



**Background note for the case study in Belgium-Flanders –
24-25 June 2014**

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1 Brief overview of the main characteristics of the education and training system

Compulsory education in Belgium-Flanders begins on the 1st September of the calendar year in which a child becomes 6 years old and last until the age of 18¹. Pre-primary provision is available from the age of two years and six months, and since September 2010 pupils are expected to attend classes regularly during the last year of kindergarten, otherwise they may not attend primary education. In Flanders, up to 99% of all 5 year olds are enrolled in early childhood education.

Elementary education finishes at the age of 12, and then for the majority of students, full-time compulsory education lasts until the age of 18 as mentioned above – this is referred to as ‘mainstream’ secondary education² and is divided into four branches: GSE - General Secondary Education, TSE - Technical Secondary Education, ASE - Artistic Secondary Education and VSE - Vocational Secondary Education.

However, after completion of the first stage of secondary education at the age of 15, some students follow alternative learning pathways, known as an ‘alternance training system’. These can take the form of part-time learning coupled with supplementary development activity as appropriate, for instance part-time vocational education or an apprenticeship, together with a part-time personal development pathway. The main goal of this system is to combine a learning component with a working component. Each developmental activity apart from those deemed as ‘working’ contribute towards this goal. Furthermore, ‘special education’ has been developed for pupils with special needs at both primary and secondary education levels.

Therefore upper secondary education is fully embedded within the overarching secondary education framework. However, for those students leaving the education system without a qualification, there is a good degree of flexibility for them to return to education via the adult educational system or through ‘second chance’ education provision. Specific employment projects have also been developed, targeting people who have not obtained a diploma ‘secundair onderwijs’ (diploma of secondary education), providing them with ‘starting jobs’³ funded by the Federal Public Service (FPS) for Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue.

In terms of characteristics of the education system geared towards tackling early school leaving (ESL), significant developments are taking place under the recently-launched Action Plan on Reducing Early School Leaving⁴ (September 2013), including the implementation of a comprehensive system to collect, collate and disseminate data on ESL between schools, partners and stakeholders across the education and employment sectors. The Action Plan on ESL is discussed in more detail below.

¹ Full-time compulsory education lasts until the age of 16, but after completion of the 1st stage secondary education at 15, part-time compulsory education can be commenced through the alternance training system, which nonetheless represents a full-time commitment. Part-time compulsory education lasts until the age of 18. Most students stay at school until the age of 18.

² For more information please refer to Eurydice web page: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Belgium-Flemish-Community:Secondary_and_Post-Secondary_Non-Tertiary_Education

³ The ‘Starting Jobs’ project was rolled out at federal level in 1999 and has gradually been expanded. These projects are specifically aimed at people who have not obtained a diploma ‘secundair onderwijs’ (diploma of secondary education), youngsters from an ethnic minority or disadvantaged background. Projects include the ‘Jo-Jo starting-job’ project and the ‘VeVe starting job’ project, both of which offer work placements and the opportunity to develop vocational and employability skills. For more information please refer to Eurydice page [here](#):

⁴ Action Plan to Tackle Early School Leaving, Government of Flanders, September 2013 http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/secundair/Actieplan_Vroegtijdig_Schoolverlaten_def.pdf

2 Country context in relation to ESL

2.1 Scale of the problem – key challenges

The ESL rate, measured at European level, remained stable between 2009 and 2012 in Flanders (8.7% in 2012, compared to an EU average of 12.7%).

At the level of Belgium-Flanders, there are two ways to measure ESL: one indicator based on the Labour Force Survey (EAK) and one indicator provided by the Policy Research Centre for Educational and School Careers (SSL). The Action Plan on Reducing Early School Leaving refers to both indicators. Currently, work is taking place under the 'Databundel' project, aimed at constructing a collection of relevant data on ESL at school level, of which the early school leaving figure will be a central component.

The Action Plan also considers the position of Belgium-Flanders in relation to key targets for the reduction of ESL, namely 'Pact 2020'⁵ which pledges to halve the rate of early school leavers, from 8.6% (according to the EAK indicator) to 4.3% by 2020, and at a European level, the EU2020 target of reducing ESL to below 10%.

The main challenges identified in terms of ESL in Belgium-Flanders are highlighted in the Action Plan discussions, along with groups identified as most likely to leave school early. The importance of socio-economic characteristics in increasing the risk of drop-out is underlined, and research also identified that ethnic background (often combined with socio-economic disadvantage⁶) is often contributory to ESL. This was borne out by research⁷ which identified the significant levels of school leavers at the age of 17 who were non-native speakers of Dutch. The experience of education has also been identified as a factor in ESL: pupils falling behind and/or changing school/form of education being at a higher risk of dropping out⁸. Gender too, is a factor affecting the likelihood of leaving school early: boys are more likely to drop out of school early than girls⁹. The 2010 rate of ESL amongst males was 13.6% whilst amongst females this was 8.6%¹⁰.

