



# Education and Training Monitor 2016

# Belgium

*Volume 2 of the Education and Training Monitor 2016 includes twenty-eight individual country reports. It builds on the most up-to-date quantitative and qualitative evidence to present and assess the main recent and ongoing policy measures in each EU Member State, with a focus on developments since mid-2015. It therefore complements the existing sources of information which offer descriptions of national education and training systems.*

*The structure of the country reports is as follows. Section 1 presents a statistical overview of the main education and training indicators. Section 2 briefly identifies the main strengths and challenges of the country's education and training system. Section 3 looks at expenditure on education, and demographic and skill challenges. Section 4 focuses on early school leaving, early childhood education and care, and basic skills as important areas related to tackling inequalities and promoting inclusion. Section 5 deals with policies to modernise school education, covering, inter alia, the teaching profession and digital and language skills. Section 6 discusses measures to modernise higher education. Finally, section 7 covers vocational education and training, as well as adult learning.*

*The manuscript was completed on 15 September 2016.*

*Additional contextual data can be found online ([ec.europa.eu/education/monitor](http://ec.europa.eu/education/monitor))*

## 1. Key indicators

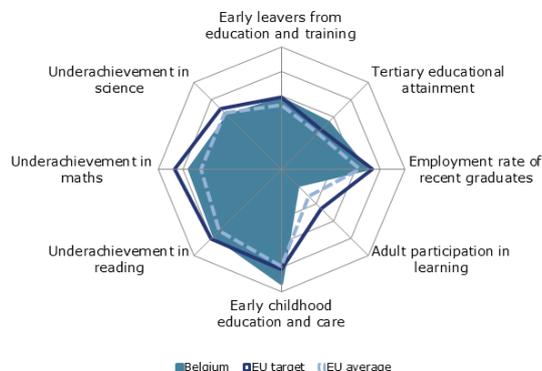
		Belgium		EU average		
		2012	2015	2012	2015	
<b>ET 2020 benchmarks</b>						
Early leavers from education and training (age 18-24)	Total	12.0%	10.1%	12.7%	11.0%	
Tertiary educational attainment (age 30-34)	Total	43.9%	42.7%	36.0%	38.7%	
Early childhood education and care (ECEC) (from age 4 to starting age of compulsory education)		98.1% <sup>11</sup>	98.1% <sup>14</sup>	93.2% <sup>11</sup>	94.3% <sup>14</sup>	
Proportion of 15 year-olds with underachievement in:	Reading	16.1%	:	17.8%	:	
	Maths	19.0%	:	22.1%	:	
	Science	17.7%	:	16.6%	:	
Employment rate of recent graduates by educational attainment (age 20-34 having left education 1-3 years before reference year)	ISCED 3-8 (total)	80.9%	79.5%	75.9%	76.9%	
Adult participation in lifelong learning (age 25-64)	ISCED 0-8 (total)	6.9%	6.9%	9.2%	10.7%	
<b>Other contextual indicators</b>						
Education investment	Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP	6.3%	6.3% <sup>14</sup>	5.0%	4.9% <sup>14,p</sup>	
	Expenditure on public and private institutions per student in € PPS	ISCED 1-2	€7.801	€7.748 <sup>13</sup>	:	: <sup>13</sup>
		ISCED 3-4	€9.285	€9.431 <sup>13</sup>	:	: <sup>13</sup>
		ISCED 5-8	€11.406	€11.525 <sup>13</sup>	:	: <sup>13</sup>
Early leavers from education and training (age 18-24)	Native-born	10.6%	9.0%	11.6%	10.1%	
	Foreign-born	22.6%	18.2%	24.9%	19.0%	
Tertiary educational attainment (age 30-34)	Native-born	46.5%	44.8%	36.7%	39.4%	
	Foreign-born	33.6%	35.6%	33.8%	36.4%	
Employment rate of recent graduates by educational attainment (age 20-34 having left education 1-3 years before reference year)	ISCED 3-4	71.4%	70.0%	69.7%	70.8%	
	ISCED 5-8	87.6%	85.3%	81.5%	81.9%	
Learning mobility	Inbound graduates mobility (bachelor)	6.4% <sup>13</sup>	7.5% <sup>14,d</sup>	5.5% <sup>13</sup>	5.9% <sup>14</sup>	
	Inbound graduates mobility (master)	16.1% <sup>13</sup>	14.9% <sup>14,d</sup>	13.6% <sup>13</sup>	13.9% <sup>14</sup>	

Sources: Eurostat (see section 9 for more details); OECD (PISA).

