Working Together for Integration

Skills and Labour Market Integration of Immigrants and their Children in Flanders



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Foreword

This review of the skills and labour market integration of immigrants and their children in Flanders is the fourth in a new series conducted by the International Migration Division in the OECD Directorate for Employment, Labour and Social Affairs (DELSA). It builds on previous country-specific reports by the OECD in the series *Jobs for Immigrants* (Vols. 1, 2, 3 and 4) and three volumes of the series *Skills and Labour Market Integration of Immigrants and their Children.*

As part of the second volume of *Jobs for Immigrants*, the OECD conducted a review of the labour market integration of immigrants in Belgium. Given the significant changes in the migration and integration landscape that have occurred since, and considering that constitutional reforms have brought down the bulk of responsibilities for integration to the regional level, a more regional perspective of the integration system is needed for Flanders. This review benefitted from the support of the Flemish Agency for Home Affairs, to assess how the Flemish integration system fares in international comparison.

It is an apt time for such a review. Despite its long history of providing a home for migrants, Flanders' population of immigrants and their offspring is not particularly large in international comparison. Close to 14% of the Flemish population are born abroad and a further 10% of the native-born have at least one foreign-born parent. Both these figures are close to the OECD average. However, growth in the population of immigrants and their native-born children over the past decade has been among the fastest in the EU, outpacing that of the Netherlands, France and Germany, as well as Belgium as a whole. The foreign-born in Flanders come from an increasingly diverse range of countries and different migration categories and bring with them a concomitantly wide range of integration needs.

Amidst a tight labour market, immigrants' integration outcomes in Flanders have strongly improved in recent years. Yet, progress is fragile and some of the core outcomes remain poor in international comparison. The highly unfavourable integration of non-EU immigrant women, refugees and youth with migrant parents merit particular attention. These groups are facing challenges that, if left unaddressed, risk compromising the potential of the economy, the society, and of the individuals themselves.

Over the past 20 years, Flanders has developed a comprehensive integration policy. At the beginning of 2022, a new *Integration and Civic Integration Act* entered into force. It aims at providing individualised support and continues Flanders' substantial investment into the integration of newly arrived migrants during their first years of settlement. Its implementation coincided with the writing of this report, and outcomes remain to be seen, though some of the changes address previous shortcomings.

Against this backdrop, this report provides an in-depth analysis of the Flemish integration system, highlighting its strengths, weaknesses, and potential areas for improving the effectiveness of existing efforts. The report is structured as follows. Chapter 1 provides an assessment and recommendations. Chapter 2 presents an overview of the context in which integration in Flanders takes place – the size and composition of Flanders' foreign-born population, as well as the labour market and the integration policy context and recent changes in these fields. Chapter 3 then sets out the core policies at the heart of early integration efforts, identifying the bottlenecks that currently compromise the integration pathways of new arrivals. Chapter 4 presents an examination of the efficiency with which the Flemish integration system

recognises, builds upon, and uses the existing skills immigrants bring with them to Flanders. Chapter 5 then turns to the employer demand for these skills and how policy is working to strengthen this demand. Finally, Chapter 6 provides a closer look at the challenges that youth with migrant parents face in the Flemish educational system and when gaining their first foothold in the labour market.

Flanders swiftly adapted its integration framework to accommodate for the specific challenges arising from the inflow of refugees from Ukraine following Russia's war of aggression. These measures are discussed in boxes in the different Chapters.

The evidence presented in this report builds on cross-country survey data, including the harmonised European Union Labour Force Survey, as well as the national Labour Force Survey (Enquête naar de *Arbeidskrachten*) and special surveys (SID-survey, Barometer *Samenleven*) designed for Flanders. Alongside survey data, the empirical analysis relies upon Flemish administrative data. Flanders has a high-quality system of administrative registers that can be linked, through a personal identification number, to provide a wide range of individual-level information covering integration, education and labour market outcomes. Notably, Flanders also registers integration measures, in contrast to other countries with a similar integration system. This provides unique opportunities for studying the effects of integration measures, as has been done for example in the recent VIONA project "Wegwijs naar Werk", which is one of the most comprehensive analyses undertaken in the OECD to study integration measures and outcomes at this level.

A thorough appraisal of the integration system, and an examination of how the efficiency of investments might be enhanced, must be closely tailored to the Flemish context. To this end, this report has benefited from the insights of Flemish practitioners and is the result of a process that convened stakeholders from across the Flemish integration system – drawn from government departments and agencies, social partners, and private sector employers. Given the key role devoted to local authorities in Flanders, the OECD Secretariat conducted a mission to four Flemish cities and municipalities in the spring of 2022, to work together with local stakeholders on identifying the co-ordination challenges and bottlenecks in the Flemish integration system.

OECD field mission to four Flemish cities in the spring of 2022

In May 2022, the OECD Secretariat visited three Flemish cities (Antwerp, Mechelen and Tienen) and one municipality (Heusden-Zolder) to meet local stakeholders, including city and municipal employees and officials, caseworkers from local employment services, social workers from the public social welfare offices, integration counsellors and civic integration and Dutch as a second language teachers from integration agencies, as well primary and secondary school heads and teachers.

Municipalities play a key role in receiving and integrating immigrants and in facilitating the coexistence of all inhabitants of Flanders. However, as there are major differences between municipalities in the size and the make-up of their immigrant population, they also have different policy tasks. In some municipalities, labour participation is a major problem, in others housing or social cohesion, and in the larger cities all three often play a role. A brief description of the four cities and municipalities that have been visited is provided below, based on the Local Integration Scan published by the Flemish Agency for Home Affairs.

Antwerp: The highly diverse population centre

With 530 000 inhabitants, Antwerp is the largest city in Flanders. The share of inhabitants who are immigrants or native-born to migrant parents increased sharply between 2000 and 2022. From 23% in 2000, it rose to just over 55% in 2022. Since 2018, the majority of inhabitants have foreign-born parentage, with four in ten inhabitants of non-EU parentage. Antwerp also has its own Integration Agency, called Atlas, which allows to pilot integration policies and initiatives.

Mechelen: A medium-sized city renowned for its model of living together

Mechelen is a medium-sized city of 90 000 people, situated between Antwerp and Brussels. In 2022, more than one out of three inhabitants had foreign-born parentage (coming from 16% in 2000), with North Africa as the most important region of origin. Two decades ago, Mechelen had a poor reputation due to high polarisation, social deprivation, and crime. Nowadays, the city is considered as a reference point for local integration policy in Flanders and well beyond, showing the way forward in efforts to live well together in diversity.

Tienen: A rapidly diversifying city

Tienen is a city (36 000 inhabitants) in the province of Flemish Brabant. The city has seen very rapid growth of its population of foreign-born parentage over the past decade (from 4% in 2000 to over 24% in 2022), in part due to high internal migration driven by low housing prices relative to Leuven and other surrounding cities (Flemish Brabant is the province with the most expensive housing prices). The increased diversity is strongly testing the local integration system, including the co-ordination between different stakeholders.

Heusden-Zolder: A medium-sized municipality with longstanding migrant presence

Heusden-Zolder is a medium-sized municipality (34 000 inhabitants) in the province of Limburg. Due to its history as a former mining region, the municipality has a longstanding migrant presence, mainly of Turkish and Italian parentage. In 2022, four out of ten inhabitants had foreign-born parentage, modestly up from three out ten two decades earlier. The high and longstanding concentration of immigrants and their offspring in underprivileged neighbourhoods (citéwijken) makes residential and educational segregation a major concern.

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Executive summary

While Flanders has a long history of providing a home for migrants, its immigrant population remains modest in international comparison. Approximately 14% of the population is foreign-born, and an additional 10% are native-born with at least one foreign-born parent; both figures are close to the OECD average. However, growth in the immigrant population over the past decade has been among the fastest in the EU. A particular challenge arises from the high proportion of non-EU-born migrants with primary education or less, with one in five among the highest in the EU.

Over the last decade, labour market outcomes for immigrants in Flanders have improved. Yet, these labour market outcomes continue to be unfavourable in international comparison. Migrants from outside the EU have some of the lowest employment rates and widest employment gaps within the EU, mainly due to the challenges non-EU-born women face.

Against this backdrop, Flanders invests substantially in integrating newly arrived migrants during their initial years of settlement. The cornerstone of these efforts is the civic integration programme. Consisting of four "pillars" (Dutch language training, civic orientation, a trajectory to work, and a network and participation trajectory), the programme stands out as one of the most elaborate instruments in the OECD outside the Nordics. Nonetheless, several challenges persist. Despite the programme's emphasis on language learning, language outcomes remain unsatisfactory. Migrants with insufficient language skills face limited opportunities for further improve their skills upon completion. In addition, the heavy focus on academic curricula and limited scope for non-formal language learning has often led to long civic integration pathways, protracting the time spent outside the labour market. Blocked from access to further support by poor language skills, many of Flanders' most vulnerable migrants struggle to enter the labour market, particularly low-educated and women. Two years after starting civic integration, only 36% of the low-educated men and 17% of the low-educated women were employed. After five years, these figures increase to 53% and 27%, respectively.

In reaction to these shortcomings, Flanders has taken significant steps to reform the integration system in recent years. The more substantial involvement of the Flemish PES at early stages has the potential to put an end to the early separation between the active and the inactive in integration activities and helps ensuring that all integration training is geared towards labour market entry. Other reforms include the further heightening of language learning expectations and a stronger focus on civic integration pathways that build on parallel participation in various forms of integration training. The network and participation pillar is rather unique in the OECD and may help newly arrived migrants to develop language skills outside classroom training. However, the ambitious changes require careful monitoring and evaluation to ensure that no new bottlenecks arise. Integrated approaches, for example, are far from evident in practice, as they require more structured co-ordination among the wide range of actors involved in integration activities than is currently the case. Flanders recently took steps towards more effective co-operation and co-ordination including through promoting data sharing and monitoring of integration outcomes, as well as strengthening the capacity of local integration policies. It is important to continue along these lines.

Going forward, one of the main challenges will be ensuring that Flanders' emphasis on rapid labour market entry does not conflict with the goal of sustainable employment. Established migrant groups often struggle to integrate and have become quite distant from the labour force. Notably, the employment of settled refugees and female family migrants remains at low levels, also when outcomes are compared to those of

other countries such as Norway and Sweden. This suggests that sustainability of employment is a challenge in Flanders, and upskilling is an essential element in addressing this.

What is more, low-educated newcomers receive very little formal education when the civic integration programme ends. Additional support is largely confined to short-term employment-oriented training run by the public employment service. The limited attention to upskilling stands in contrast with other OECD countries, notably in the Nordics, where migrants who arrive with low levels of education are encouraged or even required to pursue domestic formal education during their early integration trajectory. Given the low education levels of many new arrivals, incorporating remedial education as a component of integration services, next to language learning, would therefore be an important addition to the Flemish system.

Not only low-educated immigrants face challenges integrating into the Flemish labour market. Employment gaps vis-à-vis the native-born are most significant for high-educated immigrants, particularly for those who received their training abroad. The Flemish system for recognising foreign qualifications is advanced and has recently undergone significant changes to streamline the process and enhance transparency. Still, relatively few migrants obtain recognition of their foreign qualifications, suggesting that further improvement is needed. The validation of informal and non-formal learning is an important complement to assessing formal qualifications in Flanders, yet the numbers involved remain small, partly due to limited awareness and lack of targeted support for migrants.

Migrant women merit particular attention, as their employment levels remain well below those of men many years after settlement, especially if they have young children. Flanders stands out with a high share of non-EU migrant women who are not active in the labour market, pointing to the need for more systematic follow-up coupled with targeted second chance offers. Alongside this, policies that help parents balance work and family life, including parental leave and formal childcare, should be made more accessible for migrant mothers.

In addition to upskilling and certification of skills, policy makers have also tried to lower the cost of hiring through wage subsidies. While such programmes have proven effective in integrating migrant job seekers elsewhere in the OECD, they are not a target group in Flanders and a stronger targeting of migrants is warranted. A key sector for wage subsidies is the domestic household services sector, where Flanders has a comprehensive service voucher scheme in place. Although this scheme gradually became an important employer of migrant women, the system largely fails to offer passage to non-subsidised work, trapping many migrant women with medium and high levels of education in overqualified work. To boost the scheme's stepping stone possibilities, continued vocational and language training should be provided to migrant domestic workers.

Discrimination is a further obstacle to immigrants' integration in Flanders, despite a relatively strong and longstanding legal anti-discrimination framework. To tackle labour market discrimination more effectively, Flanders is executing sectoral action plans. Still, discrimination is hard to tackle through legal measures, and more proactive diversity tools are needed. In light of this, it is unfortunate that previous diversity plans were replaced with a less targeted "Focus on Talent" policy, despite favourable evaluation.

Another group that faces persistent disadvantages are native-born youth with migrant parents. On many indicators, they fare worse in Flanders than in other European OECD countries. More efforts are needed to facilitate their labour market entry and early career development, including through extensive second chance and mentorship programmes. Alongside this, employment in the public sector of native-born immigrant offspring should be more actively promoted.

In conclusion, while the integration framework for new arrivals in Flanders is well developed, this is less the case for longstanding immigrants and their offspring. Given their persistently poor outcomes in the Flemish education system and labour market, a comprehensive and co-ordinated set of actions should be considered.

1 Assessment and recommendations for immigrant integration in Flanders

This chapter synthesises key policy issues and recommendations identified in the main areas covered by the OECD review: the context for integration in Flanders; integration efforts for new arrivals; developing, activating, and using migrant skills in the labour market; strengthening the demand for migrant skills; and integrating youth with migrant parents.

The population of immigrants and their offspring in Flanders is rapidly growing and diversifying

Despite its long history of providing a home for migrants, Flanders' population of immigrants and their offspring is not particularly large in international comparison. Close to 14% of the Flemish population are born abroad and a further 10% of the native-born have at least one foreign-born parent; both these figures are close to the OECD average. However, growth in the population of immigrants and their native-born children over the past decade has been among the fastest in the EU, outpacing that of the Netherlands, France and Germany, as well as Belgium as a whole.

The foreign-born in Flanders come from an increasingly diverse range of countries and different migration categories and bring with them a concomitantly wide range of integration needs. Free mobility has accounted for the bulk (60%) of permanent new arrivals to Flanders over the past decade, with the Netherlands, Romania, Poland and Bulgaria as the most important origin countries. Immigrants from North Africa (mainly Morocco) and Türkiye are historically large non-EU immigrant groups in Flanders, yet inflows from Morocco and Türkiye have largely stabilised over the past decade. In contrast, immigration from Asia (top countries include Afghanistan, Syria, India and Iraq), sub-Sahara Africa (top countries include Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Cameroon and Ghana) and Latin America (mainly Brazil) surged. Most permanent migrants born outside the EU arrived either for family (48%) or for humanitarian reasons (39%). Despite being on the rise, the relative importance of permanent migration from non-EU countries for work-related reasons (10%) remains limited in Flanders compared to other European OECD countries.

Four out of ten immigrants living in Flanders are born in another EU country, a large proportion in international comparison. The non-EU immigrant population, however, grew slightly faster over the past decade than the EU immigrant population; a trend which because of demographic factors is expected to intensify.

Large inflows of asylum seekers and refugees bring challenges…

It was not until 1990 that the number of asylum seekers became important in Belgium and Flanders. Asylum applications have peaked particularly throughout the 1990s, the early 2000s and – more recently – in 2011, 2015 and 2022. Over the last decade, the main countries of origin were Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, Guinea and Eritrea. In peak years, Belgium received disproportionately higher inflows compared to many other EU countries and – due to a sharp increase in the number of asylum requests in recent years – Belgium is again moving up the list of EU countries taking in the most asylum applicants in relative terms (position 8 in 2021). The Flemish authorities have been grappling with the implications of these elevated numbers, both in terms of meeting the immediate needs regarding the handling time for asylum applications, reception, and housing, and in terms of sustainable integration into the labour market and society. This strain is set to continue in the years to come as these large numbers of new arrivals make their way along the integration path.

Integration challenges are further intensified by the more than 60 000 Ukrainian refugees who applied for temporary protection in Belgium during 2022 (of whom over 60% have settled in Flanders). In relative terms, the inflow of Ukrainian refugees in Belgium so far is similar to countries like the Netherlands and Sweden, though well below that observed in Central and Eastern European countries.

