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EEO Review: Youth Employment Measures , 2010

Belgium

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1. Trends

The employment rate for young people is relatively low in Belgium: 4.8 % for the 15-19 age group and 42.3 % for the 20-24 age group in 2010¹. This is partly due to the fact that compulsory education is set at 18. There is also a large proportion of young people pursuing their studies after they reach 18 years old. The youth unemployment to population ratio reached 3.2 in 2010 (2.3 in 2008) for the 15-19 age group and 12.4 in 2010 (8.6 in 2008) for the 20-24 age group. Long term unemployment is about one third of total unemployment for the 20-24 age group, but reached 43 % in 2010 for the 25-29 age group. Not surprisingly the unemployment rate is much higher for the low skilled (ISCED 0-2): 35 % in 2010 for the 20-24 age group compared to 19.8 % for the medium skilled (ISCED 3-4) and 17.8 % for the high skilled (ISCED 5-6) (see annex table 2). In 2008, 12.4 % of the 18-24 age group had left school early. The proportion of high skilled is higher in Belgium than in the EU and the low skilled percentage is also lower in Belgium than in the EU².

The economic crisis has had dramatic effects on youth unemployment (see annex table 6). This is also reflected in the decrease of the employment rate for the 15-19 age group, but is also noticeable for the 25-29 age group. Unemployment for the 15-24 age group increased by 18 % between June 2009 and June 2008, compared to 11 % for the over 25 age group³. The youth unemployment to population ratio increased to 12.4 for the 20-24 age group in 2010 Q1, when it was only at 8.6 in 2008 Q1. This is quite similar for the 25-29 age group (see annex table 1).

These aggregated data hide huge differences between the regions of Belgium, and also between the sexes. The problem of youth unemployment is more acute in the Walloon and Brussels' regions than it is in Flanders (see annex table 7) where the employment rate of older people is considered to be the weakest feature of the labour market. Table 7 refers to the 15-24 age group and compares 2008 and 2009. Regional differences are huge, both in terms of employment and unemployment. Nevertheless the crisis has had an opposing effect, impacting more upon youth employment in Flanders than in Brussels or Wallonia. The employment rate in Flanders decreased sharply between 2008 and 2009, from 31.7 % to 28.6 %, whereas it only decreased by 0.5 percentage points in Wallonia and 1.9 points in Brussels. The unemployment rate increased from 10.5 % to 15.7 % in Flanders and the unemployment ratio increased from 3.7 to 5.4 during the same period. Nevertheless the imbalance remains very largely unfavorable to Wallonia and particularly to Brussels: an employment rate differential of about 10 percentage points and an unemployment rate two times smaller in Flanders than in Brussels or Wallonia. The situation of Brussels and its labor market is moreover characterized by the fact that the demand for labour in Brussels often relates to high-quality jobs (51 % of jobs are held by graduates, compared to 37 % in the rest of the country), however many Brussels job-seekers are under-qualified, especially young people. This partially explains the striking youth unemployment rate in Brussels. The same imbalance characterises the early school leavers rate by region: 8.5 % in Flanders in 2008 and 19.9 % and 15.2 % respectively in Brussels and Wallonia (see annex table 9).

¹ Eurostat, Labour Force Survey (see annex table 1).

² Conseil Supérieur de l'Emploi – Higher Council of Employment, Report 2009.

³ Conseil Supérieur de l'Emploi – Higher Council of Employment, Report 2009, page 32.

This characteristic is important because a large portion of employment policy comes under the responsibility of the regions, and it will likely become more and more regionalized with the future reform of the state which has been negotiated between the political parties of the north and the south of Belgium. The age imbalance between the regions and the differences in priorities put forward by the regional governments also imply that it has been more difficult for the federal government, who are still in charge of a significant portion of employment policy. In 2000 the Minister for Employment proposed a specific programme for young low skilled job-seekers (the so-called Plan Rosetta). The Flemish government has disagreed with the measure as it means a huge decrease in the social contributions paid by the employers when hiring a young low skilled worker. The plan was eventually adopted a few years later.

Another concern continues to be employment among young immigrant communities in Belgium: the 28.1 %⁴ unemployment rate for this group is three times higher than for non-immigrant communities, and the situation is even more acute in Brussels.