Notes: data refer to weighted EU averages, covering different numbers of Member States depending on the source; b = break in time series, d = definition differs, p = provisional, u = low reliability, 11 = 2011, 13 = 2013, 14 = 2014.

Further information can be found in the relevant section of Volume 1 ([ec.europa.eu/education/monitor](http://ec.europa.eu/education/monitor)).

**Figure 1. Position in relation to strongest (outer ring) and weakest performers (centre)**



Source: DG Education and Culture calculations, based on data from Eurostat (LFS 2015) and OECD (PISA 2012).

Note: all scores are set between a maximum (the strongest performers, represented by the outer ring) and a minimum (the weakest performers, represented by the centre of the figure).

## 2. Highlights

- Major schools reforms have been launched which aim to improve equity, key competences and vocational education and training. New modes of governance should increase efficiency and enhance collaborative approaches.
- Measures are taken to address shortages in educational infrastructure.
- Belgium faces significant equity challenges. Pupils' performance is strongly linked to their socioeconomic background, particularly for those of migrant origin. This is all the more serious because the disadvantaged groups within the school population are those forecast to increase the most.
- The early school leaving rate is slightly better than the EU average, but disparities across the Communities and Regions persist.
- Disadvantaged schools lack experienced teachers and heads. Teachers need support to teach in an increasingly diverse environment.
- The higher education attainment rate is above average. Initiatives are taken to address the low proportion of students and graduates in science and technology which is a concern for future innovation capacity.

### Box 1: The 2016 European Semester country-specific recommendation on education and training

The 2016 European Semester country-specific recommendations to Belgium (Council of the European Union 2016) included a recommendation on education and training:

Move forward with education and vocational training reforms and provide training support for disadvantaged groups, in particular people from a migrant background

## 3. Investing in education to address demographic and skill challenges

General government expenditure on education as a share of GDP in Belgium was, at 6.3 %, one of the highest in the EU in 2014.<sup>1</sup> The French ('BE fr') and Flemish ('BE nl') communities invest relatively more in (upper) secondary education than in (pre-) primary education (OECD 2015a, OECD 2015b, Mc Kinsey 2015). The main reasons are the higher teacher salaries and smaller classes in (upper) secondary education. Moreover, costs are particularly high in initial vocational education and training (IVET), which is largely linked to an overly fragmented offer and the highest number of repetition years.

The proportion of public annual education expenditure dedicated to human resource costs, close to 80 %, lies far above the 60 % EU average. The share of public expenditure for school infrastructure is just 6.6% below the 7.4 EU average (European Commission 2016b). A geographical shift in the concentration of enrolments, demographic pressure and insufficient planning, coupled with long delays in renovating and building, have led to capacity and quality issues in educational infrastructure.

<sup>1</sup> Source: Eurostat, General government expenditure by function (COFOG) database.

Growth in the school population over the next decade will be highest among disadvantaged groups, particularly among students with a migrant background who are largely concentrated in big cities. Growth disparities<sup>2</sup> between the language communities, regions and educational levels are forecast. Overall budgetary constraints and the ongoing federal reform of civil servants' pensions<sup>3</sup> are putting additional pressure on effective and efficient spending in the area of education.

The communities are reinforcing investments in infrastructure.<sup>4</sup> They are also revising their funding policy, including equal opportunities policy<sup>5</sup> for the most disadvantaged schools. It is however difficult to monitor the impact of these policies as schools do not report on how the funding is spent (OECD 2015b, OECD 2016a).

In BE fr, the increase of the higher education budget is limited by the funding system which does not take into account the increase in student numbers. The government approved a significant additional increase of EUR 107.5 million between 2016 and 2019.

The communities have also taken or are planning measures to improve the efficiency of spending. This encompasses giving more attention to early intervention in (pre-) primary education and promoting new pedagogical approaches, among others to reduce the high repetition rates in compulsory and higher education. This also involves rationalising the IVET and higher education offer, managing schools' operating costs more efficiently and achieving greater synergy between educational networks (Eurypedia BE nl, 2016) or between education and training providers.