…and although the Flemish labour market is better positioned to tackle these challenges than in the past, outcomes remain unfavourable in international comparison

Moderate but sustained economic growth in recent years, amidst a tight labour market, seems to have finally created the conditions that led to a catch-up of the foreign-born in the Flemish labour market. Between 2016 and 2021, the employment gap of the foreign-born vis-à-vis the native-born decreased from 14 to 10 percentage points. The unemployment gap nearly halved over the same period; from 8.3 to 4.5 percentage points. Few European OECD countries experienced a similar improvement.

However, labour market outcomes in Flanders continue to vary widely by migrants' region of origin and gender. While employment outcomes of EU-born migrants outstrip (for men) or broadly match (for women) those of their native-born counterparts, employment outcomes of non-EU-born migrants remain among the lowest in the EU/OECD, primarily because of weak outcomes and limited progress among non-EU-born women. While Flanders' position regarding employment outcomes of non-EU-born men is now around the average of European OECD countries, employment outcomes among non-EU-born women remain very worrisome, with one of the widest employment gaps vis-à-vis native-born women in OECD-Europe (27 percentage points). Moreover, the COVID-19 recession's negative impact on the employment status of migrant women serves as a reminder that the progress accomplished in Flanders in recent years is fragile and should not be taken for granted.

As elsewhere, immigrants who migrated for humanitarian reasons face more hurdles in the Flemish labour market than other migrant groups. Their employment rate stands at 50%, lagging 32 and 9 percentage points behind those who migrated for work or family reasons, respectively. As the number of asylum seekers and refugees in Flanders continues to grow, efforts to improve their labour market integration is thus becoming an increasingly pressing concern.

A significant share of immigrants has low levels of education or was trained abroad…

The educational attainment of migrants born outside the EU is not favourable in international comparison, even though the education level of more recent arrival cohorts has been increasing. Almost four in ten non-EU-born immigrants hold at most a lower secondary education, which is more than twice the share among the native-born. A particular challenge is the high proportion of non-EU-born migrants with no more than a primary level of education, with 20% among the highest in the EU. The share of highly educated non-EU-born migrants is also well below the EU average, and the gap vis-à-vis the native-born particularly pronounced. What is more, close to six out of ten of upper-secondary and tertiary educated immigrants born outside the EU in Flanders had obtained their qualifications abroad, which is a significantly higher proportion than in Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and France.

…which brings challenges in a labour market that places strong emphasis on formal credentials

Flanders is among the OECD countries where employment chances differ most by educational attainment. High entry wages (due to high levels of collective bargaining) and relatively knowledge-intensive production processes have meant that there are few jobs for people with low levels of education. In fact, the employment rate for native-born people with low levels of education is among the lowest in the EU (52%), and it is even lower for immigrants born outside the EU (45%). Still, the employment gap between non-EU-born immigrants and the native-born is higher for those with high levels of education (15 percentage

points) than for those with low levels (7 percentage points), which indicates the difficulty for highly educated immigrants to transfer the human capital acquired in their home country to the Flemish labour market. Indeed, close to all OECD labour markets discount foreign tertiary degrees, and the Flemish labour market is no exception. The employment gap between highly educated immigrants educated in the host country and those educated abroad is 11 percentage points in Flanders, and it rises to 18 percentage points for non-EU migrants with foreign qualifications. However, other types of Flemish-specific human and cultural capital, including host country language proficiency, are also essential for labour market insertion given that highly educated immigrants who received their training in the host country still experience significant employment gaps with the native-born.

The current policy for new arrivals is centred around a comprehensive civic integration programme, with language training as the main element of support

Over the past two decades, Flanders' approach to early integration services has developed into an integrated, well-balanced set of policy instruments that is among the most elaborate in the OECD area. The cornerstone of these efforts is the civic integration programme, which aims to help newly arrived migrants integrate into the Flemish labour market and society at large. The primary components of the civic integration programme are Dutch language training (and for those that need it, literacy training), civic orientation, a trajectory to work, and – from 2023 onwards – a network and participation trajectory to promote social integration. In practice, integration training has placed a heavy emphasis on language learning. In response to diverse educational backgrounds and literacy levels among newly arrived migrants, language learning paths in Flanders are heavily tailored to different starting points. Based on an initial assessment, language instruction is adapted to prior education and measured language aptitude. The civic integration programme's attainment target, on the other hand, is fixed for all participants at level A2 in the Common European Reference Framework for Languages, with exemptions for low-literate newcomers.

Despite high participation, language training for adult newcomers has not produced strong results in the past

As the Dutch language is not widely spoken worldwide, language training needs in Flanders are more extensive and long-term than in many other European OECD countries. In fact, in Flanders, close to eight in ten non-EU immigrants had hardly or no proficiency in the host-country language before migrating. Only Finland, Sweden and Norway have even higher shares. At the same time, the civic integration programme in Flanders is offered to *all* newly arrived migrants with a permanent perspective of stay (including EU migrants), and not just to refugees and their accompanying family as in many other OECD countries. As a result, close to seven in ten non-EU-born migrants at some point participate in publicly funded language training, which is among the highest participation rates in the EU, only topped by Denmark, Finland, Norway and Luxembourg. Still, despite modularised and flexible language training offers and high participation, the available evidence suggests that, in the past, formal language training has not resulted in high levels of formal Dutch language proficiency among newcomers in Flanders. Three years after having settled, only six out of ten integration participants achieved the target grade of A2. Less than one in five attained a level B1, which is often the required level for entry into adult education. In addition, the heavy focus on academic curricula and the limited scope for incorporating informal and non-formal language learning has led to sometimes long civic integration pathways. Participants who take up slower-paced language training at the Centres for Adult Basic Education, for example, need on average 31 months to finish the civic integration track.

Language proficiency is of critical importance in the Flemish labour market and society

Language skills are central to the success of integration across OECD countries. Strong language skills facilitate not only access to employment, but also access to education, to social interactions and, hence, to further acquisition of language skills. Conversely, poor language skills can leave migrants isolated and their integration path blocked. This is true everywhere, but the available evidence suggests that the importance of language skills is particularly strong in the Flemish labour market. The share of non-EU-born migrants who reported that the lack of host country language skills was the main obstacle to getting a suitable job is, with 16%, among the highest in the EU. What is more, employers in Flanders have rather stringent language requirements, as evidenced by the fact that eight of ten vacancies published with the PES request a (very) good level of Dutch language skills.

Furthermore, immigrants' access to citizenship and social provisions (such as social housing) depends on their Dutch skills. A certain level of Dutch language knowledge is also the starting point for many other integration support measures, such as the admission for a vocational training or educational programme. As a result, migrants whose language skills remain poor at the end of the integration training, or whose skills have eroded following the end of training, have few options available to them when it comes to reskilling. Thus, for some migrants, failure to progress in their language skills by the end of integration training compromises their ability to continue their integration pathway.

The employment return of higher language levels differs across migrant groups

Overall, higher Dutch language skills are strongly correlated with employment in Flanders. On average, civic integration participants who formally attained an A1 certificate three years after settlement have a predicted employment probability of 41% five years after settlement, whereas predicted employment levels increase to 50% for A2 holders, and to 56% for those with skills at level B1 or higher. However, the employment premium for higher language skills differs significantly across migrant groups. Migrant women experienced a stronger employment return when moving from A1 to A2, whereas moving from A2 to B1 and above brings about a higher return for men. Achieving higher Dutch language skills is also more beneficial for migrants who were younger at arrival, migrants with higher levels of education, and those who migrated to Flanders for work or study reasons compared with those who migrated for family or humanitarian reasons.

Few immigrants have employment once the civic integration programme ends

Flanders invests substantially in the integration of newly arrived migrants during their first years of settlement – in terms of language abilities and knowledge of the Flemish labour market and wider society. After the successful completion of the civic integration track, migrants can either search for and enter employment, enrol in additional language and vocational training, or pursue further education. These additional services are not managed by the integration agencies but instead are provided by mainstream policies and services. Integration support for migrants at this point is mostly untargeted.

However, the *actual* integration pathway for new arrivals is frequently much longer than two to three years. Especially migrants with low levels of education and migrant women continue to have specific needs after this period. Two years after having started the civic integration track, only 36% of the low-educated men and 17% of the low-educated women were in employment. After five years, these figures increase to 53% and 27%, respectively. Longer-term and more flexible integration pathways are hence needed, especially for the low-educated, who often require – in addition to language training – remedial education to build the basic skills necessary to function in Flemish society.

Recent reforms have addressed several shortcomings of the civic integration programme

To address shortcomings of the civic integration programme, the Flemish integration system is currently undergoing substantial changes.

First, a third pillar of the civic integration programme, introduced in March 2022, obliges all non-working integration participants to register with the public employment services (PES) within two months after signing their integration contract. This reform is expected to put an end to the early separation between the active and the inactive in integration activities and help ensure that all integration training is geared towards labour market entry. This will be particularly beneficial for migrant women and low-educated migrants who – before the reform – were less likely than their counterparts to register with the PES and engage in activation measures. However, going forward, it will be important that the PES closely monitors the effects of the compulsory registration on migrants' employment outcomes. As the registration with the PES comes relatively early in the integration trajectory (after two months), many migrants will still have limited Dutch language proficiency, creating a gap between the standard level of Dutch used by the PES in its communication (at least level B1) and newcomers' language skills. What is more, many of the PES training measures require at least a basic level of Dutch, which implies that labour market activities for newcomers with weaker language skills may be put on hold. In such cases, obligatory registration with the PES may erode the enthusiasm and motivation of newcomers to engage in job search activities and support via the PES, jeopardising their integration process.

Second, language learning expectations are further heightened. From March 2022 onwards, newcomers who are obliged to participate in the civic integration programme need to prove that they independently attained oral Dutch language skills at level B1 within two years after having finished the civic integration track. Only those with limited learning capacities and those who can prove stable employment or education will be exempted from the new requirement. Strengthening newcomers' Dutch language proficiency is highly relevant in the Flemish context, where language skills are essential for integration into the labour market and wider society. However, few OECD countries oblige immigrants to reach a B1 level or above so shortly after arrival. Comparing previously achieved levels of language competence in Flanders to the newly required level also highlights the ambition of the reform. The likelihood to achieve a B1 level five years after arrival has in the past ranged from 18% for low-educated participants to 30% for high-educated participants. It thus seems that few participants will be able to meet this new target and the impact of the new policy should therefore be closely monitored.

Third, from September 2023 onwards, language and civic orientation training in Flanders will no longer be free of charge. Participants will have to pay a fee of EUR 90 each for the civic orientation course and test and the Dutch L2 course and test (EUR 360 in total). However, most migrants who are eligible to participate in the programme – including EU migrants – will be exempt from payment, to prevent that the introduction of fees diminishes their motivation to voluntarily participate in integration training (which was already following a downward trend).

At the same time, important challenges remain and need to be addressed

In the last couple of years, Flanders has taken significant steps to reform the integration system and to increase the efficiency of early integration training. There remain, however, some important challenges within the system that will need to be addressed to ensure that all migrants are able to find a pathway to the labour market.

Civic integration trajectories remain mostly sequential, protracting the time migrants spent outside of the labour market, and a stronger involvement of the PES at early stages would help in addressing this shortcoming

OECD countries are increasingly moving towards integrated approaches, through parallel participation in various forms of integration training, to speed up the integration process of newly arrived migrants and to ensure transition to employment or mainstream services by reducing so-called lock-in effects of overly long participation in a particular training element, such as language training. Flanders is increasingly moving in this direction too, which is important given that the available evidence shows that in the past, civic integration trajectories were still mostly sequential (first civic orientation, then Dutch language training, and only then participation in PES training measures). Such linear trajectories increase the time that migrants spent outside the labour market, damaging their prospects for future employment. A stronger focus on pathways in which language training, civic orientation and PES training are integrated (with the content being aligned) or combined (run in parallel, without the content being aligned) will further strengthen early integration services in Flanders.

Responsibilities for integration are shared by many actors, highlighting the need for more effective co-operation and co-ordination in integration efforts

In practice, such integrated approaches are far from evident, as they require much stronger and more structured co-ordination among the multiple actors involved in the provision of integration activities (integration agencies, public employment service, municipalities, the public social welfare centres, adult education institutions). However, while co-operation agreements in Flanders have established guidelines for counselling and referral of clients, communication between actors often leaves much to be desired. This sometimes results in inefficiencies because counsellors start the intake with the newcomer from scratch rather than building off the prior work of another actor. Due to the wide range of actors involved, new arrivals can easily lose track of whom they can best contact for which issue. The degree of communication and co-ordination among key players in the integration process also varies significantly across cities and municipalities. In local settings where different agencies face conflicts of interest and lack channels of communication, the integration of immigrants – particularly disadvantaged groups such as refugees and non-EU immigrant women – appears to be less successful.

A significant barrier regarding co-ordination issues is that the different actors currently lack systematic access to individual-level data on the (prior) integration and labour market activities of the newcomer. While basic information (on the initial assessment and integration contract) is already shared, this is not yet the case for more specific data on the duration and outcomes of the various activities. A more systematic approach to integration data collection and sharing should be considered, and the recent co-operation agreements seem to move in that direction, amongst others by constructing a more efficient tool for data exchange.

The data infrastructure is highly developed

Data and research on integration in Flanders is well developed in international comparison. This is mainly due to high-quality linked administrative register data. However, these data are difficult to access and thus still rarely used. It seems highly appropriate to proceed with a structural integration of these data infrastructures in the short term, and to work towards an administrative socio-economic panel that would enable a continuous monitoring of integration outcomes and evaluation of policy interventions.

Furthermore, a more harmonised approach to the registration of data on the outcomes of integration training (notably Dutch as a second language training) in the Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration would facilitate a clearer evaluation of the impact of integration interventions while, at the same time, easing identification of those needing further integration support.

Difficult access to housing complicates newcomers' integration pathways

In Flanders, the government does not provide initial housing, and new arrivals must therefore look for accommodation by themselves. Unlike countries such as Germany and the Netherlands, where newly arrived migrants are allowed to apply for social housing immediately or after completing an integration and language test, Flanders reserves social housing for residents who have resided in a municipality for five consecutive years within a period of ten years. Newcomers must therefore search for an affordable place to rent in the already oversaturated private rental housing market. Due to the lack of cheap rental accommodation, limited social networks and discrimination by landlords and real estate brokers, housing pathways of recently arrived migrants – refugees in particular – are highly challenging. In this context, more attention needs to be given notably to the quality, distribution, and accessibility of housing for immigrants – both new arrivals and settled migrants. This is a much-underappreciated policy area in the Flemish integration system, although it is also particularly difficult to tackle, especially because the social housing stock is small. Apart from the levers associated with social housing, addressing discrimination in the housing market also remains a critical area for policy action.

Flanders' emphasis on rapid labour market integration can create a conflict with the goal of sustainable employment

Early contact with the labour market is important to set new arrivals on a positive integration pathway and accordingly, Flemish integration policy increasingly aims for a fast transition of new arrivals into the labour market. However, there can be a trade-off between rapid and sustainable labour market integration, especially in a relatively high-skilled labour market such as the Flemish one. Administrative data shows that established migrant groups in Flanders are often struggling to integrate and have become quite distant from the labour force. Notably, the employment of long-term settled refugees and female family migrants remains at low levels, also when outcomes are compared to those of other countries such as Norway and Sweden. While the employment rate of refugees in Flanders compares quite favourably in the early years of settlement, after about five to six years, refugees' employment rates level off and integration comes to halt at low levels of employment, particularly for refugee women (35%). The decline in employment outcomes of refugees and their families in Flanders is stronger than what is observed in Norway and Sweden, suggesting that sustainability of employment is an issue in Flanders. Upskilling and job quality are important elements in addressing this.

The public employment service offers various activation measures to support jobseekers' employment entry, but immigrants and their children benefit less from the measures that work best

Contrary to several other OECD countries, including the Netherlands and France, contact with the PES is by far the most important job search method among unemployed migrant jobseekers in Flanders. Next to its role as a link between jobseekers and employers, the PES offers a wide range of training programmes that help the unemployed gain a foothold in the Flemish labour market. However, both immigrant jobseekers and their native-born offspring are less likely to participate in training programmes that are most

effective for them. As in other countries, workplace training – which has the strongest and most direct link to the labour market – generates a higher return in terms of entering (stable) employment for jobseekers. However, uptake of occupation-specific and workplace training is higher, and uptake of general classroom training is lower among jobseekers with native-born parents, compared to jobseekers with foreign-born parents.