2.2 Factors leading to ESL

As noted above, there are several factors which can contribute to early school leaving, and often these do not exist in isolation but can combine to result in a young person dropping out of the education system.

In recognition of the importance of the effective integration of children into the school system at a very early age coupled with the need for effective support, the Flemish government adopted regulations in 2012 which provided for an increase in the number of counselling and support staff for children in pre-primary education. This brought the level of support resources at a pre-primary level to equal that for primary education.

⁵ On 19 January 2009, a new pact for the future was signed by the social partners in Belgium's Flemish region. 'Pact 2020' is a type of tripartite mission statement, which defines a range of policy goals for 2020 for the Flanders region. For more information please refer to: <http://eurolocal.info/project/pact-2020-new-future-pact-flanders-belgium>

⁶ Conze (2011), Comprehensive policies to reduce early school leaving, Seminarie Vroegtijdig schoolverlaten, 31 mei 2011, Brussel.

⁷ Creten, van de Velde, Van Damme & Verhaest (2004). De transitie van het initieel beroepsonderwijs naar de arbeidsmarkt met specifieke aandacht voor de onderwijsverlaters. (The transition from initial vocational education into the labour market with specific focus on school leavers).

⁸ See Lamote & Van Damme (2011) *Less successful pathways through secondary school. Studies on grade retention and early school leaving*. Doctoral dissertation available at: <https://lirias.kuleuven.be/bitstream/123456789/425181/1/Doctoraat+Carl+Lamote.pdf>

⁹ See Conze (2011), Lamote & Van Damme (2011) and Van Landeghem & Van Damme (2011)

¹⁰ See 'Measures to tackle early school leaving in Flanders', Flemish Education Council (VLOR) http://www.eunec.eu/sites/www.eunec.eu/files/event/attachments/k_stassen_measures_to_tackle_esl_in_flanders.pdf

Factors such as socio-economic deprivation, ethnicity, gender, and educational instability such as truancy or exclusion, changing educational institution, as well as school fatigue can all play a part. In addition, there are external factors which can influence an individuals' decision to leave education, for instance, the 'pull' factor generated by the labour market. There are plans in place to discourage employers from employing young people that are termed 'unqualified novice workers', along with consideration of innovative models to raise employers' awareness of the importance of helping young people to complete their education and highlighting their role in this.

In terms of structural factors, some of the areas to be addressed through the Action Plan and wider reform activity can be seen as contributing to ESL and will be tackled, for instance: the quality of pupil guidance services, the importance of language support from primary education onwards, and the need for alternatives to grade repetition, supported by flexible learning pathways.

3 Policy approach to early school leaving

3.1 Overview of the main policy approach to early school leaving

Recent years have seen a concerted effort in policy terms within Flanders, to recognise and tackle the issue of ESL. In June 2013, the Flemish Government adopted a **Master Plan on the reform of secondary education**. On January 17, 2014, the Flemish Government approved the roadmap for the implementation of the 2013 Master Plan¹¹ and by 2025, the reforms will be fully implemented. In relation to some aspects of the Master Plan, legislation has already been adopted – for example on language policy in schools and the requirement to take part in work experience in the third stage of vocational secondary education (1st, 2nd and 3rd school year) and the third stage of technical secondary education (1st and 2nd year).

The planned reforms are far-reaching and cover a number of important aspects that will be implemented step by step, with the support of schools and teachers. The Plan outlines that Flanders aims to avoid early tracking by adopting a broad first grade in secondary education. That is to say that during the first two years of secondary education, young people will have access to a wide range of options and choices to explore before being required to choose their course of study. Second, the reform includes a stronger primary education for a better transition from primary to secondary education. Third, this reform also brings a new classification of courses. As part of the reforms, a number of measures have been implemented, for instance regarding the screening of linguistic competencies, and harmonisation of traineeships.

In relation to language policy as from 1 September 2014, schools will screen language of instruction competences of all pupils who enter primary and secondary education. Based on the results of this initial screening, primary schools will be required to develop a language programme adapted to the specific language of instruction needs of the individual pupil – this may require a full time immersion programme for example for those young people who do not master the language of instruction sufficiently to successfully attend regular lessons. This immersion programme could potentially last up to one year; however the aim is to ensure young people are integrated into the regular programme as soon as possible. In secondary education, schools will be able to organise compulsory instruction language lessons of a maximum 3 hours per week for pupils who do not master the language of instruction sufficiently to successfully attend the school activities. Final decisions on implementing the most significant aspects of reform have been postponed until 2016.