## 4. Tackling inequalities and promoting inclusion

After falling to 9.8 % between 2011 and 2014, the early school leaving (ESL) rate stood at 10.1 % in 2015, 0.6 percentage points (pp.) above the national target for 2020 and slightly below the EU average of 11 %. Disparities persist however between the regions, with ESL rates of 7.0 % in Flanders, 12.9 % in Wallonia and 14.4 % in Brussels in 2014. There is also a wide gap in the rates for foreign- and native-born students, at 18.2 % and 9.0 % respectively. The gender gap has narrowed due to lower ESL rates for boys coupled with higher ones for girls. The proportion of pupils at risk of leaving education with at most lower secondary education is estimated at over 20 % in BE fr (Lambert, 2014).

As attested by the results of the 2012 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Belgium remains one of the OECD countries with the highest disparities in basic skills achievement linked to socioeconomic background. This is particularly true for those with an immigrant background,<sup>6</sup> who make up a larger share of the student population than the OECD average<sup>7</sup>. In spite of an overall improvement, Belgium still has one of the largest performance gaps between pupils born in the country and first- and second-generation immigrants after taking their socioeconomic background into account. The family structure also matters, with students from single-parent families underperforming more than in other countries (OECD, 2013). Increasing poverty amongst the school population and greater diversity in language

<sup>2</sup> According to a forecast, between 2015 and 2025 the growth of the school population will accelerate in BE fr to reach 7 % (+13 % in Brussels and +5 % in Wallonia) (Mc Kinsey, 2015). In BE nl (Flanders and Brussels), the school population is expected to increase by 4 % between 2015/2016 and 2020/2021 (OECD 2015b). Between 2016 and 2026, the Flemish school population in pre-primary, primary and secondary is expected to grow by 5 %, 2 % and 11 %, respectively.

<sup>3</sup> The legal retirement age will increase. As a result, senior teachers with higher salaries will remain longer at the charge of the Community education budget.

<sup>4</sup> For details see European Commission (2015).

<sup>5</sup> GOK policy (BE nl), Encadrement différencié (BE fr)

<sup>6</sup> First-generation immigrant pupils are pupils born outside Belgium whose parents were also born outside the country; second general immigrants are pupils born in Belgium, but whose parents were born outside.

<sup>7</sup> There are however differences between the communities. For details see European Commission 2015.

(Studiedienst van de Vlaamse Regering 2015<sup>8</sup>, Mc Kinsey 2015), culture and family structure are increasing the equity challenges.

While participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC) may be helping to prevent early school leaving, in particular for socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, Belgium combines a very high participation rate in ECEC with an average performance in ESL. Figures on participation in ECEC show close to full participation at age three and four, and is as high as 51 % for children less than three years old. There is however variation in the quality of provision (European Commission 2014) and specific target groups have lower participation rates. In BE nl, enrolment gaps between nationals and non-nationals show little difference at age five, but significant gaps at age three. The gaps in regular attendance<sup>9</sup> are even larger. Obstacles include language and cultural barriers, teachers not being well prepared to cope with pupils' diversity, and insufficient teaching capacity (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, 2016). Similar trends are observed in BE fr. Language difficulties are already observed for children less than three years old (BE fr, Fondation Roi Baudouin 2016).

In Belgium school segregation goes beyond residential segregation and reflects academic, socioeconomic, language and migrant background (Belgian Court of Auditors 2015, OECD 2015b, Pacte pour un enseignement d'Excellence 2015). Schools with the most disadvantaged pupils are unable to attract the most experienced teachers and heads and face greater turnover in the teaching staff. Equal opportunities policies for disadvantaged schools seem not have delivered the results expected despite the student-to-teaching-staff ratio in socioeconomically disadvantaged schools being one of the lowest by international comparison (OECD 2013). Little attention is paid to the performance of individual schools (OECD 2016b).

The increased number of refugees since 2015 has raised new challenges in integrating their children into education. The communities have taken measures to increase the capacity of reception classes, the number of language teachers and the budget to support newly arrived students. 3 900 newcomers were received in Flemish schools during the first half of 2015/16. In BE fr, since September 2015, 13 additional reception classes ('Daspa') were set-up. Currently 4000 children are hosted in 69 'Daspa'. Efforts are made to spread the refugees across the country. However, past experience shows that they tend to move towards big cities to join existing communities.