It is not entirely clear what is driving this result, but the intervention of PES caseworkers who assign job seekers to different training options appears to be essential. Other factors are that immigrant job seekers and their offspring more often lack the necessary language skills and have lower levels of schooling and working experience. In the case of workplace training, the preference of employers is also important. There may thus be a case for better (indirect) targeting such instruments to jobseekers with migrant parents, to make sure that they benefit more from the measures that work best.

Participation in vocational language training should be further expanded

Vocational language training is a promising tool to build work-related language skills and has proven to be a particularly effective labour market integration tool. However, while the PES offers a variety of vocational language training and support modules, the number of immigrants that benefits from such measures is still limited in Flanders. Overall, six years after arrival, only one in ten of the (former) integration participants take up some form of vocational language training and support with the PES. Moreover, participation in such training is highly conditional on having already developed Dutch language skills. Given the benefits associated with vocational language training, efforts should be made to increase participation.

Given the low education levels of many new arrivals, adult education needs to be more central to integration efforts

The Flemish labour market assigns high value to formal domestic qualifications. However, despite their considerable needs, low-educated newcomers in Flanders receive almost no formal education when the civic integration programme comes to an end. Additional support is largely confined to short-term employment-oriented training run by the PES, and very few newly arrived migrants are currently directed to adult education for upskilling purposes. The result is that unemployed migrants lacking basic skills are often left without further options for upskilling or channeled into courses whose short duration is rarely suited to their needs. The limited attention for upskilling of new arrivals in Flanders stands in stark contrast with the policy in several other OECD countries, notably in the Nordic countries, where immigrants who arrive with low levels of education are frequently encouraged or even required to pursue domestic formal education during their early integration trajectory.

It is important that educational disparities are addressed early and effectively in the integration process to equip all new arrivals with the basic skills needed to be functional in the Flemish labour market and society. Therefore, immediate remedial support for migrants whose lack of qualifications excludes them from educational and labour market programmes should be built into the civic integration programme infrastructure and systematically available for those who need it. The incorporation of meaningful further adult education as a component of integration services, next to basic language learning, could be an important addition to the Flemish system. Such a reform would also reflect the acknowledgment of both the degree to which Flemish qualifications are beneficial to employment entry and stability for migrant jobseekers, and the degree to which many immigrants still have profound learning needs. If the civic integration programme is further expanded, there will be a considerable time investment required by new arrivals. Against this backdrop, it might be considered to introduce an individualised integration benefit for those obliged to participate, as is currently the case in Nordic countries.

Further improvements in the recognition process of foreign qualifications are needed

Not only low-educated immigrants face challenges integrating into the Flemish labour market. In fact, the employment gap between the foreign-born and native-born populations with the same formal qualification level are most pronounced among the high-educated. Highly educated migrants often find their qualifications largely discounted in the Flemish labour market, as is evident from the high incidence of over-qualification. Evidence in this report suggests that recognition of foreign qualifications is an effective tool to accelerate the employment entry of highly educated migrant jobseekers in Flanders, although the effect is found to be quite modest. Still, relatively few highly educated immigrants obtain recognition of foreign qualifications: six years after settlement, one in four highly educated integration participants obtains recognition of their foreign qualifications (for those who migrated for humanitarian reasons, however, this share increases to 40%).

That notwithstanding, the recognition framework in Flanders is advanced, and recent changes at NARIC Flanders have helped to fasten and streamline the recognition process and increase public awareness of the recognition procedures. Still, qualitative research shows that many newly arrived migrants refrain from applying for recognition because the procedure is costly (mostly because of translation fees), opaque, and in some cases long and arduous. Particularly the procedure for the purpose of exercising a regulated profession can be long and difficult to navigate, as it involves a range of actors and authorities. Finally, employers play only a small, if any role, in formal assessment and recognition mechanisms for non-regulated professions. As a result, they have little understanding of the recognition procedures and may question the value of the certificate granted. These issues need to be addressed.

Validation of professional qualifications is a promising pathway, but needs to be expanded and better targeted at migrants

One way of tackling the challenges associated with the recognition of foreign qualifications and experience is to provide more possibilities for the validation of competences. Flanders has gradually established a framework for validation of informal and non-formal learning since the mid-2000s as part of its life-long learning strategy. The validation act of 2019 has further streamlined the policy. Although validation trajectories for ten different professional qualifications are offered by a wide range of actors, they remain very small-scale (639 individuals in 2022). What is more, the share of foreign-born candidates differs strongly between the professional bodies, ranging between 17% and 45%. It is not entirely clear why validation measures are not used more often, but the lack of familiarity with the offer among employers and jobseekers seems important. Additionally, anecdotal evidence points to long and demanding procedures.

Given that recognition of prior learning is frequently the only way for immigrants with little or no formal schooling to ascertain their professional skills, more efforts should be taken to increase awareness among all stakeholders, including employers and migrants, about the existing provisions and their benefits. A well-targeted publicity campaign can maximise the potential of the programme. The possibility of attaining professional qualifications through validation procedures should be systematically introduced during the early stages of the civic integration programme, and referral to the different services should form part of any initial skills mapping performed in integration training. Validation bodies should therefore intensify their co-operation with integration agencies and other third parties such as immigrant organisations. Efforts to disentangle the assessment of professional competencies from an assessment of the individual's general language proficiency could also be instrumental in making the validation framework more valuable for the foreign-born. Where possible and appropriate, and qualification requirements permitting, special arrangements may include oral demonstrations in place of the written sections of the competence

demonstration; additional time allocated during competence tests for the planning of tasks and written modules; and targeted support materials, such as plain language texts, pictures, drawings, models, and aids.

Bridging offers need to be streamlined and scaled up

Conveying highly educated immigrants of the benefit of further education is also an essential component of the integration process. Many highly educated migrants would benefit from a faster-paced integration track which equips them rapidly with the advanced language and vocational skills required for higher-skilled employment. However, for immigrants whose foreign degree is never recognised or does not hold the same value in the host country, getting another degree in the host country can improve job prospects and reduce the risk of over-qualification. However, despite a good range of adult education options at different levels in Flanders, few highly educated migrants pursue formal domestic qualifications in the first years after arrival. Less than one in ten civic integration participants who arrived with a foreign academic bachelor or master's degree obtains Flemish credentials within the first six years after settlement.

Many practical obstacles arise for newly arrived migrants wishing to follow formal education in Flanders. One of the most important obstacles is that the educational institutions have large autonomy in determining what level of Dutch or what certificates are required to be eligible to follow a specific educational programme. Course eligibility for this type of supported study is largely granted on a case-by-case basis, with former degrees and language proficiency (often at level B2) constituting the primary requirements. Institutions take these decisions independently from one another, often leading to untransparent admission procedures for newcomers. Ambiguity regarding the newcomer's residency status and associated rights further hinder interactions between newcomers and higher education institutions. In addition, the various counsellors and caseworkers with whom newly arrived migrants interact during the first period after arrival frequently lack a thorough understanding of the educational options available to newcomers in Flanders. In the absence of tailored guidance, new arrivals often must contact the educational institutions themselves or consult general websites, some of which are only available in Dutch. Furthermore, for highly educated migrants who receive social assistance benefits, public centres for social welfare have incentives to resort to 'quick' activation strategies over encouraging enrolment in formal schooling. The language barrier is also a major obstacle. Within the framework of the civic integration programme, only language courses up to and including level A2 are publicly funded. However, since the required level of Dutch for starting a higher education programme is often situated at level B2 or C1, there is a gap in the financial support of newly arrived migrants. Bridging courses are particularly cost-effective options allowing immigrants to demonstrate their skills without meeting all the host-country's job qualification requirements. Even though many of the universities and university colleges in Flanders have established such bridging programmes on their own, adequate funding, streamlined regulation, and an effective information and distribution of the offer are still lacking.

Migrant women are struggling to integrate, and many remain locked in inactivity, pointing to the need for second chance offers

Migrant women need more time to integrate into the Flemish labour market than men, and their employment levels remain well below those of men even ten years after settlement. Women also experience more hurdles in the transition from targeted to mainstream labour market support and many become increasingly distant from the labour market. High inactivity among migrant women merits particular attention, with close to half of the non-EU-born women in Flanders not at work nor actively looking for a job, the highest share in OECD-Europe. The labour market attachment of migrant women is of particular

concern, given that integration failures among female migrants that are left unaddressed risk leaving a lasting impact on the integration outcomes of their children.

The civic integration programme has to some extent been adapted to the needs of migrant women with a weak labour market attachment. However, the lack of systematic follow-up coupled with few targeted second chance offers leads to a situation in which immigrant women who are not actively seeking work upon arrival in Flanders may drift quite far from the labour market. What is more, they risk becoming isolated from Flemish society. Efforts to ensure that those women keep in touch with mainstream services and are continually engaged on a systematic basis need to be stepped up. Outreach for such second chance programmes will require innovative tools, given that the bulk of migrant women are inactive without social benefits, and thus hard to reach. Surveys suggest that family responsibilities, discrimination, and the lack of language and digital competencies are the most commonly perceived barriers to professional life for inactive immigrant women. Prior bad experiences in the labour market also appear to be an essential driver in the decision not to work. What is more, most of the economically inactive women were otherwise "active" in various ways, by taking care of their children or other people's children, following a training or course, or doing voluntary work. This implies that the distance from the labour market can be addressed through appropriate out-reach tools coupled with other instruments such as training, job placements, and mentorship.

Family policies should be made more accessible for migrant mothers

Effective activation also begins with an analysis of the reasons for inactivity. In Flanders, a relatively small share of the migrant women (12%) is involuntary inactive. As a reason for being economically inactive and not wanting to work, more than half of the migrant women cite family responsibilities, in contrast to native-born women for whom reasons such as illness and disability and education and training were more frequently cited. Migrant women thus seem to experience more difficulties in combining employment with care responsibilities, which is further stymied by the availability of family policy measures. To help parents balance work and family life, Flanders has extensive childcare support systems and parental leave policies in place. However, these family policies are heavily commodified. Regarding parental leave, eligibility requires continuous employment with the same employer for at least 12 months in the 15 months preceding the application. In formal childcare, childcare agencies often give preference to parents who are well established in the labour market and therefore have predictable demand for childcare, due to long waiting lists and the fact that they must guarantee minimal occupancy rates.

However, in Flanders as elsewhere, foreign-born women are much more often outside the labour market than native-born women and are therefore less likely to have had stable employment prior to having a child. As a result, such commodified family policies which heavily rely on stable employment for access, inadvertently give foreign-born women lower access and perpetuate the precarious integration of migrant women by implicitly creating more barriers to combining family formation with continued labour market participation. Access to family policies should be made less restrictive, to support migrant women with a low labour market attachment to combine motherhood with a job.

Wage subsidies form an important element in Flanders' approach to tackle demand-side barriers to employment, but immigrants are underrepresented

To tackle demand-side barriers to employment, Flanders has a long tradition of using wage subsidies for the employment of disadvantaged groups. Wage subsidies (or a reduction of social security contributions) are focused on employers who hire people from three disadvantaged groups: low-educated youth, jobseekers and workers aged 58 and above, and persons with an occupational disability. In contrast to other OECD countries such as the Nordic countries which also make heavy use of this tool, migrants are

not specifically targeted. Indeed, migrant jobseekers are underrepresented among those who benefited from these policies in Flanders. For instance, only 23% of beneficiaries of the subsidy for low-educated youth had a foreign nationality, compared to 29% of the eligible non-users. Similarly, 35% of the users had no to little Dutch language skills, compared to 46% of the non-users. What is more, research shows that the wage subsidy for low-educated youth does not have a significant effect on the jobseekers' employment outcomes, even though low-educated youngsters are a particularly vulnerable group in the Flemish labour market. Part of the explanation lies in the fact that the wage subsidy for low-educated youth frequently did not lead to durable employment, as individuals hired with such a subsidy had mostly brief periods of employment interspersed with non-employment. To which degree this is also the case for immigrants is unclear, however, and evidence from the Nordic countries suggests that the impact is often different and indeed higher for this group, as information asymmetries are large. This should be investigated for Flanders and, if a similar pattern holds, a stronger targeting to immigrants should be strongly considered.

The service voucher scheme gradually became an important employer of migrant women, but traps many highly qualified migrant women in subsidised domestic work

A key sector for wage subsidies in Flanders is the non-care domestic household services sector. Since 2004, Flanders has a comprehensive system of social vouchers in place for this sector. This scheme is the largest subsidised domestic work scheme in the OECD and subsidises a restricted list of household services including cleaning, washing, and ironing, to create low-skilled jobs, reduce informal sector activities and improve the work-life balance of the users. Although the scheme does not have a specific focus on migrants, foreign-born women make up almost half of the approximately 100 000 employees working through service voucher companies.

Although the initial aim of the service voucher scheme was to create low-skilled jobs that could provide a leverage to other jobs, the system largely fails to offer passage to non-subsidised work, despite many migrant women working in this system having medium and high levels of education. One in seven of the non-EU-born women working in the scheme are highly educated, compared to one in ten of the EU-born women, and one in 30 of the native-born women. Many migrant women with high levels of education seem to get trapped in the scheme and in domestic work for which they are overqualified. There seems to be scope for providing continued vocational and language training to migrant domestic workers, in co-operation with the registered companies concerned, to increase the scheme's steppingstone possibilities.

Self-employment can offer immigrants a way out of labour market exclusion, but low survival rates point to the need for more guidance and counselling

Another channel of activation is to support self-employed immigrants. Compared to other European OECD countries, Flanders has a relatively high self-employment rate among the native-born and EU-born migrants, whereas the proportion of self-employed among non-EU-born migrants is relatively low. Nevertheless, the share of immigrants in the self-employed population rose from 10% to 15% between 2010 and 2020. There are several positive aspects to immigrants becoming self-employed or setting up their own businesses. Self-employment can be a particularly effective pathway into the labour market for migrants who experience difficulties in taking up salaried employment. In addition, migrant business owners can be an important role model and a potential employer for other (often migrant) workers. Still, immigrant self-employment is no panacea for labour market integration. Many of the foreign-born self-employed in Flanders (16% compared to 5% for the native-born) end up in self-employment due to

involuntary reasons (i.e. out of necessity or because the employer requested it) and to escape from marginalisation in the labour market.

Self-employment thus seems to represent an important fallback strategy for immigrants to avoid unemployment, blocked mobility, and discrimination in the Flemish labour market. At the same time, research shows that immigrants in Flanders are more likely than the native-born to exit from self-employment into non-employment, and that weaker attachment to the labour market preceding entry into self-employment plays a crucial role in explaining why immigrants suffer from higher exit rates. In Flanders, tailored assistance to support immigrants in self-employment is still relatively limited. More structured and targeted support should be considered to make sure that businesses are viable, notably through better accompaniment in the business foundation and early functioning, including with training, counselling, and mentoring.

Mentorship is relatively well-developed, and stronger targeting would improve its effectiveness

Mentorship is well developed in Flanders. Different actors (NGOs, public bodies, companies) have implemented mentoring projects on a relatively large scale in Flanders and these have proven rather cost-effective means of integration, in Flanders as elsewhere. Notably, the addition of a fourth pillar – a network and participation trajectory – to the civic integration programme starting in 2023 will structurally anchor mentorship in the Flemish integration system. The new pillar assigns 40 hours to strengthen immigrant's social networks and Dutch language skills, with the exact details of the networking programme up to each municipality to design. Such a mandatory state-led participation scheme (for newcomers obliged to participate in the civic integration programme) is unique in the OECD, but it is also an ambitious undertaking. It puts considerable pressure on (smaller) municipalities, which need to design and offer such a programme despite in some cases limited expertise and experience. Clear guidelines on what the participation project should entail, including measures to follow-up and clear communication of expected funding for this task, would help municipalities in planning.

In Flanders, newly arrived migrants (especially those with high qualifications) often constitute the most important target group of mentoring initiatives in Flanders. However, given that many established migrant groups and native-born youth with migrant parents are struggling to integrate and, in some cases, have become quite distant from the labour force, it is key that mentoring of established migrants and their native-born offspring also receives more policy attention. Indeed, in most other countries, these groups are the main target group of mentorship initiatives.

