorizing School-Parents Partnership and Increasing School Attractiveness:** As we've seen, the main reasons why kids drop out of school are related to their families. Major risk factors include low educational

attainment, unstable employment, income that is barely enough to survive, and extremely low educational expectations for one's children. Therefore, it is important to involve the families of the kids who are at risk of dropping out in school activities in an honest and useful relationship. More specifically, parents might participate in organizing extracurricular activities and might gain from counselling or expert training services. The collaboration with the family may take on new meaning since schools currently frequently resort to a small number of parents whose children are not risking dropout but do quite well instead.

2.4 VARIOUS FORMS OF DEMAND SIDE SUPPORT TO PREVENT SCHOOL DROPOUT AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL OF EDUCATION

There are various scholarship schemes available for secondary school students, depending on the country and region. Scholarship programs are designed to support students financially and encourage academic excellence. Below are some of the most common schemes.

Merit Based Scholarships

- These scholarships are awarded based on academic achievements, such as high grades or standardized test scores.
- Students who demonstrate exceptional performance and potential are often considered for these scholarships.

Need Based Scholarships

- These scholarships are awarded to students from low-income backgrounds who demonstrate financial need.
- The purpose is to provide financial assistance to students who might not be able to afford secondary education otherwise.

Sports Scholarships

- These scholarships are specifically available for talented student-athletes.
- They are often awarded to students who excel in a particular sport and demonstrate a combination of athletic ability and academic achievement.

Minority Scholarships

- Certain scholarships aim to support students from underrepresented minority groups.
- These scholarships help increase access to education and promote diversity in schools.

Subject Specific

- These Scholarships focus on specific subject areas, such as science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM).
- They encourage students to pursue education in these fields and often require students to meet certain academic criteria.

2.5 ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN PREVENTING SECONDARY SCHOOL DROPOUT

The local government plays a significant role in shaping and overseeing the education system in a community. Some of the key responsibilities and roles of the local government in relation to secondary education include:

Funding and Resource Allocation

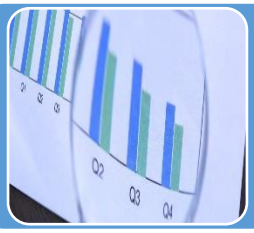
- Local governments allocate funds for education, including secondary schools.
- They determine the budget for education and ensure that schools have the necessary resources, such as textbooks, facilities, and equipment, to provide quality education.

Curriculum Development

- Local governments often have the authority to shape the curriculum taught in secondary schools.
- They work closely with education experts, teachers, and administrators to design a curriculum that meets national standards and addresses the needs of the local community.

School Governance

- Local governments establish policies and guidelines for school governance.
- They may oversee the appointment of school principals and administrators, as well as the formulation of school rules and regulations.

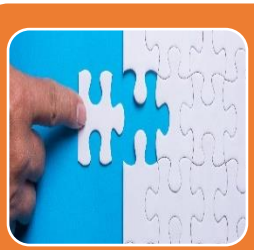


Monitoring and Evaluation

- Local governments are responsible for monitoring the performance of secondary schools within their jurisdiction.
- This includes evaluating the quality of education, student achievement, and overall school performance and they may conduct regular inspections and assessments.

Community Engagement

- Local governments facilitate community engagement in education..
- They encourage parental involvement, establish partnerships with local organizations and businesses, and provide platforms for community feedback and suggestions



Support Services

- Local governments may provide additional support services for secondary school students.
- This can include counseling services, career guidance, extracurricular activities, and access to scholarships or financial aid programs.