In terms of policy responses, all three language communities are engaged in major schools reforms (see sections 5 and 7) aimed at providing more 'inclusive' education. Specific measures target ESL. In early 2016 the Flemish government approved a revised concept note on the new integrated ESL approach, including an action plan. It is positive that this policy involves three ministries: Education, Welfare and Employment. The downside is that it lacks information on the budget. In BE fr, there is still no specific policy on ESL. The focus is on the ongoing implementation of the 2014 reform of lower secondary education, under which schools have to draw up plans to tackle low achievement.

The communities are currently also revising their priority education policies and enrolment decrees. Other measures aim to provide schools with data to help improve their governance and teaching. However, there is little information on how such data are used. Government agreements for 2014-2019 refer to the need to attract qualified teachers to disadvantaged schools, but measures have not yet been announced.

For early childhood education, current measures<sup>10</sup> focus mainly on the participation of vulnerable groups (Be nl) or improving the quality of the education (BE fr, Milquet 2015). Further evidence has been gathered to inform policymaking (Ministerie van Onderwijs, 2016a). Flemish child benefits will be reformed. A part should be linked to the enrolment and attendance rate at age three and four.

<sup>8</sup> In BE nl the risk that children are born into a disadvantaged family increased from 6.5 % in 2005 to 11.4 % in 2014.

<sup>9</sup> In BE nl at age three (cohort 2006, data on 1.2.2015), 96.4 % of children of Belgian nationality attend regularly, against 31.6 % of non-Belgians from EU countries, 36.3 % of non-EU non-Belgians. The attendance rate of children from low-income families is 92 %.

<sup>10</sup> For details see European Commission (2015) and Crevits (2016b).

In Belgium, the steering of pupils from disadvantaged groups remains poor from ECEC onwards. Disadvantaged pupils, particularly those with a migrant background, are overrepresented in special needs education and vocational pathways. The proportion of pupils in special needs education is at worryingly high levels.

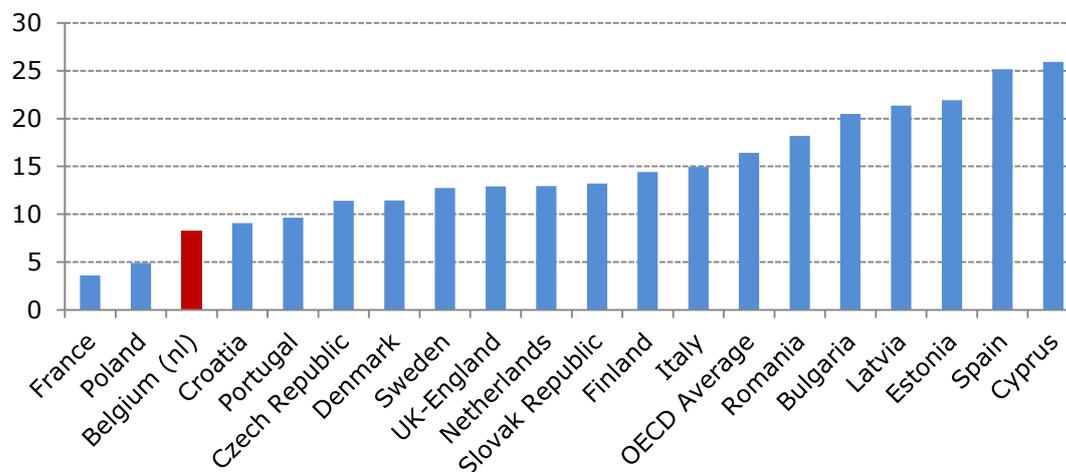
For children with special needs, the entry into force in 2015/2016 of the Flemish 'M-decree' is a major step towards increasing inclusion in the mainstream system. From September 2015, every child, including those with special needs, has the right to enrol in a mainstream school, provided this is possible with reasonable adaptations. Around 180 full-time staff specialising in special education provide support to teacher teams in regular education (Crevits 2015a). Initial results show a greater proportion of students with special needs participating in mainstream rather than special education. As there is still a need for more staff from special schools to support mainstream schools and for preparing all teachers to address special needs (OECD 2015b), the staff arrangements will be increased in 2016/2017.