Discrimination is an important obstacle to labour market integration, and Flanders aims to tackle it more effectively through sector-specific actions

Despite long experience in anti-discrimination legislation at the federal and regional level, both perceived and direct discrimination are prevalent in the Flemish labour market. From the perspective of immigrants themselves, the proportion of foreign-born individuals that feel discriminated against in Flanders is high in international comparison: 22% of working-age non-EU-born and 8% of EU-born migrants in Flanders consider themselves members of a group that is discriminated against. What is even more worrisome, perceived discrimination is also high among native-born youth with migrant parents in Flanders: almost one in four consider themselves as belonging to a group that is discriminated against; one of the highest shares in the OECD. In addition to the sentiment of discrimination (a self-reported measurement), field experiments in Flanders using fictitious applications with foreign-perceived names show that the actual

incidence of discrimination is widespread, although some evidence suggests that this may have decreased recently.

To tackle labour market discrimination more effectively, the Flemish Government has recently developed an ambitious Action Plan in the framework of the sectoral covenants. Over the 2022-24 period, each of the sectors receives funding and guidance to take targeted action to combat discrimination in three subsequent phases. The first stage is a baseline measurement that includes a sector-specific risk analysis, an examination of the sociodemographic composition of the workforce and jobseeker population in the sector, and a testing stage that makes use of field experiments and fictitious applications to track the prevalence of discrimination on various grounds. Based on the baseline measurement, sectors should create focused anti-discrimination efforts during the second phase. Sectors should do a follow-up assessment during the last phase and, if necessary, modify the anti-discrimination measures. The plan is to communicate the findings of the first phase – the baseline measurement – by the end of 2023. It will be important to monitor and follow up on these findings, as currently foreseen.

Equal employment policy measures have become less targeted and the effect of this should be closely monitored

While anti-discrimination legislation can have some effect on discrimination, more proactive measures to promote diversity are also necessary. In Flanders, such equal employment policies were traditionally more developed than elsewhere in the OECD through supply-driven career and diversity plans, targeted at small- and medium-sized companies. Companies that chose to implement a diversity plan had to set targets for the recruitment, internal mobility, training, or retention of migrants or other vulnerable groups. To achieve these targets, companies received free support from dedicated diversity consultants and subsidies to co-finance plan-related costs.

Despite positive evaluation and OECD work advising to further expand the career and diversity plans, this policy was replaced by a new “Focus on Talent’ policy. While the objective of the new policy is largely the same, the underlying policy vision and the tools to achieve it are not. Most importantly, there is no more active outreach to employers, and companies themselves must approach the services. This is a barrier notably for SMEs. The new policy emphasises individual competencies or talents and intendedly breaks with the previous policy focused on combating the under-representation of certain socio-demographic groups in the labour market. “Focus on Talent” has three parts or “tracks”: the activation of the unemployed and inactive population by the PES, the investment in employee training via the SME portfolio and sectoral covenants, and a bottom-up approach wherein various labour market actors (including diversity consultants) further develop and implement a talent- and competence-based mind switch. A recent evaluation has revealed that established consultation networks largely disappeared with the policy switch, and that many SMEs are not actively seeking support for diversity measures anymore. Indeed, the inclusion of general themes such as competence building among the overall workforce seems to have resulted in weaker attention to integration and diversity issues. Companies are also no longer required to report on their goals under the new policy, and evaluation of the programme now focuses solely on a macro-level monitoring of the labour market outcomes of vulnerable groups in Flanders.

The population of youth with migrant parents is becoming increasingly important in the Flemish education system and labour market…

The population of youth with migrant parents is rapidly increasing and diversifying in Flanders. More than a third of children aged below 15 in Flanders were either themselves foreign-born or had at least one foreign-born parent, up from one in four children one decade ago. The share of young people with migrant

parents is relatively high in international comparison, and considerably higher than in France and in the Netherlands for example. Furthermore, growth in the population of youth with migrant parents over the past decade has been among the fastest in the OECD. Due to their young age distribution, most of the native-born children of migrant parents are still in the education system or have recently entered the Flemish labour market.

…and overall, children of immigrants fare poorly in Flanders, highlighting the persistent nature of integration challenges

How well youth with migrant parents are integrated into the education system and the labour market is one of the best measures of the long-term success or failure of a country's integration policy. As native-born children of immigrants have been raised and educated in the country, they should not, in theory, encounter the same difficulties as migrant adults who have often obtained their skills in a different context. In many European OECD countries, young people with migrant parents nevertheless face persistent disadvantages in the education system and labour market. Yet on many indicators, they fare worse in Flanders than in other countries. Nowhere in OECD-Europe is the tertiary education gap of native-born with migrant parents vis-à-vis native-born with native-born parents more pronounced than in Flanders. Only one in three native-born adults with migrant parents attain a tertiary education degree, compared to more than half of those with native-born parentage.

Entering the labour market also constitutes a challenge for native-born children with migrant parents in Flanders. Among those aged between 15 and 34, the employment rate of native-born children with migrant parents lags almost 24 percentage points behind children with native-born parents, for both genders. Again, Flanders' performance falls far short of countries like Sweden and the Netherlands, where adult immigrants nevertheless face similar integration challenges. What is more, while the employment rate of young foreign-born adults in Flanders has shown a strong improvement over the past decade, that of native-born adults with migrant parents remained largely stable. As a result, the employment rate of native-born adults with migrant parents now lags 6 percentage points behind that of their foreign-born peers.

Gaps in educational performance already manifest themselves at an early age, despite high participation in Early Childhood Education and Care

Youth with migrant parents face many challenges in the Flemish education system, and gaps in educational performance already manifest themselves at an early age. Despite improvement in some areas (notably early school leaving), the gap in school performance of youth with migrant parents vis-à-vis youth with native-born parents in Flanders has remained persistent over the last 15 years, in contrast to improvement seen elsewhere in the OECD. The reasons for this gap are manifold, but socio-economic background characteristics play a particularly important role in explaining why school performance among native-born children with migrant parents is lower, more so in Flanders than in other countries. This is at first sight surprising since, in contrast to many other European OECD countries, almost all native-born children with migrant parents participate in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), which is known to have an important impact on later education trajectories. What is more, several steps have been taken over the past years to support ECEC.

That notwithstanding, pre-primary schools have a lot of autonomy to implement their pedagogical projects and teaching strategies which leads to a great variety in support. What is more, ECEC institutions often face shortage of qualified teachers and in this context, the toddler/teacher ratio remains high although schools with more socially disadvantaged children are allocated more teaching periods. The recent

introduction of the KOALA test, a standardised language screening which is obligatory in all schools for toddlers at the age of 5 is however expected to reinforce support to disadvantaged toddlers by providing systematic follow-up language support for those assessed to be in need. Going forward, providing language support in pre-primary schools will become more and more challenging in a context of increasing numbers of children with a home language other than Dutch (26% of the toddlers in 2021, up from 18% in 2011).

Flanders employs an inclusive approach to enhance the educational chances of pupils with migrant parents, yet outcomes still leave much to be desired…

Under the Equal Educational Opportunity (EEO) policy, preschools, primary and secondary schools with relatively many "disadvantaged students" receive extra support (additional funding in preschools and primary education and mostly additional teaching hours in secondary education) to work in an integrated way towards a structural improvement of the educational opportunities of all their students. Several evaluations have shown that the EEO policy failed in reducing the gap between disadvantaged students and other students and did not lessen the strong correlation between students' socio-economic background and home language on the one hand and school performance on the other. Several features help to explain the low impact of the policy. The low impact of the EEO policy seems to be partly due to the lack of specific objectives and standards for evaluation provided to all schools by the government. Little guidance is provided to schools by the government regarding how they should use the additional resources. It appears that school-specific actions based on the additional EEO resources are frequently not appropriately targeted. What is more, some evidence suggests that while the Flemish secondary education system is characterised by significant additional investment in schools with disadvantaged students in the form of additional teaching hours, teachers in such schools often tend to be significantly less experienced than those found elsewhere.

Early tracking and frequent down-streaming seem to disadvantage children of immigrants. In the Flemish secondary educational system, track choice (and therefore often school choice) plays a decisive role in the organisation of schooling. Although the first two years in secondary education are often presented as more or less comprehensive, in practice, there is a first tracking of students from the age of 12 onwards. Given the strong hierarchy in tracks (general-technical-vocational) thereafter, the Flemish educational system is also known for its frequent down-streaming. Mobility between the different tracks almost exclusively occurs downwards and once students end up in the vocational track, they can almost never climb up this hierarchy. What is more, students who speak at home a language other than Dutch are much more likely to end up in the least prestigious and desirable vocational track, with negative consequences for further educational careers and employment perspectives in the long run. In part, this is due to weaker performance in primary school, yet studies show that, even at given performance levels, school staff orient youth with migrant parents more often to lower-status tracks than their peers with native-born parents. At the same time, in the Flemish educational system, where freedom of choice and autonomy are structural features, information available to the parents is key. Migrant parents appear to be less aware of the importance of educational choices.

Partly due to the comprehensive tracking and high emphasis placed on autonomy and school choice, school segregation in Flanders is relatively high in international comparison. What is more, the school performance of native-born students with migrant parents in the top quartile of segregated schools largely lags behind that of their peers in the quartile of the least segregated schools. With a gap equivalent to almost two years of schooling at the age of 15, the differences are the largest in the OECD. Even after considering other factors such as the fact that students in segregated schools tend to have lower-educated mothers and do not speak Dutch at home, the gap is still more than the equivalent of one year of schooling.

Youth born abroad face difficulties transitioning from reception education

In most OECD countries, young people who arrive in the country past the start of primary education face a higher risk of falling behind in the school system compared to their native-born peers and those who arrive at a younger age. To ensure that new arrivals have sufficient time to adapt to their new school environment and catch up with the demands of the new education system, Flanders has reception education (OKAN) in place, to teach newly arrived minors without any knowledge of the Dutch language the language of instruction as soon as possible and promote their integration into the Flemish secondary school system. The demand for reception education increased strongly in recent years and, in 2022, Flanders received a record number of newly arrived minors due to the large inflow of Ukrainian refugees. This situation is set in a context where secondary schools have few guidelines in how to organise reception education. Many schools have therefore developed their own classification approach. As typically very little is known about newly arrived students' educational background and abilities, and few formal assessment tools are available to teachers to assist them in allocating newly arrived students to groups, the most important factor that is looked at when dividing the students is how quickly they are expected to learn Dutch. The fact that this classification is mainly based on non-standardised tests and teacher assessments which are designed unilaterally to gauge how quickly students learn Dutch, means that the potential of students who need more time to master the language of instruction is systematically underestimated. This helps to explain why the diverse group of OKAN students has a very homogeneous orientation towards the vocational track in mainstream secondary education. In addition, as OKAN mainly focuses on Dutch language acquisition, the set-up allows little to no time for classes in mathematics, science, English, French, and digital skills, despite these competencies being essential to enable a transition to the general or technical track.

The embeddedness of reception education in the educational system is also a challenge. Reception programmes often operate as an entity on their own, isolated from mainstream education, sometimes even physically. The responsibility to incorporate newly arrived migrant students in the educational system is almost solely assigned to reception education, generally without adjustments in the secondary education system itself. Few secondary schools have, for example, developed a clear language policy and structural accommodation for newly arrived migrant students, even though these could boost the students' chances for succeeding, especially in the more academic tracks. Many children and youth are not prepared for immediate schooling when they arrive in Flanders. Some, especially refugee children and non-accompanied minors, need psychosocial support to overcome their difficulties before joining the educational system. Yet, initiatives on having psychological and social support for OKAN students are scarce in Flanders. Instead, OKAN-teachers must often deal with these vulnerable youth, in addition to their already high work pressure and fluctuating hours of support. This situation adds to the challenge of retaining qualified OKAN-teachers and results in high staff turnover.

Particularly challenging is the situation of students who arrive during their teenage years with little prior formal education, low literacy skills and learning difficulties. Students from that age have very low chances to succeed in a regular secondary school – even after a two-year OKAN training. However, simply staying longer in the reception programme is not a solution either. While targeted programmes exist for newcomers who have already turned 18, for youth between the ages of 13 and 15, these programmes are not an option, as they are still obliged to follow mandatory schooling. In addition, due to their young age, they are not able to start a dual apprenticeship yet. These youth are often falling through the cracks of the system and need targeted support.

The employment gap between immigrant and native-born offspring is among the widest in the OECD, regardless of level of education

Native-born youth (15-34 years old) with immigrant parents are twice as likely to be NEET as their peers with native-born parentage (24% vs. 12%). Nowhere in the EU are the absolute and relative differences as large as in Flanders. Differences in employment rates between the children of immigrants and the children of the native-born are also higher than in other OECD countries. Employment rates of immigrant offspring increase stronger with educational attainment than for native-born offspring, suggesting that much could be gained by improving the educational levels of the native-born children of immigrants.

However, other important factors than educational attainment also need to be tackled such as widening youth with migrant parents' social and professional networks to smoothen their transition into the labour market and improve their opportunities in the job-search process. The recent reform of the Dual learning programme offers promising opportunities. However, without additional support, the most disadvantaged students, notably those lacking Dutch language and soft skills, may face difficulties accessing the first phase of this programme, which could increase their risk of early school leaving.

For those who fail, Flanders offers various but fragmented activation measures. One specificity of the Flemish system is that unemployed young adults who register for the first time to the PES are obliged to follow a professional integration period before they receive an unemployment benefit or until they find a job. This programme cannot however exceed one year and estimates show that native-born with foreign-born parents are less likely to be employed than other native-born at the end of this period.

The large public sector plays an important role-model function, but immigrants and their offspring remain strongly underrepresented

The public sector accounts for a relatively large part of employment in Flanders. What is more, public sector employment of immigrants and their offspring generates several benefits. First, the presence of this group among civil servants enhances diversity within public institutions, making them more representative of the communities they serve. Second, how the wider public perceives immigrants and their children depends in part on their "visibility" in public life. Third, by employing immigrants and their descendants, the public sector should also be a role model for the private sector. However, for a variety of reasons – notably access restrictions for foreign nationals to certain parts of public administration and strict language and diploma requirements – immigrants and their native-born offspring are largely underrepresented in public sector employment in Flanders. While there are some targeted actions at the municipal level, more systematic action is needed, including through internship offers and targeted information campaigns.

A comprehensive action plan on integration should be considered

While the integration framework for new arrivals is relatively well developed, this is less the case for more longer-standing immigrants and their native-born children. Given the current lack of systematic integration measures beyond new arrivals and the persistently poor outcomes of settled migrants and their children, a comprehensive and co-ordinated set of measures should be considered. Several OECD countries have reacted to this through targeted action plans. Such an Action Plan should inspire focused policy action and structural co-ordination among different stakeholders to get a holistic mapping of the needs and required actions for all immigrants and their children. In addition to the administration across and within levels of government, this should also involve employers, trade unions, and civil society actors.