Youth employment must also be analysed from a gender perspective. Indeed, while school attendance and the school success rate of young girls is higher than for young men, young women remain disadvantaged in the labour market: their employment rates remain significantly lower than those of men, even if the crisis has had a stronger negative effect on young men than it has had on women.

In terms of wages, there is little differentiation between the earnings of young people and adults, and relatively few young workers are in low-paid jobs⁵. The relatively high wages paid to young people may act as a barrier to recruiting low-skilled young people. The federal Win-Win scheme is being widely used to bring down labour costs for low-skilled young people, and is based on lower social security contributions. It may be worthwhile to set aside a subsidy for in-house vocational training for the least-skilled unemployed. However, in order to prevent this opportunity from being abused, special attention will need to be devoted to the fact that employers can select which candidates they want to take on board.

In terms of job security, young workers are over-represented in the area of temporary work: nearly 65 % of temporary workers are aged under 30. Young people are often told that temporary employment is a good way to gain initial work experience, but it would appear that they then find it hard to escape from this.

2. Measures taken to promote youth employment

As already noted in the introduction, the multilayered employment policy in Belgium implies that both the federal government and the regional or community governments or administrations are in charge of specific aspects of employment policies. Up to now, most of the policies involving social security (contribution or allowances and benefits), labour law, collective bargaining and fiscal policy have stayed under the competence of the federal government. Most of the other aspects of employment policies are under the responsibility of the regions and/or the Communities, e.g. public employment services, training, skills forecasting. The present situation is also characterised by a growing demand from the regions (or at least one of them) to enlarge their remit. In this context, regions are trying to launch

⁴ La libre Belgique, *Jeunes au chômage: génération perdue ?* [The young unemployed: a lost generation ?], 14/08/2010.

⁵ OECD, *Jobs for Youth Employment*, 2008.

new measures, but these are often not coordinated between the regions. Since regional policies are, of course, designed to meet the regional imbalances, the Walloon and Brussels regions have adopted additional measures to boost youth employment. Even in the framework of youth employment policies, the emphasis will be placed differently from one region to another.

2.1 School education and training policies

Both (compulsory) education and continuing vocational training are the responsibility of various federated entities. To improve the quality of education and to guarantee equality of opportunity for all, the Communities (i.e. the federated entities responsible for compulsory education) have reached agreement on a coordination method entitled 'Education and Training 2010'.

Belgium has a relatively dense and well-developed network of childcare facilities and primary schools. To prevent any educational disadvantage from arising at an early age, the federal government is planning to reduce from six down to five the age at which children must start attending school, however no final decision has yet been taken.

At the secondary level, policies have been introduced to improve the image of, and attract more pupils into, technical and professional study orientations as part of the fight against early school-leaving. There have been huge investments in the technical equipment of schools, often in collaboration with specialised sector-level centres and the employment services and with the support of European Structural Funds. Collaboration between schools has also been encouraged. The three communities have also developed and re-evaluated systems of part-time professional secondary education in order to offer young people the possibility to study part-time and work part-time, which is considered to be very important to counter early school-leaving and to smoothen the inflow into the labour market.

In Flanders, a new legislative framework was drafted which guarantees, amongst other things, that pupils are active full-time (at school or at work), i.e. 28 hours a week (this has been the case for 76 % of pupils). The French Community has also made efforts to attract more pupils into this system of alternated education and training by uniting the different statutes in one law, and by providing, just like in the German-speaking Community where alternated education and training is much more widespread, a fully equivalent secondary school certificate once this specific educational path has been completed.

At the federal level, the social partners are working on a uniform social statute in the various systems (both at the level of labour law and social security) to encourage part-time studies.

The main problem that persists is the limited range of possibilities to build up the work experience offered in certain sectors of economic activity.

The Flemish Community is planning, for example, to extend its bonus system in order to bring down the cost of access to higher education. The French Community has tightened the requirements on the basic knowledge to be acquired during secondary-school studies, and has introduced a community test for the purpose of harmonising primary-level teaching.