Violent radicalisation is a major concern. Belgium is the EU country with the highest proportion of people, mostly youngsters, leaving the country to fight in Syria and Iraq. Belgium has taken measures across all levels of compulsory education to prevent violent radicalisation (Eurydice 2016). All the communities aim to support schools and teachers and to share specific resources, for example to train teachers on this subject and stimulate intercultural and interreligious competences/dialogue. Key measures encompass setting up a network of experts on Islamic discourse (BE nl), introducing a citizenship course (BE fr) and dedicating the year 2016 to intercultural and interreligious dialogue (BE de). Coordination with regional measures varies greatly. There is awareness that inclusive education is a prerequisite to successful action in education to prevent radicalisation.

## 5. Modernising school education

Belgian teachers are not well prepared to cope with an increasingly poor and diverse school population or to take full advantage of digital opportunities. In-work teacher training is not well used to develop competences nor recognised for career development. Participation in training for teaching in a multicultural or multilingual setting is significantly below the EU average (Figure 2). Collaborative teaching is not well developed (OECD 2014, Pacte pour un enseignement d'Excellence 2015). Teachers need support to adopt new pedagogical approaches, e.g. in order to reduce repetition years.

**Figure 2. Percentage of lower secondary education teachers who report participation in professional development relating to teaching in a multicultural or multilingual setting in the 12 months prior to the survey.**



Source: OECD (2014)<sup>11</sup>

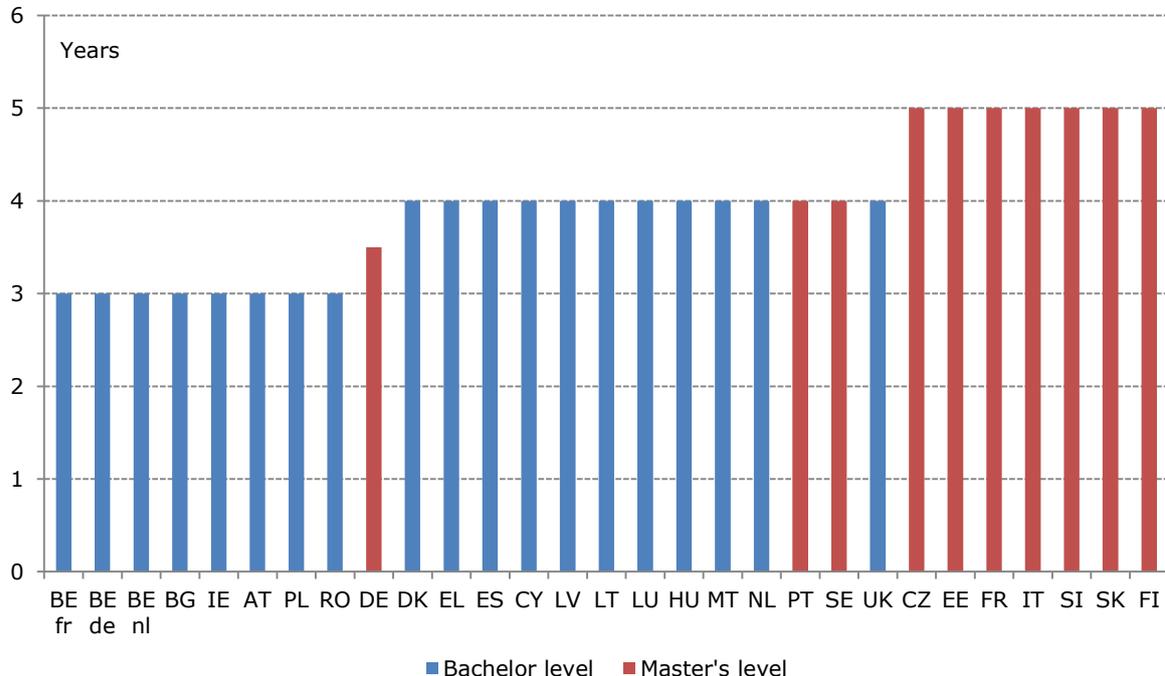
<sup>11</sup> TALIS covers the Flemish Community. The other Communities did not participate.

Despite a higher enrolment rate of students in 'Education' than the EU and OECD average, Belgium faces a shortage of qualified teachers. The main reasons are the difficulty of attracting the most suitable students and candidates to the profession; the high exit rate of starting teachers; retirement conditions; the unavailability of a proportion of teachers for teaching; and the low student-to-teaching staff ratio.<sup>12</sup> Barriers include the big difference in status and employment conditions of starting teachers compared with those of (not very mobile) established teachers (OECD 2015b, Delvaux et al. 2013). Teachers will retire later from 2019, which calls for a reorganisation of the work at the end of their career. Salaries of school teachers in Belgium remain above the OECD average (OECD 2016b) with however differences between the communities. Those differences count among the obstacles to teacher's mobility between them, including for language teachers.