Summary of main policy recommendations

Enhance early integration efforts

- Make sure that the integration process starts during the asylum process for those with a high probability of being granted international protection. Reconsider the exclusion of asylum seekers to participate in the civic integration programme
- Considering the increasing settlement delays, consider investing more in public housing and make social housing available to recently arrived migrants in need
- Decrease the time that immigrants spend in the civic integration track by investing more in integrated and parallel integration training with a stronger employment focus
- Ensure that all migrant mothers are aware of the custom-made civic integration trajectory that was designed for this group and consider opening the programme to migrant mothers with high literacy skills
- Continue efforts to increase the digital skills of participants in the integration programme
- Ensure that the digital civic orientation test represents no hurdle on the integration track for newcomers with low digital literacy skills
- Increase outreach and encourage EU-born migrants to participate in the civic integration programme
- Monitor the short- and longer-term effects of the introduction of fees for integration training, notably regarding its impact on participation
- Support and encourage migrants with low and medium levels of education at arrival to invest in further domestic education in the context of the civic integration programme
- Provide clear guidelines on what the fourth pillar (network and participation trajectory) should entail, including measures to follow-up and clear communication of expected funding for this task, to help municipalities in planning. Ensure that participation projects are sufficiently tailored to migrants' individual needs

Improve co-ordination in integration efforts

- Establish a comprehensive Action Plan for Integration in Flanders, involving all stakeholders, to co-ordinate actions and identify gaps – notably for settled migrants and children of immigrants
- Involve adult education institutions more systematically in the design of the civic integration programme, especially for low-educated newcomers
- Systematically track and exchange information between the stakeholders on integration and labour market activities undertaken
- Involve the different integration actors more systematically in the design of the civic integration contract
- Make sure that smaller municipalities have the capacity to respond to diverse integration needs
- Facilitate experience sharing among municipalities and enhance guidance on measures along with minimum standard setting

Smoothen the transition from targeted to mainstream support

- Acknowledge that the integration pathway for new arrivals lacking basic skills frequently exceeds two years, and structure integration measures accordingly to allow for a coherent and

integrated approach including adult education and further education and training, and in combination with labour market introduction

- Consider introducing an individualised integration benefit for those obliged to participate in an extended civic integration programme, as is currently the case in Nordic countries
- Continue to reach out to women in a systematic way when the civic integration programme ends, to assess and address their additional needs
- Invest more in parallel integration activities, combining language training with civic orientation and labour market activities
- Monitor whether the B1 attainment target does not delay labour market entry and causes stress among migrants
- Make sure that all new arrivals are not only registered with the PES but also accompanied in their labour market trajectory early on, through a dedicated PES counsellor and a personalised labour market integration plan, in co-ordination with the civic integration services
- Support PES caseworkers to ensure that migrant-specific needs are not overlooked when assigning unemployed jobseekers to different activation measures
- Enhance participation of immigrant jobseekers in the most effective activation measures, by ensuring that general classroom training is more frequently followed by occupation-specific classroom and workplace training
- Make sure that Dutch language skill requirements do not prevent new arrivals from taking beneficial PES courses and make adaptations where necessary
- Avoid that immigrants are excluded by employers in contractual workplace training by strengthening incentives to involve disadvantaged groups
- Expand the uptake of training options in which working or vocational training is combined with Dutch language training and support
- Consider providing basic information on PES activation measures in languages other than Dutch
- Address the widespread difficulties faced by migrants in reaching the language threshold necessary to access further labour market training and education, including those outside the PES system

Ensure that incentives to boost the demand for migrant skills improve long-term integration

- Monitor the impact of wage subsidies on immigrants and act on the results
- Provide continuous education and language training to migrant women working in the service voucher scheme, to enhance their chances for upward mobility
- Strengthen targeted support for immigrant business owners, notably by upgrading immigrants' business and other skills through training, counselling, and mentoring
- Increase mentoring initiatives for settled immigrants and their native-born offspring
- Monitor the impact of the innovative sectoral anti-discrimination covenants and communicate and act on the results. If the results are positive, consider extension to other domains, including the housing market
- Follow-up on innovative techniques like "open hiring" and anonymisation of CVs in the recruitment process, which are gaining attention and popularity as a means of preventing hiring discrimination

- Monitor the impact of the Focus on Talent policy at the micro-level of businesses and ensure that diversity-related issues are given more weight in SME portfolio investments; consider reintroducing the previous diversity plans

Ensure that the skills of high-qualified migrants are appropriately recognised and valued

- Improve co-ordination in the process of recognition of foreign qualifications, linked with a strengthening of certification of more practical competences and bridging offers
- Increase the capacity of NARIC Flanders to ensure that the recent rise in the number of applications does not inflate the processing time of applications
- Increase transparency and gather evidence on the procedure of applications for professional recognition at the various competent recognition bodies, as these are currently not systematically available
- Explore the possibility to automatically transfer applications for recognition of qualifications for regulated professions from NARIC to the competent recognition bodies internally, after academic recognition
- Expand the scale and scope of recognition of prior learning and validation tools that enable immigrants with informally acquired skills and work experience to get the equivalent of a domestic professional qualification
- Systematically introduce the possibility of attaining professional qualifications validation during the early stages of civic integration
- Involve employers in the assessment process for skills
- Enhance bridging courses for migrants, along with additional support in language learning

Ensure long-term labour market attachment of immigrants

- Provide more targeted support for established migrants who lack basic skills
- Reach out to and support migrant women with a low labour market attachment, including through a targeted “second chance” programme. Ideally, such a programme would also involve a co-operation with childcare and school systems to encourage participation of immigrant stay-at-home mothers
- Make access to family policies such as parental leave and formal childcare less dependent on employment stability, to incite migrant women with a low labour market attachment to combine motherhood with a job

Strengthen efforts to offer equal educational opportunities to native-born children of immigrants

- Strengthen language acquisition at early ages. To this end, make sure that the newly introduced language assessment at age 5 is systematically followed-up for those assessed to be in need
- Link Ministry of Education and Training enrolment data with population register data to better understand the educational gap between native-born children of immigrants and children of native-born parents, notably by assessing the relative importance of language spoken at home as well as of parents’ country of birth.
- Raise awareness of migrant parents with a low socio-economic profile regarding the importance of educational choices and help them better navigate into the school system
- Support early school leavers who turned 18 by reinforcing the collaboration between Pupils’ Guidance and Adult Learning *(Leerwinkels)* Centres

- Develop more systematic training and on-the-job training programmes for teachers in schools with a high share of socio-economically disadvantaged pupils and of non-Dutch speakers at home

Smoothen the integration of newcomers at school, including at a very young age

- Monitor the outcomes of additional language support for newly arrived minors in preschools and primary schools and promote partnerships with reception classes in secondary schools
- Facilitate the transition from the one-year reception class in secondary education to regular classes by offering faster and more flexible integration in regular education
- Strengthen vocational offers to students when they finish reception classes, notably minors who are not entitled to follow part-time vocational education. A pilot programme, like the BENO programme for basic education after reception, should be considered to prepare youth within mainstream education for vocational education in a secondary school or workplace learning
- Increase attention to education for new arrivals in initial teacher education and improve pedagogical preparation for reception teachers

Tackle the difficult transition from school to the labour market for children of immigrants

- Make sure that insufficient Dutch language or soft skills do not prevent children of immigrants accessing the first phase of the new Dual Learning programme.
- Follow-up students enrolled in dual apprenticeship by maintaining regular exchanges between employers and teachers
- Strengthen the one-year professional integration period for youngsters who are still unemployed with targeted activation measures, including second chance and mentorship programmes
- Promote employment in the public sector of native-born immigrant offspring
- Tackle disadvantage in the labour market by promoting exchanges between students and employers (e.g. through job fairs and apprenticeships)

2 The context of integration policy in Flanders

This chapter provides the context for integration in Flanders, starting with an outline of the size and structure of the foreign-born population. Next, it presents the broader features of the Flemish labour market, and the opportunities and challenges these present for immigrants. The chapter ends with a discussion of the evolution of integration policy and the main stakeholders involved in integration.

Characteristics of immigrants

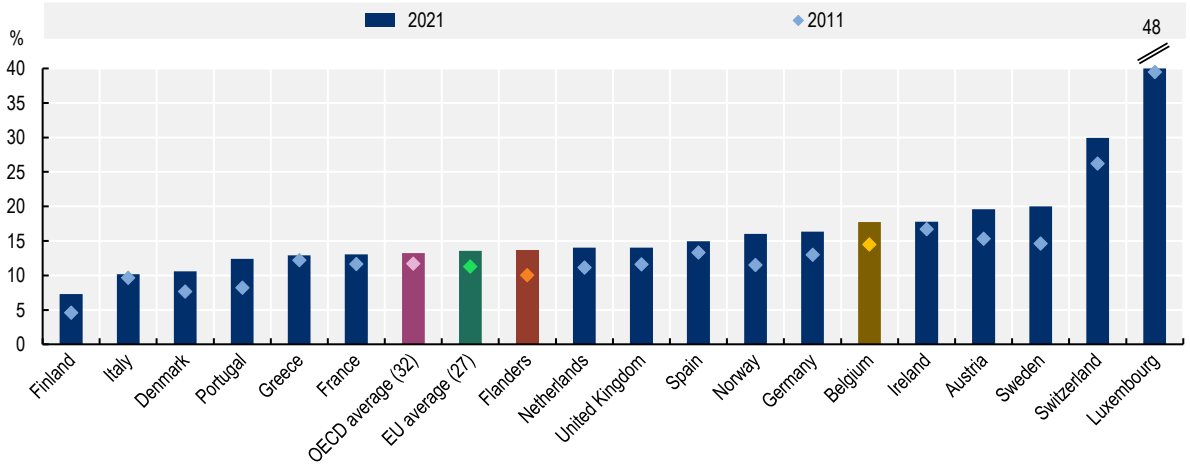
Priorities in integration policy are set in response to the characteristics of past and present waves of immigration. To understand the current state of labour market integration and the use of immigrants' skills in Flanders, it is important first to take stock of the size and make-up of its immigrant population.[1]

The immigrant population is rapidly increasing and diversifying

Flanders' foreign-born population has been growing fast over the past decade. In 2021, close to 14% of the Flemish population were born abroad, up from 10% a decade ago. While the share of immigrants in the total population is close to the EU and OECD average[2] (see Figure 2.1), growth has been relatively strong in international comparison and has outpaced growth in Belgium as a whole, France, the Netherlands and Germany.[3]

Figure 2.1. Immigrants account for 14% of the population in Flanders

Share of immigrants in the total population, 2021, Flanders and selected European OECD countries



Note: Total population.
Source: OECD International Migration Outlook 2021; Flanders and Belgium: Statistics Belgium (see Box 2.6).

Flanders has a long migration history, with successive inflows of immigrants coming from different countries and through different migration channels (see Box 2.1). Reflective of this long migration tradition, the foreign-born population is rather heterogeneous. In 2020, over 19% of the immigrants were born in Belgium's neighbouring countries (the Netherlands, France and Germany), and an additional 8% were born in other countries that composed the EU prior to 2004 (mainly Italy and Spain) (see Figure 2.2). Following the EU enlargements in 2004 and 2007, immigration from the new EU member states (mainly Romania, Poland and Bulgaria) strongly increased and since 2010, it outpaced immigration from the old EU member states. As a result, the share of this group in the migrant population grew from 9% in 2010 to 15% in 2020.

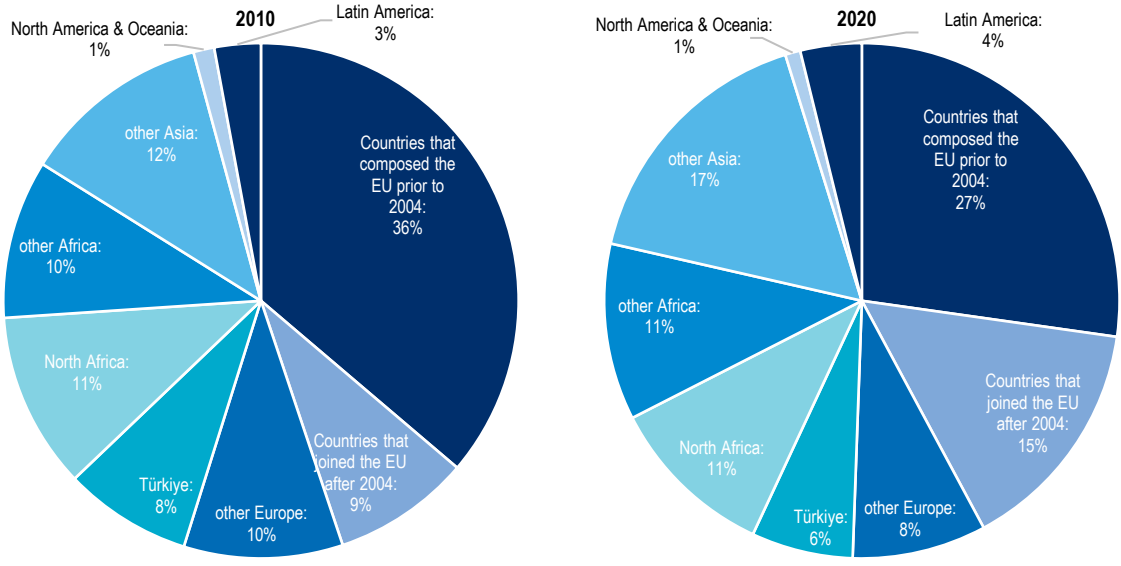
Immigrants from North Africa (mainly Morocco) and Türkiye are historically large non-EU immigrant groups in Flanders and still accounted for 12% and 6%, respectively, of the foreign-born population in 2020. However, as immigration from Asia grew sharply over the past decade while immigration from Morocco and Türkiye largely stabilised, immigrants born in other Asian countries (top countries: Russia, Afghanistan, India, Syria, Iraq) constituted the largest non-EU immigrant group. In 2020, they accounted

for 17% of the foreign-born compared to 12% a decade earlier. Due to continuous inflows of humanitarian migrants and, subsequently, their families (see Box 2.2), the share of immigrants born in other Asian countries (particularly Afghanistan and Syria) is set to increase further in the coming years. The number of immigrants born in sub-Sahara Africa (top countries: Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Guinee and Rwanda) and Latin America (mainly Brazil) has also grown gradually over the last decade. As a result, in 2020, these groups accounted for 11% and 4%, respectively, of the foreign-born population. In contrast, the relative importance of immigration from other European (non-EU) countries (mainly from the former Yugoslavia) has declined; they constituted 8% of the immigrant population. Immigrants born in North America and Oceania are a small group in Flanders.

In 2020, 42% of the immigrants in Flanders were EU-born, a large proportion in international comparison. The non-EU immigrant population, however, grew slightly faster over the past decade (44% increase) than the EU immigrant population (37% increase); a trend which because of demographic factors is expected to intensify (Neels et al., 2020[1]). Women accounted for half of the immigrant and native-born populations in 2020, like the gender distribution a decade ago. EU immigrants are as likely as non-EU immigrants to be women.

Figure 2.2. The immigrant population has diversified over the past decade

Composition of the foreign-born population, by place of birth, 2010 and 2020, Flanders



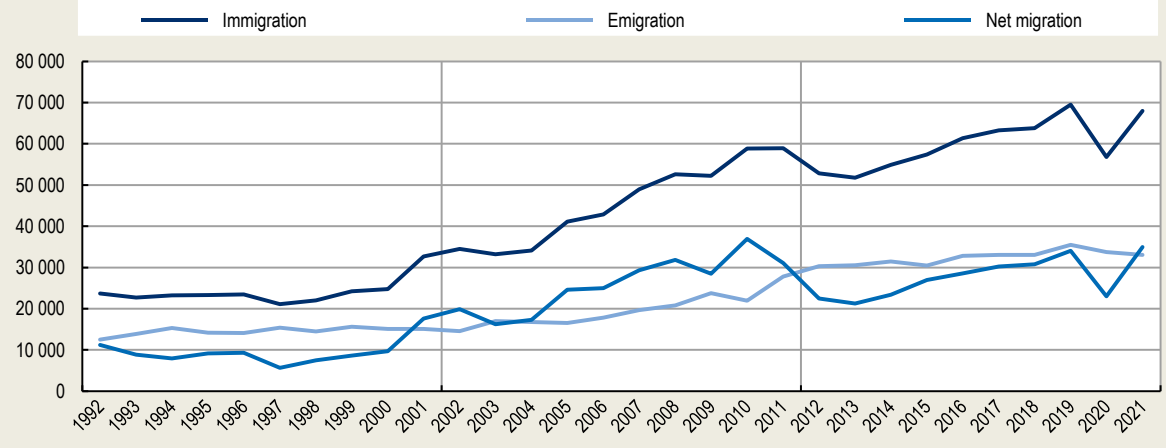
Note: Total foreign-born population.
Source: OECD Secretariat based on data from the Crossroads Bank for Social Security (see Box 2.6).