To smooth the transition from education into the labour market, the Walloon region has conducted a detailed analysis of occupations suffering from a shortage of labour and the skills required to enter them. This has been done with a view to providing better guidance for job-

seekers wishing to move into these occupations. There is now also an integration training course which was established in 2008. This is an internship governed by an agreement between the worker, the company and the regional public service for employment and vocational training (FOREM in Wallonia, ACTIRIS [previously ORBEM] in the Brussels region and the Arbeitsamt in the German-speaking Community). This agreement provides for arrangements similar to those applicable to individual internships. Once the internship comes to an end, the same employer must provide an open-ended contract of employment lasting at least two months. The internship itself must be scheduled to last for at least two months and be at least part-time.

2.2 Labour market and employment-related policies and access to benefits

Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs)

To cope, as far as possible, with the consequences of the crisis on youth employment, a series of measures has been adopted, including an adaptation of the ACTIVA measures, known as ACTIVA Start, for workers under age 26. The aim of this programme is to cut the cost of recruiting these young workers by activating their unemployment benefit. This may be regarded as an employment subsidy in that job-seekers who find work can keep part of their unemployment benefit, while employers can deduct this amount from the net wage payable.

On the 1st January 2010, a new recruitment plan known as ‘Win-Win’ was introduced in order to bolster the existing ACTIVA scheme. The aim is to make it even more attractive to recruit members of the most vulnerable population groups, i.e. young job-seekers during a crisis period - mainly during 2010 and 2011⁶. Job-seekers recruited under this scheme receive an activated unemployment benefit, known as a work allowance, amounting to either EUR 1 000 or EUR 1 100. As with the ACTIVA scheme, the employer can deduct this amount from the net wage payable to the employee, and can also benefit from lower employer’s contributions. Table 1 shows that a distinction is made among young people according to whether or not they have obtained their upper secondary education diploma.

Table 1: Description of the benefits provided by the ACTIVA and Win-Win schemes

Category	Period registered as a job-seeker	Amount of allowance	Period for which the allowance is payable
Activa – aged under 25	1 year	EUR 500	Month of recruitment + 15 months
Activa Start – aged under 26	Within 21 months of completing full-time education	EUR 350	Month of recruitment + 5 months
Win-Win – aged under 26 (no CESS) ⁷	3 months	EUR 1 100	24 months (recruitment in 2010) 12 months (recruitment in 2011)

⁶ MILQUET J., *Le nouveau plan d'embauche en détails* (Details of the new recruitment scheme), January 2010.

⁷ i.e. not in possession of a higher secondary-education diploma or certificate.

Win-Win – aged under 26 (max CESS) ⁸	6 months	EUR 1 000	24 months (recruitment in 2010) 12 months (recruitment in 2011)
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Source: ONEM

At the regional level, the ‘Marshall plan’ has been approved by the Walloon region and includes a series of measures relating to youth training and employment. The various priority themes highlighted in the plan are outlined below.

- Promoting motivation and access to employment for those population groups affected by the crisis, especially young people.
- Giving young people who wish to do so the opportunity to obtain their qualifications via sandwich courses or internships. This initiative (an ‘offer of guidance’) seeks to help job-seekers (especially those supported by the FOREM, and with particular emphasis on young people and workers who have been made redundant) to choose an occupation in a growth sector, based on concrete and practical information about it.
- Boosting the effectiveness of the ‘Language’ scheme and refocusing it on people with good prospects of employment.
- Developing, as part of the Walloon Esprit d’Entreprendre (Entrepreneurship) programme conducted by the ASE (Economic Stimulation Agency), initiatives aimed at young people via business leaders, innovative entrepreneurial projects within educational establishments, and consolidation activities.
- Enabling young people who are in the final years of education and training which is leading to qualifications overseen by the IFAPME (Walloon Institute for sandwich courses and training for the self-employed and SMEs), to acquire language training related to their occupation, through either a study grant or an award for immersion at a training centre, or via intensive tuition in the language used in the occupation.