Both communities are pursuing the preparation of their reform of initial teacher education launched under the previous governments. In early 2016, the Flemish Government approved a concept note which includes: 1) generalising a non-binding entrance test for students, including a pilot in 2016; 2) introducing a specific master's in education; 3) higher education institutes remaining the only providers of teacher training; and 4) an obligation to offer career paths for adults wanting to become teachers (Crevits 2016a). A draft decree is planned in early 2017 in view of finalising the reform by 2020.

The French Community aims to adopt a draft decree by end-2016.<sup>13</sup> Debate is ongoing over an increase in the course length for initial teacher training — at 3 years currently, this is relatively short in Belgium (Figure 3) — and over consistency with the compulsory education reform. Given the budgetary outlook (Thonet et al. 2016), however, opting for a 5-year master's for all teachers is not an option. The costs would be so high that it would leave no scope to finance other education reforms.

**Figure 3. Level and minimum length of initial teacher education of primary teachers (2011/2012)**



Source: Eurydice (2013), p 26

<sup>12</sup> This ratio differs from the average class size. For instance it takes into account teachers who are not available for teaching.

<sup>13</sup> This also has an impact for secondary education teachers of the German-speaking Community as they are mainly trained in BE fr (Eurydice 2016).

On teachers' careers, the Flemish education minister and social partners are still pursuing their negotiations on a 'career pact' (*Loopbaanpact*; Crevits 2015b).<sup>14</sup> However, these are complicated by the pension reform. The communities have also taken or plan to boost measures on inter-professional and community mobility. Recent initiatives also focus on training teachers to cope with poverty and diversity (Fondation Roi Baudouin 2016, Crevits 2016b).

On its plans to modernise secondary education, the Flemish Government has reached agreement on long-awaited measures which should take effect in 2018. Two concept notes adopted in May 2016 serve as a starting point for the consultative and legislative process. At the first stage, the separate pathway for those without a primary certificate would be strengthened, with new measures to improve their transition to the general pathway.<sup>15</sup> The next stage would consist in introducing a new structure of the educational offers, in addition to the current general, technical and vocational tracks. The new structure would be defined by destination (educational track leading either to direct transition into the labour market, or to tertiary education, or to both the labour market and further studies) and by domain (field of study). The number of study domains would decrease from 29 to 8 (Crevits 2016c) and the number of courses from 196 to 46. A 'domain school' would offer one or more of the eight domains and for each of them will provide the three different types of educational tracks. A 'campus school' would offer the three educational tracks but in different domains. Schools would receive financial incentives if they move towards these new types of organisation. Critics fear that the compromise was reached at the expense of greater equity, as ambitious measures to address this were abandoned (e.g. 'broad first grade', suppression of the three tracks). The possible risks include creating a more complex system with even greater difficulties for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds to make an informed choice of schools and study.

A shortage of skilled professionals, mainly in sciences and engineering, could become a major barrier to innovation in Belgium (European Commission 2016a). In Flanders an interministerial science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) action plan for 2012-2020 aims to increase the number of pupils and students in sciences or technology. At secondary education level current results are limited. Moreover, a strong fall in STEM students in vocational training is observed, particularly girls. New measures focus, for example, on the professional development of STEM teachers (EU STEM Coalition 2016).

### Box 2: Reform of compulsory education in the French Community (*Pacte pour un Enseignement d'Excellence, 2015-2025*)

BE fr has launched a process to reform its compulsory education system. This aims to reduce educational inequalities, raise the average performance and overall efficiency of the system, and adapt to the needs of the 21st century. Building on a wide participatory process and in-depth analytical work, the reform should be adopted by 2017. Its main elements are:

- **A systemic reform around four key axes:** 1) the student and his/her pathway; 2) the teachers and actors involved in education; 3) education provision, knowledge and competences; and 4) governance.
- **Equity, effectiveness and efficiency at the heart of an evidence-based policy:** a prospective view and a broad analysis of the current situation are available since mid-2015.
- **A participatory process to identify key challenges and propose guidelines for the reform:** In May 2016 the Government endorsed the second report of the central steering group set up to accompany the reform and announced it would establish its key priorities for action in autumn 2016.
- **Impact assessment and definition of Government priorities:** by end-2016, short-, medium- and long-term priorities should be established based on equity, effectiveness and efficiency, and taking into account the budgetary implications of different measures.