Box 2.1. Migration to Flanders since World War II

Like many Western European countries, Flanders' recent immigration history began with the arrival of so-called "guest workers" from the Mediterranean (Martiniello et al., 2010[2]; Lafleur, Martiniello and Rea, 2015[3]). From the 1960s until the mid-1970s, Belgian migration policy actively recruited low-skilled migrants from Southern Europe and later from North Africa and Türkiye to work in heavy industry sectors. Wallonia (the southern region of Belgium) represented the most important destination of immigration in that period, but many migrants were also contracted by the metal and mining industries of Limburg (one of five Flemish provinces). Immigration was exceptionally high in the early 1960s when, due to articulated labour shortages, migration was no longer restricted through work permits, and migrant workers were allowed to settle under tourist visas, with regularisation typically after medical screening. Due to the economic decline in reaction to the oil crisis in the late 1960s, labour migration decreased substantially, ultimately leading to a migration stop in 1974. Net migration fell sharply in the 1980s and even became negative, but Flanders never ceased to be a region of immigration. Labour migration continued but was controlled through the selective granting of work permits for highly educated profiles. Family reunification and family migration became the most important entry channels into Flanders. The late 1990s witnessed an increase of immigration (see Figure 2.3) and a diversification of origin countries, resulting from the free movement of individuals within the EU (Schengen treaty), continued family reunification and marriage migration, but also student and labour migration, accompanied by fluctuations in the number of asylum seekers and refugees. From the 1990s onwards, immigration flows to Belgium have increasingly affected Flanders, mainly due to Flanders' more favourable economic situation. Since the 2000s, immigration to Flanders accounted for about half of the total inflow to Belgium. The increase in immigration from countries that joined the EU after 2004 represents the most impactful change in the Flemish immigration landscape since the 1990s. Other critical evolutions were a decrease in immigration from Western European countries, a significant reduction in immigration from Morocco and Türkiye, and an increase in asylum migration from Western Asia, particularly from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Figure 2.3. Throughout the 20th century, Flanders increasingly became an immigration society

Immigration, emigration, and net migration of foreigners, 1992-2021, Flanders



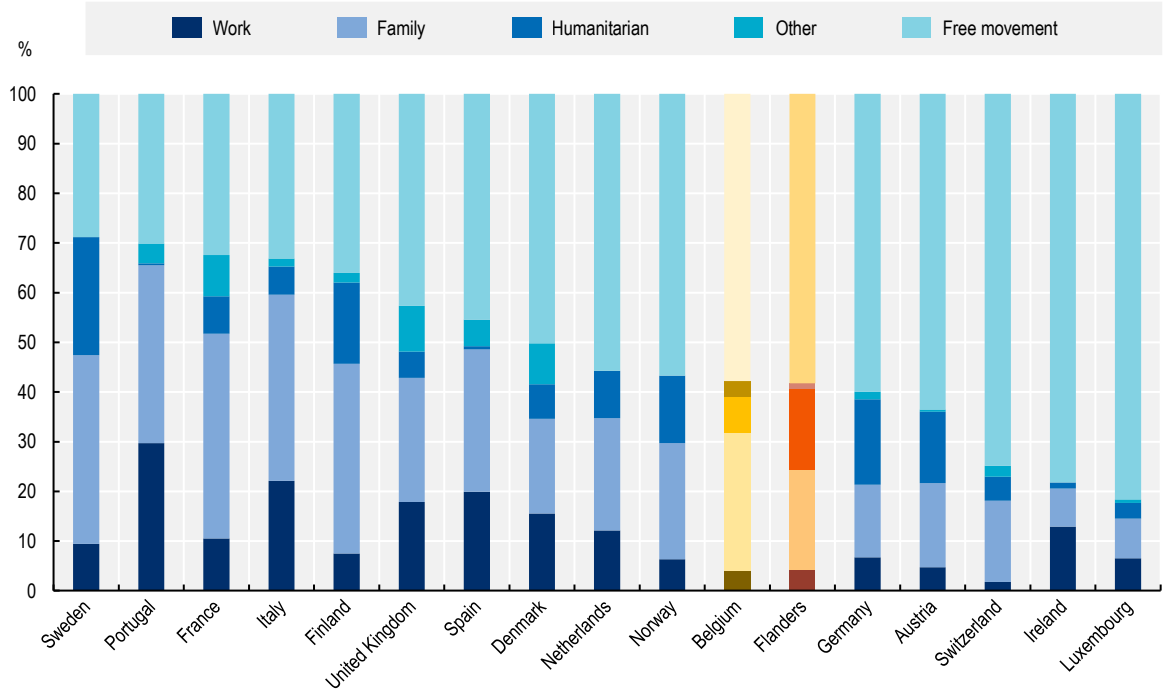
Source: OECD Secretariat based on data from Statistics Flanders.

During the 2011-20 period, an average of 37 000 new permanent migrants settled in Flanders each year. Close to 60% of permanent inflow were made up of EU nationals who migrated under the framework of the free movement of workers, a high share in international comparison (see Figure 2.4). The top nationalities of EU immigrants were Romania (21%), the Netherlands (21%), Poland (15%) and Bulgaria (9%). Nearly six in ten EU immigrants were men.

The relative importance of migration for work-related reasons was comparatively small in Flanders (only in Belgium as a whole and Switzerland it was less important). Nevertheless, the number of incoming non-EU labour migrants is rising, with the share of work-related migration in the total permanent inflow increasing from 3% in 2011 to 5% in 2020 (see Box 2.4). Twenty-nine percent of the labour migrants coming to Flanders were born in India. Other important source countries were the United States (7%), Türkiye (7%) and Japan (5%).

Figure 2.4. Free mobility has constituted the main channel of immigration to Flanders

Composition of permanent immigration flows, by category of entry, 2011-20 settlement cohort, Flanders and selected European OECD countries



Note: 2006-20 for Finland, 2012-20 for Luxembourg, 2007-20 for Spain, 2005-20 for other European OECD countries. The OECD collects and standardises administrative data by category of residence permit from OECD countries. Permanent immigrants are foreign nationals of any age who received in a given year a residence permit that, under normal circumstances, grants them the right to stay permanently in the host country. They include foreigners who obtain a permanent residence permit upon entry, those who have an initial temporary residence permit routinely and indefinitely renewed or transformed into permanent residence, and free mobility migrants (excluding those on short-term stays). Temporary immigrants who become permanent-type residents following a change in their status, such as students taking up employment after completing their studies, are also included.

Source: OECD/European Commission (2023[4]) *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In*, https://doi.org/10.1787/1d5020a6-en; Flanders: OECD Secretariat calculations based on Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration data (see Box 2.6).

Family migration, composed of those who already have a family and those who want to establish a family, stood for 20% of the permanent inflow during the 2011-20 period. While migration for family reasons constituted the primary entry channel for non-EU immigrants in Flanders, its relative importance was lower than in many other European OECD countries, especially compared to Belgium as a whole. The origin of family migrants clearly reflects previous labour and humanitarian inflows, with Morocco, Türkiye, India, and more recently Afghanistan and Syria as main origin countries. While men accounted for the bulk of labour migrants (74%), most of those coming to join a family member were women (66%).

Finally, 16% of permanent immigration flows to Flanders were made up of humanitarian migrants, a much higher share than in many EU countries, including Belgium. Of the countries shown in Figure 2.4, only Sweden and Germany recorded a higher humanitarian share than Flanders. The main origin countries of humanitarian migrants were Syria (18%), Afghanistan (16%), Iraq (12%) and Somalia (5%). Men made up the majority (69%) of humanitarian migrants between 2011 and 2020.[4]

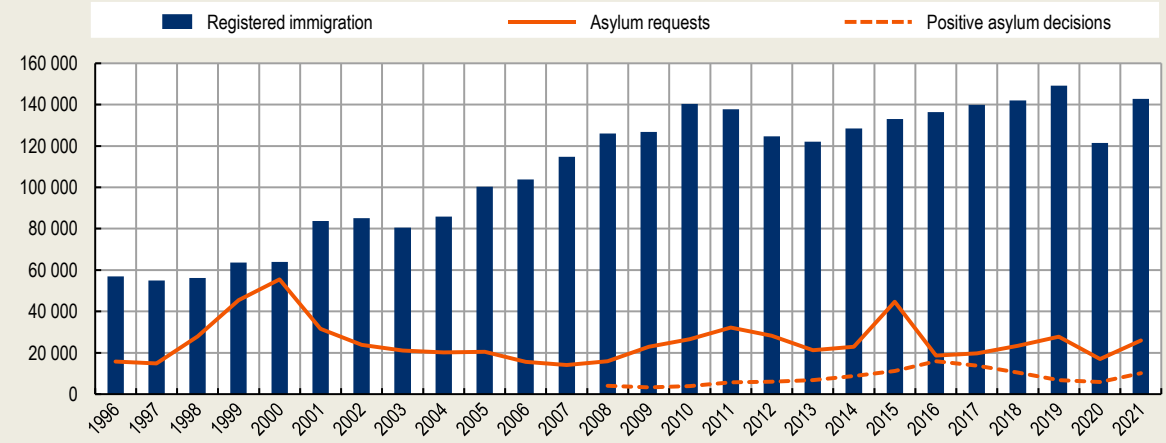
Box 2.2. Inflows of asylum seekers and refugees

It was not until 1990 that the number of asylum seekers became important in Flanders. As statistics on asylum seekers are not available for Flanders, this report uses Belgium's asylum statistics. Asylum applications for Belgium peaked particularly in 1993 (34 000), 2000 (55 000), 2011 (32 000), 2015 (45 000) and 2022 (37 000). The fall of the communist regimes, the disintegration of former Yugoslavia, and conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo drove the peak in the number of asylum requests in 1993. The peak in 2000 resulted from conflicts in Kosovo[1], the resurgent struggle in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the second war in Chechnya. The peak in 2011 was primarily made up of asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Guinea, Iraq and Russia, but inflows from the Balkan countries remained important. In 2015, asylum seekers from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan accounted for 63% of the applications, followed by Somalia and Russia. According to recent figures, the number of applications has reached a new height in 2022. More than 36 000 applications were registered, with Afghanistan, Syria, Palestine, Burundi and Eritrea leading the top ten of applicants' countries of origin.

Over the past decade, according to Eurostat statistics, Belgium has been at the top of EU countries taking in the most asylum seekers compared to its population (ranging between the 6th and 12th place). In 2021, asylum applications lodged in Belgium accounted for 3.6% of the total number of asylum requests registered in the EU. With 1.7 applicants per 1 000 inhabitants, Belgium was eighth on the list of EU Member States taking in the most asylum seekers in that year (Eurostat; European Migration Network, 2022[5]). However, not all persons who applied for international protection were granted that protection. Of the asylum decisions made in 2021, 44% were positive, which is higher than the overall EU recognition rate (34%). Nine in ten decisions recognised refugee status, whereas one in ten decisions granted subsidiary protection status. Resettlement of refugees is uncommon in Flanders and Belgium (with 949 persons in 2021). Despite their visibility in the media, refugee inflows still represent a small share of total immigration in Belgium. In 2016, for example, when the number of recognitions was at its peak, persons who got a positive decision on their asylum request accounted for 12% of the total inflow (see Figure 2.5).

Figure 2.5. Asylum seeking is modest in comparison to overall migration

Number of asylum requests, positive asylum decisions and registered immigration, 1996-2021, Belgium



Note: Only registered flows of foreigners are considered.
Source: OECD Secretariat based on data from the General Commission for Refugees and Stateless Persons (asylum statistics) and Statistics Belgium (registered immigration).

Box 2.3. Inflows of refugees from Ukraine

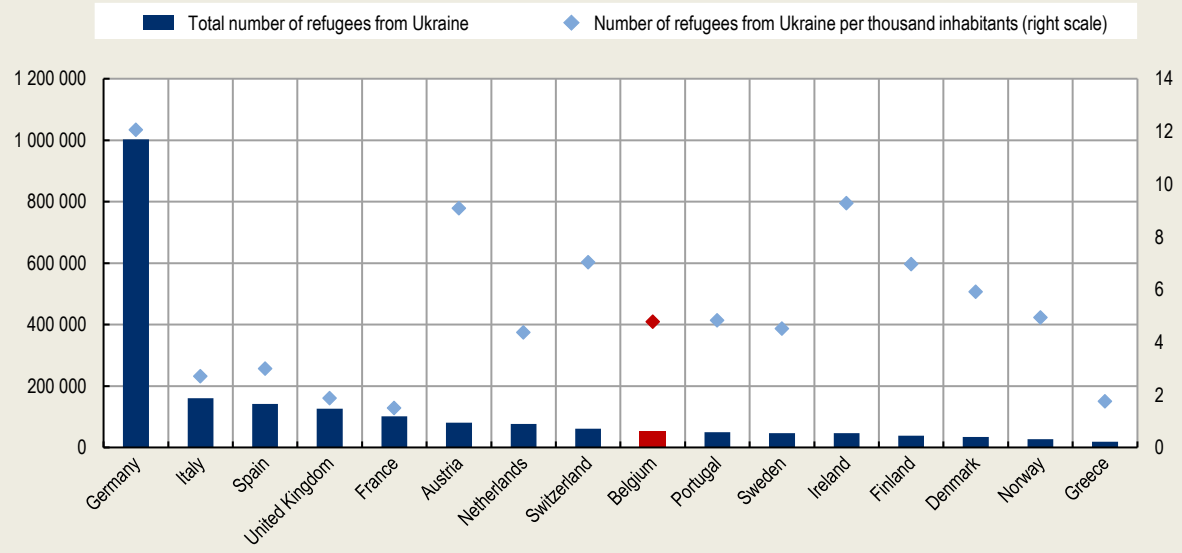
Russia's unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine, which started on 24 February 2022, generated a historic mass flight. By mid-September 2022, close to 5 million individual refugees from Ukraine had been recorded across the EU and other OECD countries, out of whom about 4 million had registered for temporary protection or similar national protection schemes in Europe. While the neighbouring countries of Ukraine have received most of the refugees, high numbers have also found refuge in other OECD countries, including Belgium. Relative to the size of the population, flows to Belgium have been lower than those reported in Germany, Ireland, Austria, Switzerland, Finland and Denmark, but can match those in the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, and Norway (see Figure 2.6).

Prior to the war, Ukrainian nationals benefited from visa-free travel allowing them to enter Belgium without an entry visa and stay for up to 90 days within 180 days. On 24 February 2022, Belgium suspended the exit obligation, allowing Ukrainian citizens who were in Belgium on permits or visa-free visits set to expire to ask their municipalities to extend their stay. Following the activation of the *European Temporary Protection Directive* on 4 March 2022, Ukrainian citizens and other third country nationals with international protection or stateless person status residing in Ukraine before 24 February 2022 and their family members can apply for a residence permit in Belgium based on temporary protection.[2]

To apply for temporary protection, individuals must visit the registration centre set up by the Immigration Office in Brussels. After registering the identity and biometric data, the Immigration Office issues a temporary protection certificate (before 13 March, there was an intermediate step of "pre-registration"). With the certificate of temporary protection, the person can turn to their municipality. After a positive residence check, the municipality will register the person in the aliens' register and issue an electronic A card. People who are granted temporary protection in Flanders have immediate access to temporary crisis housing, social assistance, education, and health insurance, as well as the right to work (see Chapter 3 for further discussion). They can also reunite with their family in Flanders.

Figure 2.6. So far, Belgium has received 4.8 refugees from Ukraine per 1 000 inhabitants

Number of refugees from Ukraine recorded, mid-September 2022, Belgium and selected European OECD countries

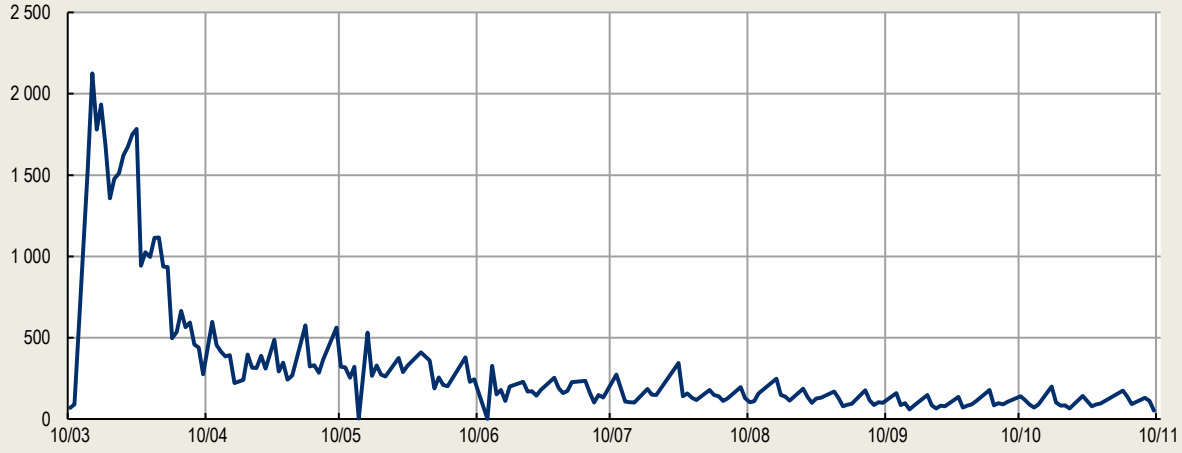


Source: Adapted from OECD (2022[6]), *International Migration Outlook 2022*, https://doi.org/10.1787/30fe16d2-en.