Access to social security benefits

Upon leaving school and obtaining their diploma, young people can register as job-seekers with the regional public employment service. Registering in this way provides access to the active measures on offer in each region and to the ONEM ‘waiting allowance’. This is an unemployment benefit granted on the basis of studies, for an unlimited period, following a ‘waiting period’ lasting between six and twelve months, depending on the job-seeker’s age. From the age of 18 onwards, the most underprivileged young people can also claim social welfare benefits in their own municipality, via the CPAS (Public Social Welfare Centre).

In 2008, the government introduced the start-up bonus. This may be seen as a premium paid to young people who, during their period of compulsory education ($\pm <18$), commence hands-on training or obtain work experience with an employer as part of a sandwich course. The training or employment contract for this must stipulate a minimum term of four months.

⁸ i.e. not in possession of any diploma or certificate above higher secondary-education level.

‘Training contract’ refers to any type of apprenticeship agreement, as well as agreements covering socio-professional integration and workplace immersion. The bonus is granted for a maximum of three years’ training (as part of a single training programme, i.e. a course with one goal only). A young person may, if appropriate, conclude more than one training and/or employment contract with more than one employer as part of one training course. These contracts do not necessarily have to follow one another continuously.

The second and/or third year of training may take place after the student’s compulsory education has finished, provided that the training or employment contract commenced prior to the end of compulsory education. For each year’s training successfully completed, the young person is entitled to receive a start-up bonus, amounting to EUR 500 for years one and two, and EUR 750 for year three. Likewise, the training-course bonus, introduced in 2008, is a premium payable to any employer who trains or employs under a training or employment contract, a young person who is in compulsory education. Like the start-up bonus, the training-course bonus is granted for a maximum of three years’ training (as part of a single training programme, i.e. a course with one goal only). The amounts payable for the training-course bonus are paid at the same time as those for the start-up bonus. The training-course bonus is granted at the end of each year’s training, whether or not the young person has been successful. Where the contract is terminated prematurely, the training-course bonus is granted only if the contract has been performed for at least three months during the training year.

The introduction of the ACTIVA and Win-Win schemes may be regarded as a kind of allowance payable indirectly to young job-seekers.

Tax systems and labour market legislation

Young people are entitled to an ‘establishment allowance’ which attempts to encourage an entrepreneurial spirit among them. This is an allowance aimed at unemployed job-seekers who are registered with the regional service for employment and vocational training (FOREM in Wallonia, ACTIRIS [previously ORBEM] in the Brussels region and the Arbeitsamt in the German-speaking Community). To qualify, they must be preparing to become self-employed and be in receipt of support for this from the Participation Fund, set up within the Caisse Nationale de Crédit Professionnel (National Business Loans Fund) by the Law of 28 July 2002. This allowance is payable from the date on which the applicant’s preparations start and for a maximum of six months.

Next, the two financial incentive measures will be considered which encourage companies to hire young workers, and thereby attempt to deal with the effects of the crisis on this category of the workforce.

- A EUR 1 000 reduction in quarterly social security contributions for young people aged between 19 and 26. A young person is defined as very low-skilled when s/he holds, at most, either a second-level secondary-education certificate or a technical or vocational secondary-education certificate.
- Total exemption, during 2010 and 2011, from payment of social security contributions in respect to young people under age 19. At the present time, a EUR 1 000 reduction is granted for young workers through to the fourth quarter of the calendar year during which they reach the age of 18. Since 1st January of this year,

total exemption has been applied, and this will continue throughout 2010 until the end of 2011.

Regional disparities

The huge differences in youth employment and unemployment across regions in such a small country clearly indicates a lack of labour mobility. If Brussels attracts on a daily basis a large number of workers, coming from Flanders or Wallonia, there are relatively few flows between Flanders and Wallonia, and, concerning young people, from Brussels to Wallonia and Flanders. Initiatives have therefore been implemented by the regional governments and employment agencies attempting to increase mobility between regions and encourage job-seekers, and among them young job-seekers, to 'cross the linguistic border', both geographically by searching for a job in another region and also by increasing their language skills.

At the federated entity level, the Brussels region has broadened access to language vouchers to include young job-seekers, to prepare them for recruitment interviews. One of the features of the Brussels labour market is the fact that almost all of the increase in employment is accounted for by people coming from Wallonia or Flanders. A significant proportion of available job places require that employees are able to speak French and Dutch. However, a large portion of the young job-seekers in Brussels, mostly low skilled, are not bilingual. To ensure greater coherence between the training pursued and the demand for labour, the Brussels region has set up a database bringing together data from all employment-related institutions.