<sup>14</sup> The focus of the minister is on passion for the occupation, working conditions, guidance for starting teachers, creating more flexible career opportunities, continuous professional development and reduction of workload.

<sup>15</sup> The first two years of secondary education should focus more on guidance by combining a general curriculum with optional courses. For students who need additional support, the optional courses can be used for remedial teaching to prevent dropout.

Key points put forward by the steering group:

*Overhaul the governance system:* The different actors, individual schools and teachers should be given greater autonomy and responsibility. Steering would be done by setting objectives at system level and specific ones for schools by geographical area. These objectives would be implemented through contracts concluded between a school and the central level and will benefit from the support of the school's umbrella organisation. Contracts with the central level cover the school strategy, plan and objectives. The central authorities would decentralise responsibility by geographical area for monitoring the contracts, with measures for low-performing schools. At central level, the education ministry would be reorganised and the roles (e.g. of the school inspectorate) redefined. A 2016 decree already foresees that each school will establish by 2018/2019 a 6-year pilot plan with objectives in more than 10 key areas. The heads of underperforming schools have to draw up a remedial action plan with the support of their umbrella organisation.

*Heads and teachers:* The role of the heads should be reinforced with less administrative work and a greater focus on teaching, shared leadership and their own professional abilities. The teaching profession should evolve towards a stronger engagement and collaboration between teachers and with external actors. Teachers are also to be equipped for social, cultural and pedagogical diversity. In-work teacher training should become more relevant to the school and to individual needs with the introduction of a training plan at school and individual level. Teachers' careers would become differentiated with the introduction of a specific status for starting, and senior teachers in addition to the standard teacher one. Mandatory support to starting teachers has been introduced in September 2016.

*A common comprehensive pathway, a one-track IVET, better guidance and easier transitions:* The common pathway would start from ECEC and go up to lower secondary education (15 years) which would be extended by 1 year. Its possible extension by an additional year might be considered later. The common set of knowledge and skills to be taught at that level would include seven domains, including one on manual, technical and technological competences. IVET would be reduced to one track with fewer study options and apprenticeships integrated into the education system.

*Inequity:* Eight areas for action have been identified in view of a global response, addressing among others low-performing schools and social mix (see also section 4). Further analysis is ongoing. Other proposals discussed in the context of the 'Pacte' could also contribute, such as the organisation of schooling time, 'home-work' and extra-curricular activities at school).

*Coordination with the reform of initial teacher training:* It will be crucial to ensure consistency between the school reform headed by the Minister of Education and the initial teacher education reform led by the Minister of Higher Education. Progressive implementation that enables teachers to be empowered and gives them appropriate training and support to cope with the changes will be key to the success of the reform.

The reform process so far attests a positive shift towards a transparent, participatory and evidence-based policy. Under a tight calendar, progress has been made in identifying innovative approaches to longstanding weaknesses. The reform is now in a critical phase. The government will have to set priorities and make choices under strong budgetary constraints. Moreover, work on important subjects, like the fair distribution of teachers in disadvantaged schools, special needs education and vocational education and training, is still under development. For more information see: <http://www.pactedexcellence.be>.

## 6. Modernising higher education

Belgium's tertiary education attainment rate for 30-34 year-olds, at 42.7 %, remains above the EU average of 38.7 % in 2015. However, it is 4.3 pps. short of the 47 % national target set for 2020, with no improvement seen since 2008. Women outperform men by 48.7 % to 36.7 % — a gender gap wider than the EU average. Whilst narrowing, the gap between native-born and

foreign-born students is still large at 44.8 % to 35.6 %. The employment rate of recent tertiary graduates<sup>16</sup> remains above the EU average.

Institutions need to cope with steadily rising numbers of students and high dropout and repetition rates and to ensure quality in a context of budget constraints. International students make up 14 % of new entrants in tertiary education. At doctoral level, they represent 38% of graduates considerably above the 26% OECD average (OECD 2016) —In BE fr half of all international students is French (Jauniaux and Dieu 2016).