By 9 November, more than 60 000 persons from Ukraine had applied for temporary protection in Belgium (see Figure 2.7), of whom approximately six out of ten applied for status in the Flemish region. The number is thus already well above the 45 000 asylum seekers registered in the previous record year 2015 and highlights the need for rapid scale-up of Flanders's reception and integration system (for further discussion, see Chapter 3).

Figure 2.7. Inflows peaked at 2000 on 15 March 2022 and declined progressively since then

Daily number of registrations from Ukraine for temporary protection, Feb-Nov 2022, Belgium



Source: OECD Secretariat based on data from Statistics Belgium.

As in other European OECD countries, arrivals from Ukraine to Belgium were predominantly women with children. Until mid-November, 33% of arrivals from Ukraine to Flanders were at most 17 years of age, 18% between 18 and 29, 27% between 30 and 44, and 21% above 45 years. Overall, 62% of arrivals from Ukraine were women.

Before the war, immigration from Ukraine to Flanders was relatively small-scale. Between 2005 and 2021, around 3 700 Ukrainian immigrants settled permanently in Flanders, accounting for 0.6% of the total inflow. The modest immigration from Ukraine to Flanders contrasts with a sizeable presence throughout the EU, where Ukrainians were the third-largest immigrant group in 2020, behind Moroccans and Turks.

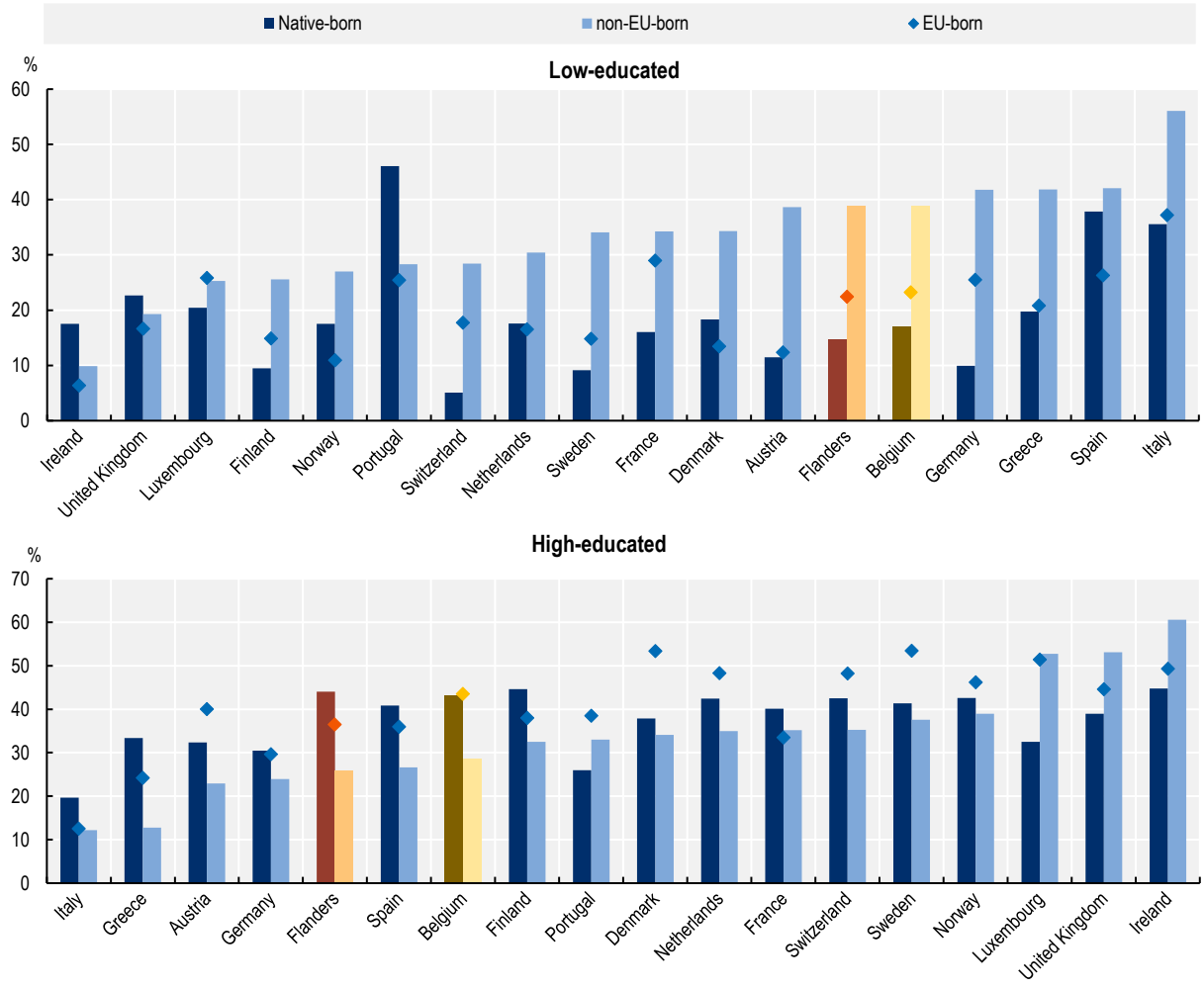
1. This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244/99 and the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice on Kosovo's declaration of independence.
2. People who are not eligible for the temporary protection are channelled into the asylum procedure, which remains also accessible for Ukrainian citizens who are eligible for, have applied for or received temporary protection. However, the examination of an application for international protection is suspended for as long as the temporary protection scheme is still in place.
Note: The term "refugee from Ukraine" is used in this report to refer to persons who are fleeing from Russia's war against Ukraine and have obtained some sort of international protection, including not only formal refugee status (as per the Geneva Convention) but also subsidiary and temporary protection (as in the case of most refugees from Ukraine).
Source: Immigration from Ukraine to Flanders: OECD Secretariat based on Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration data.

The share of the immigrant population with (very) low levels of education is high

Education is central in determining immigrants' integration outcomes (Damas De Matos and Liebig, 2014[7]; FPS Employment and Unia, 2022[8]). Over the past decade, the educational attainment of the foreign-born improved considerably in Flanders, primarily because new arrivals were better educated than their predecessors.[5] Still, as shown by Corluy (2014[9]) based on Labour Force Survey data for Belgium, the positive upskilling trend among the foreign-born did not keep up with the native-born trend. Consequently, immigrants continue to lag far behind their native-born counterparts in terms of educational attainment. In 2020, 39% of non-EU immigrants in Flanders had at most a lower secondary level of education, compared to 15% of native-born and 22% of EU immigrants (see Figure 2.8). The share of highly educated non-EU immigrants was well below the EU average, and the gap vis-à-vis the native-born was particularly pronounced, with only Greece having a larger gap than Flanders. While migrant women have higher educational attainment than men, the gap vis-à-vis native-born women remains large in Flanders. Hence, the educational attainment of non-EU immigrants in Flanders is not favourable in international comparison and taking adult skill proficiency as a measure instead of educational qualifications yields a similar picture. Indeed, data from the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) shows a low performance in literacy and problem-solving skills of immigrants in Flanders in international comparison (OECD, 2019[10]).

Figure 2.8. The educational attainment of non-EU immigrants is not favourable in international comparison

Share of low- and highly educated, by place of birth, 2020, Flanders and selected European OECD countries

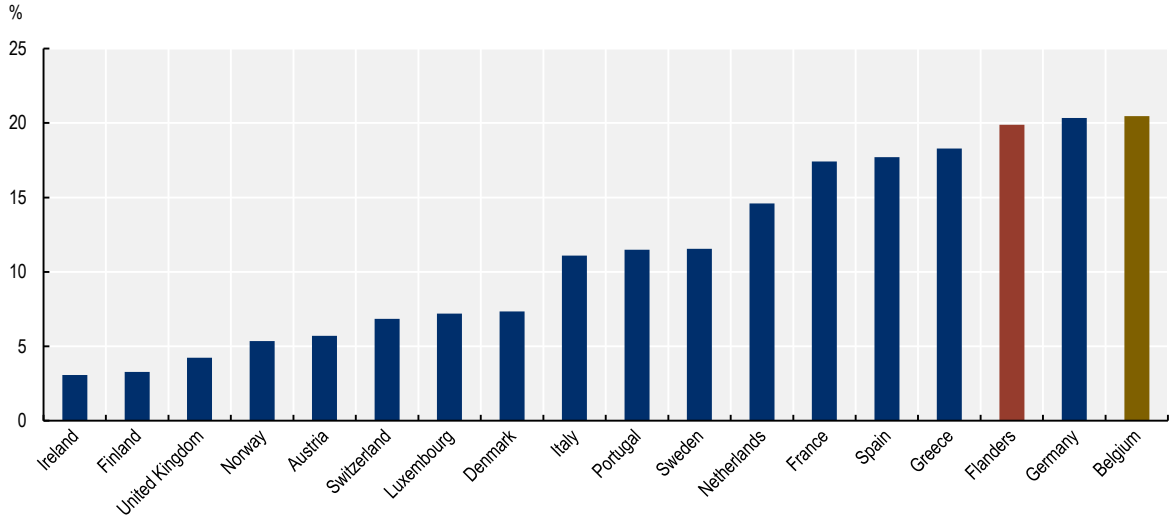


Note: Population aged 15 to 64, not in education. Educational attainment against the International Standard Classification of Educational Degrees (ISCED). People falling into ISCED groups 0-2 (no more than a lower secondary level of education) are described as having low education. Those with ISCED 5-6 hold a tertiary education and are classified as highly educated.
Source: OECD/European Commission (2023[4]) *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In*, https://doi.org/10.1787/1d5020a6-en; Flanders: OECD Secretariat calculations based on national LFS.

A specific challenge for Flanders is the high share of non-EU immigrants with only elementary levels of educational attainment. In 2020, one in five non-EU immigrants had attained at most primary education, compared to 3% of the native-born. Of the countries shown in Figure 2.9, only Germany and Belgium record a similarly high proportion of immigrants lacking basic skills.

Figure 2.9. The share of very low educated among non-EU immigrants is high

Share of non-EU immigrants with a very low level of education, 2020, Flanders and selected European OECD countries



Note: Non-EU-born population aged 15 to 64, not in education. People falling into ISCED groups 0-1 (no more than a primary level of education) are described as having very low education.
Source: OECD/European Commission (2023[4]) *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In*, https://doi.org/10.1787/1d5020a6-en; Flanders: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the national LFS.

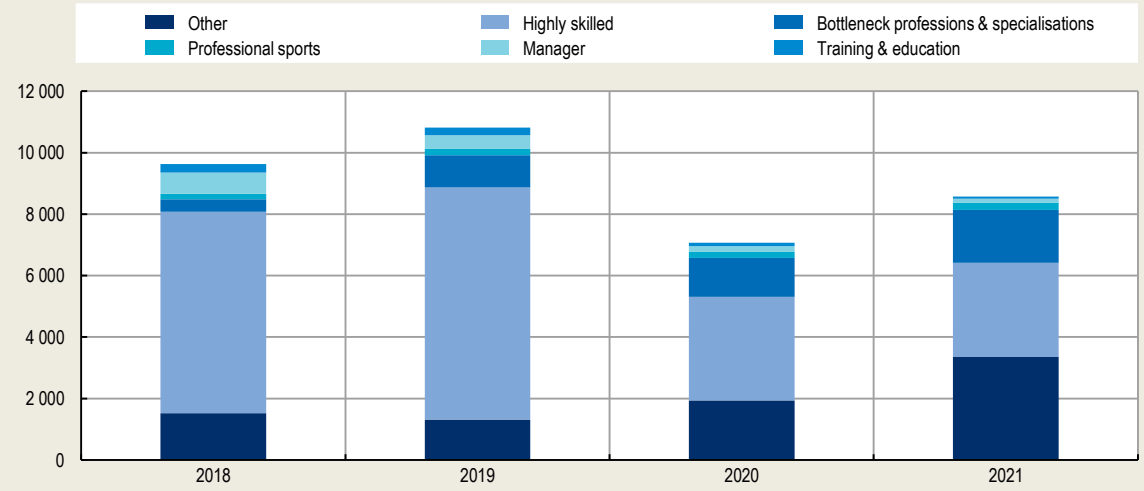
Box 2.4. Labour migration to Flanders

Historically, Belgium's federal government has been responsible for developing immigration legislation and policy, including policies for admitting third-country nationals. The federal government is also competent for enforcing policies regarding the entry and stay of migrant workers. The federal Immigration Office is responsible for issuing visas and residence permits to third-country nationals. As of 1 July 2014, however, the competence over employment-based immigration policy got transferred to the regional governments. Hence, each regional government has full decision-making authority over all matters related to the employment of immigrants in its region, including the issuance of work permits.

Flanders issues more work permits than the other Belgian regions. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of working permits and single permits (combined working and residence permit) issued increased from 7 000 in 2014 to 10 800 in 2019. Figure 2.10 shows that highly skilled workers and managers accounted for most of the work permits issued before 2019. However, permits issued for bottleneck professions and specialisations have consistently increased in recent years, up to 16% of the total issued permits in 2021. In the past, the labour migration channel was predominantly reserved for highly educated workers, but since January 2019, the Flemish Government eased work authorisation requirements for medium-educated workers in bottleneck professions and technically skilled staff, exempting them from a local labour market test. At the same time, the government lowered minimum salary thresholds and increased the maximum validity of work authorisation from one year to three years for highly educated workers. As of October 2021, the Flemish Region processes all single permit applications via the digital platform "Working in Belgium" to improve co-ordination between the federal (in charge of the visa and residence permit) and the regional level (in charge of the work permit) and reduce processing times.

Figure 2.10. Labour migration has recently opened to medium-educated workers in bottleneck professions

Work permits and single permits, by category, 2018-21, Flanders



Note: The increase in the category "Other" is mainly due to the implementation of the work permit obligation for third-country nationals who are seasonal workers in May 2020.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculation based on data from the Department of Work and Social Economy.

Labour market integration of immigrants

Immigrants account for a high and rising share of the population (14% in 2021) and form an essential mainstay of the labour force in Flanders. Immigration has accounted for the bulk of population growth in Flanders since the turn of the millennium and can play an essential role in counterbalancing the adverse effects of ageing on the labour force. That is, if immigrants are socially and economically integrated (Neels et al., 2020[1]). Successful integration of immigrants may also bring benefits in other areas, such as sizeable fiscal gains from higher employment (National Bank of Belgium, 2020[11]; Damas de Matos, 2021[12]).

Despite significant policy efforts, Flanders continues to rank among the most paradoxical countries in the EU regarding facilitating access to paid employment and reducing the burden of welfare state costs associated with an ageing population. With an employment rate of 75% in 2021, Flanders fell far short of the employment rate of 80% and over in leading EU countries such as the Netherlands, Sweden, Germany and Denmark. Almost a third of the working-age population in Flanders was not at work in 2021. At the same time, the swelling number of unfilled vacancies, in combination with a historically low unemployment rate (3.9% in 2021), has led to an increasingly tight labour market (Van Impe et al., 2022[13]; OECD, 2022[14]). According to Eurostat statistics on job vacancies, the Czech Republic is the only country to surpass Flanders in terms of unmet labour demand. Across different sectors of the Flemish economy, employers relentlessly express anxiety about the imbalance between skills demand and supply, which in turn has prompted policy makers to promote and facilitate labour migration to solve those pressures. Yet, despite economic expansion and the creation of new jobs, Flanders continues to struggle with a persistently high inactivity rate (27% in 2021) and significant employment gaps for vulnerable groups. To catch up with the top European OECD countries, the Flemish Government has set the goal of increasing employment to 80%. Achieving this objective will largely depend on Flanders' ability to lessen the ongoing differences in labour market opportunities across different population groups, notably between the foreign-born and the native-born (Vansteenkiste and Theunissen, 2022[15]).