The Walloon region is developing initiatives that will enable young job-seekers to find work in a different region, so that they can acquire new language and technical skills. So far, these initiatives have proved to be effective, with a recruitment rate of between 80 and 85 %⁹.

During 2009, the various federated entities continued to develop individual skill profiles matching particular occupations, so that in the future they can be used as a reference point to meet the requirements of the labour market, in line with the 'European Qualification Framework'. In time, the setting-up of this type of database will facilitate the mobility of young Belgian workers. At the Belgian level, the various public employment services are already cooperating to ensure that workers have comparable profiles, thereby allowing greater inter-regional mobility.

2.3 Roles of the labour market actors

As previously stated, teaching-related matters are the domain of the Communities, while employment and vocational training-related matters are the domain of the regions. The federal authorities, for their part, are responsible for employment legislation, collective labour agreements and social security benefits. The SPE (Public Employment Service) finds it difficult to function effectively because unemployment benefit is controlled by the ONEM (National Employment Office), while job placement and active measures are the responsibility of the three regional SPEs (VDAB in the Flemish region, FOREM in the Walloon region and ACTIRIS [previously ORBEM] in the Brussels region). It might be that the multitude of institutions linked to education, training and youth employment constitutes a

hindrance to the transition from school to employment in Belgium. Nevertheless, the view could also be taken that the federated entities are better placed to introduce more efficient employment policies in view of the existing regional divergences.

As seen earlier, initiatives are being taken jointly by the various federated entities to create a harmonised database, which will firstly list occupations using a common description of the skills required, and secondly will upgrade training courses on both sides of the linguistic border. This will help to facilitate mobility among young workers.

Companies are showing increased interest in helping to train young students and/or workers, particularly by virtue of the various financial incentives that the federal government has introduced to counter the effects of the crisis. Nevertheless, it might be worth extending the 'sandwich course' educational model to all levels of diplomas, because for the moment it appears to be mainly targeted at low-skilled labour.

3 Conclusions

The crisis has had a more significant impact on youth employment than it has had on older age group employment. This is not surprising, but may have some long term negative consequences for young people. The crisis has deepened existing inequalities and accentuated issues affecting the youth labour market, especially the high proportion of low skilled among young job-seekers and the increase in the period between leaving school and finding a job. The crisis has effectively tended to postpone entry into employment for young school leavers. The 2009 report of the Higher Council of Employment has shown this.

The crisis has had a more significant impact on the labour market in Flanders. This is due to the great impact on the manufacturing industry and on specific sectors. It implies that young people in Flanders have been hit harder by the crisis compared to the other age groups, but also compared to the other regions. Nevertheless, the situation remains largely better in Flanders than in Wallonia and Brussels from the point of view of the youth labour market. The worsening of the situation in Flanders is mainly cyclical whereas the situation in Brussels, for example, is more structural with the problem of a high percentage of low skilled individuals.

Dealing with youth employment and unemployment in Belgium has to be seen from a regional point of view. The situation is quite different by region, in terms of employment and unemployment, but also in respect to skill levels and the rate of early school leavers. General measures (at the Federal level) have nevertheless been adopted and implemented during 2009 and the beginning of 2010. This has not been an easy thing since different points of view were expressed in the north and the south of the country, influenced of course by the different situations. The Flemish parties in the federal government were not in favour of introducing new policies directed towards young people. Conversely, when the social partners agreed to accomplish simplification in the system of reductions in the social security contributions paid by the employers by suppressing the reduction allocated to the older workers, the Flemish government used its right to block this decision. The present situation does not favour an efficient employment policy, especially when considering the youth labour market. Since June 2010, no new measures have been adopted at the federal level, and the regional authorities,

⁹ SPF Economie, *L'apprentissage tout au long d'une vie en Belgique: état de la situation en 2008* (Life-long learning: a review of the situation in 2008), May 2008.

particularly Flanders, therefore consider that their competences are too narrow and should be enlarged. This is effectively one of the topics that is under negotiation between the political parties from the north and the south in the process of forming a new federal government and of reforming the federal state by giving more autonomy to the regions. In this debate, the transfer of labour market competencies to the regional level is very important.