The reforms set out in the Master Plan in 2013 and implementation roadmap (January 2014) for reform (2013-2025) of general education and IVET are also key in shaping the policy landscape for ESL, including the expansion of work-based learning and strengthening and

¹¹ The Master Plan is available to download here: <http://www.hervormingsecundair.be/waarom/>

extending workplace learning which is key to reducing the ‘pull factor’ of the labour market in terms of ESL.

An **Action plan on grade repetition** has also been produced for primary education, the reform of secondary education included action for repetition in secondary education.

In recognition of the link to truancy as a predictor of likelihood of early leaving, in 2008 Flanders adopted an **Action plan entitled ‘truancy and other forms of limit-crossing behaviour’**. The action plan covers six broad topics: monitoring, informing and sensitizing, preventive work, guidance and sanctioning.

Further strengthening the policy commitment to addressing early leaving, and of most relevance here, in September 2013 the Flemish government adopted a comprehensive **Action Plan on ESL**. Based on the European framework on tackling ESL, the action plan sets out priorities for action under key areas of work:

- Monitoring/identification/co-ordination
- Prevention
- Intervention
- Compensation
- Supported by an overall co-ordination strategy, the plan has identified a series of quick wins and sustained actions to support progress.

3.2 Stakeholder involvement in the context of the new Action Plan against ESL

Throughout the **development process** supporting the Action plan, there has been an emphasis on involvement of all relevant organisations. For instance, a dedicated Thematic Working Group was set up to support the process, this consisted of the Ministries of education and labour; Social partners; Educational providers; Advisory bodies (Vlor & SERV¹²); and Public training providers. Co-ordination activity to support the Action Plan also highlights the focus on collaboration and cooperation, most notably between schools, guidance centres, public employment service and other relevant partners to tackle ESL.

To facilitate cooperation of stakeholders in implementing the measures of the Action plan, a **local agreement framework** is being prepared which will concern schools, the pupil guidance centres (CLBs)-VDAB and other actors such as the local consultative bodies (LOPs)/local authorities. The framework will establish the roles and tasks of partners at a local level, in response to ESL. At a strategic level, tools such as scenario planning can be used by local authorities to support the role of director in the local approach to early school leaving.

There is a clear acknowledgement of the **interplay between the education sector and the labour market context**, in relation to ESL. A more detailed look at the priorities and actions set out in the plan show this, especially in terms of planned collaborative working arrangements. Initial stages of the action plan aimed at the prevention of ESL set out proposed reforms to strengthen the work experience component of the current alternance training system. In addition, planned joint activities by the VDAB and the Education and Training Department will gather intelligence about the labour market experiences of early school leavers, exploring the occupations pursued, the kind of jobs they obtain, and integration opportunities into the labour market.

In relation to the twin priorities of **monitoring and identification**, the Action Plan sets out, first and foremost, the improvement of collection and sharing of data at school level and at a local level, to give all partners a clear picture of the extent of ESL in their locality.

To support this, the Education and Training Department developed a method for generating indicators of early school leaving at pupil level (based on the procedure developed by the

¹² VLOR (Vlaamse Onderwijsraad) – is the “strategic advisory council” for the education and training policy of the Flemish Community in Belgium. www.vlor.be . SERV is the Social and Economic Council of Flanders <http://www.serv.be/serv>

SSL). Further support will be provided by stakeholders to ensure school management teams and policy aides can effectively analyse the relevant data to inform development of tailored policy measures.

In support of collaborative working, the Action plan and wider policy interventions recognises the importance of **communication and information sharing**. Key principles are built in, such as the sharing of good practice examples. Building on a Dutch example, a dynamic website will be developed in order to support effective communication and dissemination. The Department of Education and Training will co-ordinate and monitor the website, providing information on a range of subjects including educational processes, such as certification, assessment practices, sanctions, pupil guidance, and classroom practices.

Across all the areas identified in the Action Plan, and related policy interventions, measures are in place to ensure effective **monitoring, assessment and reporting of progress** and outcomes. For instance, built in to the delivery of planned activities is the involvement of the education inspectorate, adopting an examination role to ensure that the actions taken are effective at a school level, in relation to the wider objective of tackling ESL.

