

Vocational Education and Training in Belgium (Flanders)

Strengths, Challenges and Recommendations

STRENGTHS

- There is a good range of vocational options at different levels. Initial secondary education offers full-time and part-time programmes, while continuing VET provides further learning and second chance opportunities in centres for adult education, and training centres of the Flemish Employment and Vocational Training Agency (VDAB) and the Flemish Agency for Entrepreneurial Training (*Syntra Vlaanderen*).
- The average performance of 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics and science is very strong by international standards, as indicated by PISA assessments, in which Flanders has been consistently among the best performing countries.
- A commitment to universal upper secondary education is embedded in compulsory education up to age 18, with the possibility of part-time education from age 16.
- Policy development is dynamic, as illustrated by the recent green paper entitled “Quality and opportunities for every pupil”, the “Competence Agenda” and the “Pact 2020” agreement concluded between the government and social partners. Evidence is used extensively in reforms.
- The Flemish VET system gives commendable attention to entrepreneurial training through *Syntra Vlaanderen*, which offers flexible routes to acquire entrepreneurial competences.

CHALLENGES

- A proportion of students have weak literacy and numeracy skills.
- Students are tracked at a young age (14, with institutional transition at age 12) and there are limited opportunities for upward progression between secondary tracks.
- The share of unqualified school leavers is high. In 2006, 12.4% of 18-24-year olds did not have a secondary qualification and did not follow secondary education.
- Some parts of the VET system make limited use of workplace training, and the effectiveness of quality assurance mechanisms for workplace training also varies.
- The mix of provision is dominated by student preferences in school-based VET, with limited mechanisms to take into account labour market needs.
- The quality of career guidance provided in compulsory education, including collaboration between schools and pupil guidance centres, is variable. Sources of career information are fragmented.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Strengthen the core general skills component in programmes that currently contain limited general education, in particular in BSO (vocational secondary education), DBSO (part-time vocational secondary education) and *Syntra* apprenticeships. For those who wish to obtain general education beyond the core general skills component, create options to do so.

Systematically identify those with literacy and numeracy problems at the beginning of VET programmes and provide targeted support to those in need. Enhance data and research on the achievement of the final objectives and on ways to achieve these. We welcome the ongoing sample-based standardised assessment of the final objectives and recommend extending this approach.

2. Postpone tracking at least until the age of 14 and make education in the period preceding tracking fully comprehensive.

3. Sustain and further develop workplace training. Ensure the quality of workplace training, by controlling its content, strengthening the assessment of competences and providing an appropriate level of preparation to those who supervise students.
4. Ensure the mix of provision is more responsive to labour market needs by taking the availability of workplace training into account to balance the influence of student preference in upper secondary VET. This should be complemented with high quality career guidance. Reform the elements of funding that risk distorting the mix of VET provision.
5. Strengthen and develop career guidance by:
 - Ensuring that career guidance receives attention, separately from psychological counselling, and is not submerged by it. Consider the establishment of a separate career advisor profession.
 - Ensuring that individuals receive guidance that is objective and independent from the providers of education and training programmes.
 - Creating a comprehensive website with career information about all levels of education and training.

FURTHER READING

Vocational education and training (VET) has a key economic function in up-skilling and integrating young people into the labour market and in providing high quality technical skills. But in recent decades, VET has been a neglected part of initial education: education policy research and reform have tended to focus primarily on school and tertiary education.

The OECD's policy review of vocational education and training (VET), *Learning for Jobs*, comprises a programme of analytical work and individual country reviews and is designed to help countries make their VET systems more responsive to labour market needs.

[Learning for Jobs, OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training Policies, Belgium \(Flanders\) \(OECD, 2010\)](#) was released in October 2010 and assesses the main challenges faced by the VET system and presents an interconnected package of five policy recommendations. For each recommendation, the report describes the challenge, the recommendation itself, supporting arguments, and issues of implementation.

Further information about the policy review and reports on VET systems in other countries is available on the OECD website www.oecd.org/edu/learningforjobs