2.6 DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE LOCAL EDCATIONAL POLICIES TO PREVETN SCHOOL DROPOUT AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL OF EDUCATION

We, at the Observatory for Children and Youth Rights, have noted that designing effective local government scholarship schemes to prevent school dropout requires careful planning and consideration of various factors. Below are some steps that we identified during the experience of working with children in the primary level of education:

IDENTIFY THE TARGET GROUP	• Determine who you want to focus on, such as economically disadvantaged students, or those at risk of dropping out. • Understanding their needs and challenges is crucial for designing appropriate Identify the target group: interventions.
CONDUCT A NEEDS ASSESSMENT	• Carry out a thorough assessment of the local education system to identify the main causes of school dropout • Consider factors such as poverty, lack of access to resources, inadequate infrastructure, family circumstances, and social barriers.
DEFINE PROGRAM OBJECTIVES	• Clearly outline the goals and objectives of the scholarship scheme. • Setting specific and measurable targets will help in evaluating the effectiveness of the program.
DETERMINE ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA	• It's important to strike a balance between providing support to those who genuinely need it and ensuring that the program is sustainable. • Consider factors like academic performance, financial need, and social circumstances.
PROVIDE FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE	• Design schemes to offer financial support that covers tuition fees, books, uniforms, transportation, and school-related expenses. • The level of financial assistance should be sufficient to alleviate the financial burden on students and their families.
OFFER MENTORSHIP AND GUIDANCE	• Implement a mentorship component as part of the scholarship scheme. • Assign mentors who can provide guidance, support, and motivation to the scholarship recipients. Thls can help students navigate challenges, set educational goals, and explore future career opportunities.
PROMOTE PARENTAL AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT	• Encourage active involvement of parents, & the local community in supporting students' education. Organize workshops to raise awareness about the importance of education and provide parents with tools to support their children's learning.
ALWAYS MONITOR AND EVALUATE THE PROGRAM AND BE TRANSPARENT	• Establish a system for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the scholarship scheme. • Use the data collected and information to make necessary adjustments and improvements to ensure the program's success.
FOSTER COLLABORATION WITH SCHOOLS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS	• Collaborate with local educational institutions, to ensure effective implementation of the scheme. • Establish partnerships that provide mentoring opportunities, or vocational training programs to enhance the impact of the scholarships.
PROVIDE CONTINOUS SUPPORT	• Consider offering ongoing support to scholarship recipients throughout their educational journey. • This can include regular check-ins, career counseling, and opportunities for continued education or skill development

2.7 CONCLUSIONS

Scholarship schemes in secondary education can play a significant role in preventing dropout rates among students and lowering numbers of NEET. We see this process as an on-going one that requires support and collaboration among all stakeholders in the Albanian society. Based on the experiences gained this year through the implementation of the project "Stay in School" and learning from our past experiences with projects focusing on out of school children, the Observatory for Children and Youth Rights has accumulated significant experience. The following are some ways that scholarship programmes can help lower dropout rates:

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

- One of the primary reasons students drop out of school is the inability to afford the costs associated with education, such as tuition fees, textbooks, uniforms, transportation, and other related expenses
- Scholarship schemes provide financial support to students, easing the economic burden and enabling them to continue their education.

INCREASED MOTIVATION

- Knowing that their scholarship is contingent upon maintaining certain academic standards can inspire students to work harder and stay engaged in their studies.
- This increased motivation can contribute to lower dropout rates as students strive to meet the scholarship program's

SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

- Many scholarship programs offer additional support services beyond financial aid.
- The presence of a support system can enhance students' sense of belonging and reduce the likelihood of disengagement from school.

EXPANDED OPPORTUNITIES

- Scholarships can open doors to a wider range of opportunities for students. By providing financial assistance, they enable students to access quality education, which can lead to better future prospects.
- This expanded vision and awareness of opportunities can act as a deterrent against dropping out.

PEER NETWORKS

- Scholarship programs often bring together a cohort of students who share similar backgrounds and aspirations. This network of peers can provide a sense of community, support, and encouragement.
- By fostering positive social interactions & a sense of belonging, SCHOLARSHIPS help students develop a stronger attachment to their schools and resist the temptation to drop

PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT

- Scholarship schemes often involve parental engagement and support. Parents are often required to participate actively in their child's education, attend meetings, and monitor their progress.
- When parents are invested in their child's education, the likelihood of dropout decreases significantly.

While scholarship schemes can be effective in preventing dropout rates, it is important to recognize that they are just one component of a broader set of strategies needed to address the complex factors contributing to dropout. Creating supportive learning environments, addressing socio-economic challenges, and improving the quality of education are also crucial aspects that need attention. Nonetheless, scholarship schemes provide a vital tool in supporting students and encouraging them to stay in school.