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Table 1: YOUTH EMPLOYMENT / UNEMPLOYMENT TRENDS (Q1 data)									
Data	Age group 15-19			Age group 20-24			Age group 25-29		
	2008	2009	2010	2008	2009	2010	2008	2009	2010
Employment rate (%)	6.9	5.8	4.8	48.5	43.4	42.3	79.8	79.5	77.1
Unemployment rate (%)	25.0	31.0	39.9	15.1	19.2	22.6	9.1	10.0	12.2
Long-term unemployment as a % of unemployed	-	-	(12.4)	32.2	26.8	31.8	46.3	37.1	43.0
Youth unemployment to population ratio	2.3	2.6	3.2	8.6	10.3	12.4	8.0	8.8	10.7

Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey

- : Data not available

Data in brackets not reliable due to small sample size.

Table 2: YOUTH EMPLOYMENT TRENDS (Q1 data, %)						
Data	Age group 15-24		Age group 20-24		Age group 25-29	
	2009	2010	2009	2010	2009	2010
Unemployment for the low-skilled (ISCED 0-2)	28.5	39.6	35.0	35.0	29.3	26.0
Unemployment for the medium-skilled (ISCED 3-4)	22.1	23.7	21.4	19.8	9.3	10.7
Unemployment for the high skilled (ISCED 5-6)	10.3	11.6	10.4	17.8	5.0	5.1

Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey. Data non-seasonally adjusted

Table 3: YOUTH TEMPORARY CONTRACTS (% OF EMPLOYEES) (Annual data)			
Data	Age group 15-19	Age group 20-24	Age group 25-29
	2009	2009	2009
Temporary work as a % of employment	61.5	26.7	11.3

Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey. Data non-seasonally adjusted

Table 4: NEITHER IN EMPLOYMENT NOR IN ANY EDUCATION OR TRAINING (NEET) (Annual data)

Data	Age group 15-19	Age group 20-24
	2008	2008
NEET rate (% of the age group) (annual averages)	5.2	15.1

Source: Eurostat, EU Labour Force Survey, Annual averages

Table 5: EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS* (Annual data)

Data	Age group 18-24	
	2008	2009
Early school leavers (% of the age group)	12.4	11.5

Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey

* Percentage of the population aged 18-24 having attained at most lower secondary education and not being involved in further education or training.

Table 6: DIFFERENCE IN YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT RATE BETWEEN Q4-2009 AND Q4-2007

Data	Age group 15-19	Age group 15-24
Difference in youth unemployment rate between Q4-2009 and Q4-2007	-0.3	5.6

Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey. Data non-seasonally adjusted

Table 7: DIFFERENCE IN YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT AND EMPLOYMENT BY REGION (Annual Data) – 15-24 AGE GROUP

Data	2008			2009		
	Brussels	Wallonia	Flanders	Brussels	Wallonia	Flanders
Employment rate	21	22.3	31.7	19.1	21.8	28.6
Unemployment rate	33.2	27.5	10.5	31.7	30.5	15.7
Youth unemployment ratio	10.5	8.5	3.7	9.0	9.6	5.4

Table 8: Employment rate by sex (% OF EMPLOYEES) (Q1 data)

Data	Age group 15-19		Age group 20-24		Age group 25-29	
	2008	2010	2008	2010	2008	2010
Female	4.6	4.2	45.8	39.8	75.8	73.3
Male	9.1	5.3	51.2	44.8	83.7	80.9

Source : Eurostat, Labour Force Survey, Data non-seasonally adjusted

Table 9: EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS BY REGION* (Annual data)		
Data	Age group 18-24	
	2003	2008
BELGIUM	14.3	12.4
BRUSSELS	18.8	19.9
FLANDERS	12.5	8.5
WALLONIA	16.1	15.2

Source: Dgsie- Conseil supérieur de l'emploi Rapport 2009

* Percentage of the population aged 18-24 having attained at most lower secondary education and not being involved in further education or training.