In terms of reporting amongst stakeholders, the technical working group supporting the Action Plan meets at least three times per year, regular reporting including full annual reports are produced and disseminated. Monitoring of the Action Plan is the responsibility of the Secretaries General of the Education and Training and the Welfare and Social Economy Departments. An annual consultation will also be held, led by the education inspectorate, the educational guidance services and the Education and Training and the Welfare and Social Economy policy areas.

3.3 Parental involvement

Research¹³ has established the role of parental involvement in reducing the likelihood of early drop out from school. The importance of social capital of a pupil, including parent-student and parent-school connectivity, is considerable. This is supported by factors such as relationships with teachers, relationships with peers and changes in school.

The Action Plan on Early School Leaving acknowledges the importance of parental involvement: *“schools concentrate their efforts on creating a positive school climate by paying particular attention to the well-being of all pupils and enhancing parent involvement”*. These actions are supported by clear and effective communication tools such as the website Onderwijskiezer.be¹⁴ which is a source of education-related information for pupils, parents, teachers, and stakeholders.

There are a range of actions to involve parents and establish collaborative working arrangements between schools, education organisations or stakeholders, and parents. There are three main education networks working to develop and strengthen parental involvement:

- Go! Education of the Flemish Community, which supports parental involvement in public schools. Go! Education functions independently of the Ministry of Education, despite being government-funded. The remit of Go! Education is varied, however a key part of the organisation is to ensure delivery of the Belgian Constitutional right which states that every child has a right to education (which is free of charge during the period of compulsory education), and it is every parent’s constitutional right to choose a school within reasonable proximity to their homes.
- KOOGO, the independent organisation working to support parental involvement in publicly funded and publicly run education, which comprises municipal education organised by local authorities, and provincial education which is organised by provincial authorities. KOOGO co-ordinates the activities of the many local initiatives and maintains links with the central administration of the school network and government.

¹³ See Lamote (2013)

¹⁴ Onderwijskiezer can be accessed at: <http://www.onderwijskiezer.be/v2/index.php>

- The VCOV (Flemish Confederation of parents and parents' associations) is the umbrella organisation of the subsidized private education and represents all the parents and the parents' associations of the Catholic framework (education) in Flanders. The VCOV works in a number of ways, adopting both a top-down approach by supporting and implementing governmental policies and a bottom-up approach by acting as a focal point for parents' feedback and concerns.

These three networks strive to encourage positive co-operation between school and parents, for example the VCOV coaches and supports parents' associations, offering ready-made educational packages, and developing advisory projects.

In terms of local educational structures and representation, for GO! Education as well as for publicly funded education, the school council regulates the participation of all education stakeholders. Since the Act on participation of 2 April 2004, rules concerning participation have applied to all nursery, primary and secondary schools. These include education councils, parent councils and pupil councils, irrespective of the education network. A parent council is obligatory if at least 10% of the parents ask for it. In the majority of nursery, primary and secondary schools, parents set up a parents' association.

4 Discussion

The questions below provide examples of key questions for discussion during the case study. Working Group members may identify additional questions.

4.1.1 Stakeholder involvement

1. What measures/approaches (if any) are in place to create the acceptability of the stakeholders in the schools?
2. Have any problems been encountered during the design and implementation of this policy measure?
3. What are the results of this policy measure?
4. Is the policy measure considered to be effective and why? What evidence is there to demonstrate how effective the measure is?
5. What have been the main challenges and difficulties associated with this policy measure and what approaches have been taken to overcome them?
6. What are the most important lessons learnt?

4.1.2 Parental involvement

1. What measures/approaches are in place to encourage and strengthen collaboration between parents and other stakeholder involvement? E.g. examples of local businesses supporting parental involvement?
2. What are the results of this policy measure?
3. Is the policy measure considered to be effective and why? What evidence is there to demonstrate how effective the measure is?
4. What have been the main challenges and difficulties associated with this policy measure and what approaches have been taken to overcome them?
5. What are the most important lessons learnt?

5 Sources

5.1 Input from country representative

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5.2 Useful website links and bibliography

Websites and on-line resources:

- Eurypedia – European Encyclopedia on National Education Systems, Belgium (Flemish Community) <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/fpfis/mwikis/eurydice/index.php/Belgium-Flemish-Community:Overview> home page:
- Flemish Education Council (VLOR) <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/wegwijs/>
- Flemish Ministry of Education and Training: <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/wegwijs/>
- Hervorming secundair onderwijs (website providing information on the reform of Secondary Education) <http://www.hervormingsecundair.be/>
- 'Pact 2020' for the Flanders region. For more information please refer to: <http://eurolocal.info/project/pact-2020-new-future-pact-flanders-belgium>
- SERV – Social and Economic Council of Flanders <http://www.serv.be/>

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