By international comparison, the proportion of science, engineering and technology students and graduates remains low. Women are largely underrepresented in particular among bachelor's graduates (OECD 2016b). In comparison with its neighbouring countries, the EU-21 and OECD averages, the 2012 Belgian enrolment rates for new entrants was lower in sciences (5 % against 11 % in EU-21) and engineering (10 % against 15 % in EU-21). This is paired with higher than average enrolment rates in 'Health and welfare' and 'Education'. However, the study choice of Belgian university students differs significantly across the communities: Flemish students opt more often for engineering and sciences whilst those from the French Community choose health, in particular medicine. Differences could be explained by the introduction of different admission tests (Lambert 2015) and by the positive results of the Flemish STEM action plan (see section 5).

Relatively low tuition fees and open access to higher education remain guiding principles. Measures have been taken or are planned to improve the transition between secondary and tertiary education through earlier and more efficient guidance. This includes 1) gradually introducing a compulsory guidance test at the end of secondary education (BE nl); 2) piloting or extending non-binding higher education entrance tests in 2016/17 (BE nl: pilot in teacher education and STEM fields, BE fr: dentistry and health); and 3) limiting the possibility to re-sit exams and introducing early reorientation mechanisms. The education ministries aim to support higher education institutions by equipping them with data on the study results of students across institutions and study programmes (BE nl Higher education database). Measures aimed at increasing employability are being pursued (see European Commission 2015), in particular by rationalising the number of courses and developing further short cycle programmes (BE nl) and dual or work-based education programmes at bachelor level (BE fr).

## 7. Modernising vocational education and training and promoting adult learning

The participation of upper secondary students in vocational education and training remains above the EU average. However, the proportion of work-based learning stands at only 5.9 %. The employment rate of recent upper secondary vocational education and training graduates reached 75.6 % in 2014, slightly above the EU average of 73 %. Adult participation in lifelong learning is low and decreased in 2015 to 6.9 %, well below the EU average of 10.7 %.

A recent decree strengthens dual learning in secondary education. As part of this process the variety of existing contracts is reduced with the objective to have a unique contract, as is the incentive structure for companies. The new Flemish contract also aims for consistency with the unique dual learning contract recently implemented in BE fr. The Flemish Government has approved several pilot projects enabling 33 educational institutions to experiment with dual learning for 3 years, starting in 2016-2017. The pilots provide room to further develop the curriculum provided that it fulfils certain conditions. For example, the programme must lead to a formal qualification, about 60 % of the total programme must be dedicated to work-based learning and the relevant economic sectors must be committed to the project. The objective is to roll out dual learning on a wider scale from the school year 2017/2018.

In the Walloon Region, measures to further develop dual training are part of the 'Marshall Plan 4.0'. They aim to increase the number of apprenticeship places, improve regulation around apprenticeships and improve the quality of the training given in the framework of dual learning.

<sup>16</sup> People aged 20-34 who left tertiary education between one and three years before the reference year.

Regarding adult learning, a recent report (BE nl Lavrijsen and Nicaise, 2015) pointed to the lack of learning culture to explain the low participation rate. The Flemish Government presented a concept note in mid-2016 on reforming the adult education sector. The aim is to better respond to the needs of both the sector and learners. BE nl is striving for a more unified framework for all providers, including a more stable and predictable financial framework for education providers. Staff regulations for staff working in the adult sector are being adapted. In the 'guidance and orientation for adult learners' (GOAL) project, support centres have opened to provide guidance and counselling services to adults in BE nl (GOAL 2016). In BE fr, a single service in charge of providing guidance to citizens on lifelong learning has been created. Information campaigns will raise awareness about occupations of the future.

## 8. References

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## 9. Annex. Key indicator sources

Indicator	Eurostat online data code
Early leavers from education and training	edat_lfse_02 + edat_lfse_14
Tertiary educational attainment	edat_lfse_03 + edat_lfs_9912
Early childhood education and care	educ_ipart (2011), educ_uoe_enra10 (2014)
Employment rate of recent graduates	edat_lfse_24
Adult participation in lifelong learning	trng_lfse_01
Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP	gov_10a_exp
Expenditure on public and private institutions per student	educ_uoe_fini04
Learning mobility	educ_uoe_mobg03

Comments and questions on this report are welcome and can be sent by email to:  
 Patricia DE SMET  
[patricia.de-smet@ec.europa.eu](mailto:patricia.de-smet@ec.europa.eu)  
 or  
[EAC-UNITE-A2@ec.europa.eu](mailto:EAC-UNITE-A2@ec.europa.eu)