Despite improvement, non-EU immigrants' employment outcomes remain poor in international comparison

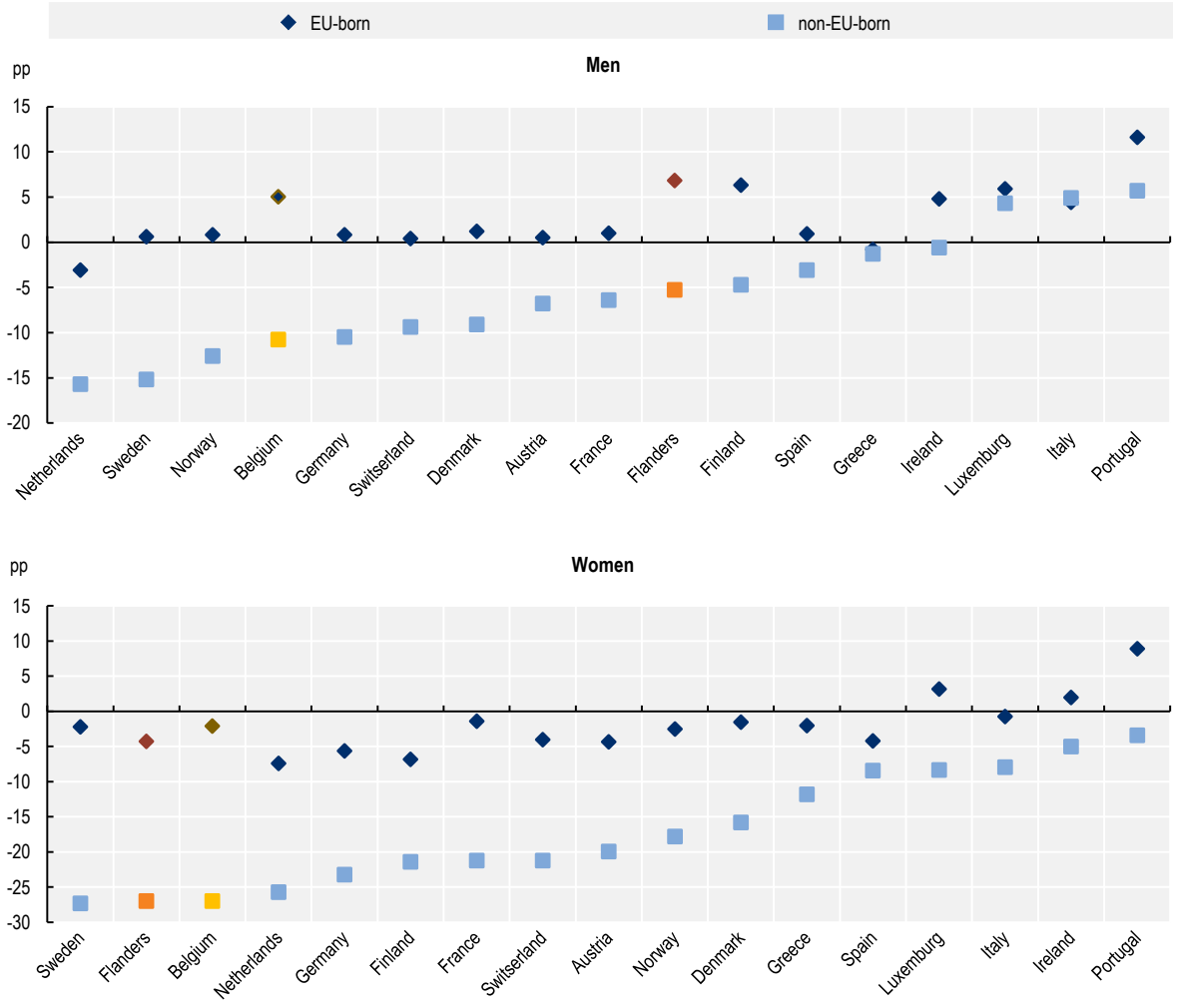
Moderate but sustained economic growth in recent years, along with a growing imbalance between labour supply and demand, seem to have finally created the conditions that led to a long-awaited catch-up of the foreign-born in the Flemish labour market. Between 2016 and 2021, immigrants' employment rate increased from 60% to 67%. Because progress was more substantial among the foreign-born than among the native-born, the employment gap between the two populations shrank from 14 to 10 percentage points. At the same time, the unemployment rate of immigrants decreased from 12.2% in 2016 to 7.8% in 2021. Consequently, the unemployment gap vis-à-vis the native-born nearly halved over the same period, from 8.3 to 4.5 percentage points Few European OECD countries experienced a similar improvement in immigrant labour market outcomes over the 2016-21 period.

This marked improvement, however, masks persistent employment differentials by place of birth and sex in the Flemish labour market. Over the 2006-21 period, the labour market position of EU-born immigrants gradually converged towards that the native-born. In 2021, EU-born men had an employment rate 6 percentage points above native-born men, while EU-born women lagged 4 percentage points behind their native-born peers. Hence, EU immigrants now have relatively high employment levels in Flanders, also from an international perspective.

For immigrants born outside of the EU, the picture looks much bleaker, largely because of poor outcomes among women. Due to a surge in non-EU immigrants' employment levels between 2016 and 2019, the employment gap vis-à-vis the native-born shrank from 21 percentage point to 15 percentage points However, the COVID-19 pandemic hit non-EU immigrant women particularly hard, wiping out most of the progress that was made (see Box 2.5). In 2021, the employment rate of non-EU immigrant men stood at 73%, only 5 percentage points below native-born men. In contrast, only 48% of the non-EU migrant women were in employment that same year, a staggering 27 percentage points behind native-born women. While Flanders' performance regarding employment outcomes of male non-EU immigrants thus climbed towards the EU average, outcomes among female non-EU immigrants hardly improved and remain among the poorest in international comparison both in absolute and relative terms. Together with Sweden, Belgium and the Netherlands, Flanders displayed the largest employment gap between non-EU and native-born women in 2021 (see Figure 2.11).

Figure 2.11. The employment gap vis-à-vis the native-born remains particularly large among non-EU migrant women

Employment gap vis-à-vis the native-born, by sex and place of birth, 2021, Flanders and selected European OECD countries



Note: Population aged 15 to 64, not in education. A negative employment gap refers to an advantage of the native-born over the foreign-born.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on EU-LFS; Belgium and Flanders: national LFS.

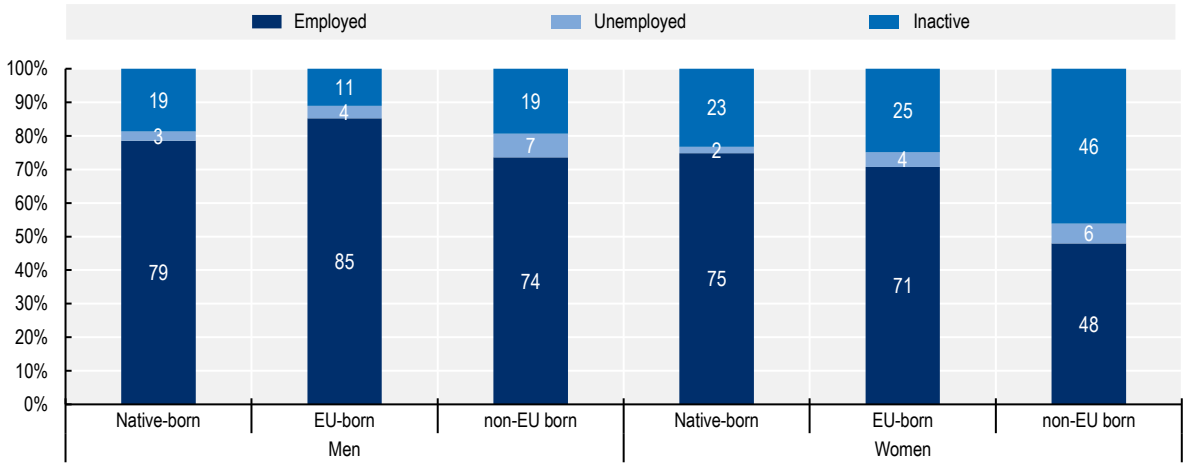
Outcomes for unemployment and inactivity in Flanders are essentially similar. While gaps vis-à-vis the native-born were strongly reduced for EU immigrants (with EU-born men outperforming their native-born peers), there remains a significant gap for non-EU immigrants, primarily because of weak progress among non-EU immigrant women. In 2021, the share of unemployed persons in the working-age population stood at 7.1% and 2.7% for non-EU-born and native-born men, and at 6% and 1.9% for non-EU-born and native-born women (see Figure 2.12). Still, unemployment outcomes of non-EU immigrants in Flanders are, in absolute and relative terms, better than in many other European OECD countries (including Sweden, Finland and Norway) and better than the EU average.

High inactivity among foreign-born women merits particular attention

However, where Flanders really stands out in international comparison is the high share of non-EU migrant women who are not active in the labour market. In 2021, close to half of the non-EU migrant women (46%) in Flanders were not at work nor actively looking for a job (only Belgium as a whole performs worse). The labour market attachment of non-EU migrant women is thus of particular concern in Flanders.

Figure 2.12. The low labour market attachment of non-EU migrant women is of particular concern

Labour market status, by sex and place of birth, 2021, Flanders

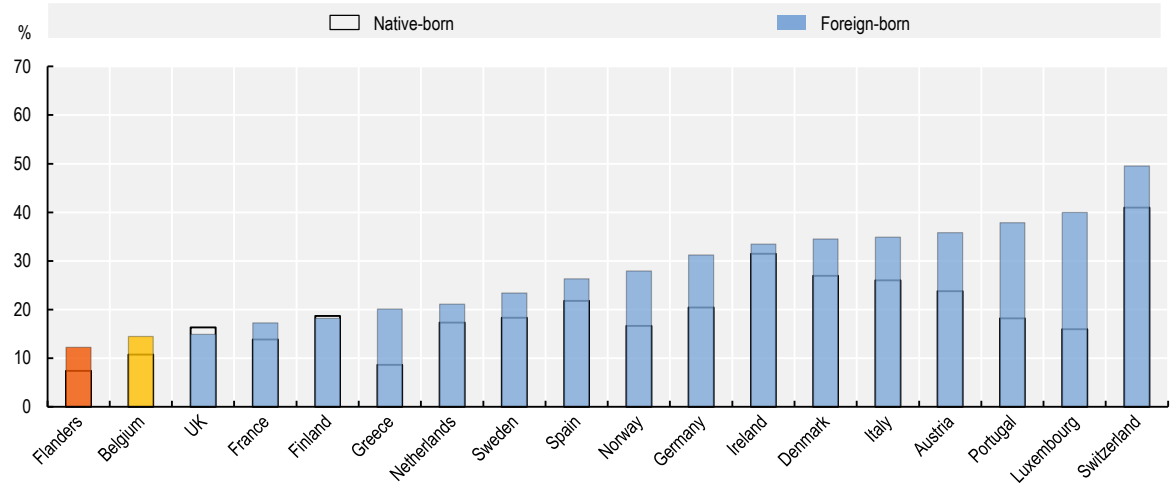


Note: Population aged 20 to 64.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the national LFS.

Effective activation begins with an analysis of the reasons for inactivity. In most OECD countries, immigrant women are slightly more prone to involuntary inactivity than native-born women. In 2021, the proportions in Flanders were 12% versus 7%. Still, both immigrant and native-born women were much less likely to be involuntary inactive compared to their peers in other European OECD countries (see Figure 2.13). As a reason for being economically inactive and not wanting to work, migrant women (aged 25 to 54) cite family responsibilities (52%) more often than native-born women (18%) in Flanders. On the other hand, reasons such as illness and disability and education and training were more frequently cited among native-born women than among foreign-born women.

Figure 2.13. Only a small share of migrant women is involuntary inactive

Share of economically inactive women who are involuntary inactive, by place of birth, 2021, Flanders and selected European OECD countries

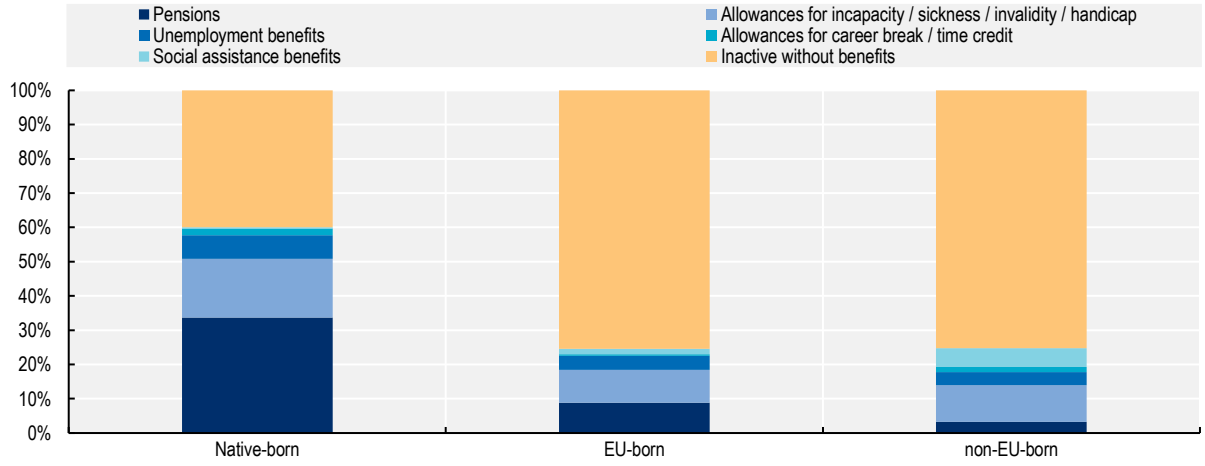


Note: Population aged 15 to 64. Involuntarily inactive people are not seeking work, though willing to take up work.
Source: OECD/European Commission (2023[4]) *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In*, https://doi.org/10.1787/1d5020a6-en; Flanders: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the national LFS.

The difference in the profile of economically inactive women according to migrant status is also reflected in the benefit structure. Figure 2.14 shows that inactive native-born women are more likely to receive pensions or allowances for illness or invalidity, whereas foreign-born women are more likely to be inactive without benefits. Age is a very important factor to consider in this regard, as native-born women who are inactive tend to be older than immigrant women (52 years on average for native-born women versus 38 for EU and 32 for non-EU immigrant women, respectively). Other factors, such as the presence of young children in the household also help explain the imbalanced benefit distribution by place of birth.

Figure 2.14. The share of inactive women who receive benefits is lower among migrant women

Composition of economically inactive women, by benefit type and place of birth, 2014, Flanders



Note: Population aged 25 to 64. The definitions of employment, unemployment and inactivity differ from those in the Labour Force Survey, as Crossroads Bank for Social Security data come from information in administrative registers (for further information, see Chapter 4). "Unemployment benefits" also includes women who receive unemployment benefits but are exempted from registration as a job seeker because of education and training or personal reasons.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the national LFS enriched with data from the Crossroads Bank for Social Security (see Box 2.6).

A study by the Flemish Policy Research Centre for Work confirms that migrant women are overrepresented in the potential labour reserve, which includes discouraged job seekers (i.e. people who are available to work but not seeking employment), unavailable job seekers (i.e. people who are seeking work but not immediately available), and employable inactive persons (i.e. people who are not seeking work or not available for work, because of family responsibilities and because appropriate childcare is lacking or too expensive) (Sourbron and Vansteenkiste, 2018[16]).

More recently, VDAB has studied the employment-related hurdles faced by migrant women and their daughters who were economically inactive, contrasting their outcomes with control groups of job seeking and working women. Based on a semi-structured survey (N=95), focus groups (N=68), and in-depth interviews (N=68), the study shows that family responsibilities, discrimination, and the lack of language or digital competencies were the most commonly perceived barriers to professional life for inactive women (see also (Elloukmani and Raeymaeckers, 2022[17])). Family commitments stood in the way of job seeking and employment for six out of ten inactive women (compared to 27% of job seeking women) and was further aggravated by the lack of suitable childcare and part-time employment options (for further discussion, see Chapter 4). Close to half of the inactive women had felt discriminated against during their past job search (compared to 27% of job seeking women). Furthermore, close to four in ten mentioned that wearing a headscarf constituted an important barrier to employment (close to half of the women wore a headscarf). The lack of digital competencies also represented a more considerable challenge among inactive women than among job seeking and working women, whereas language difficulties were equally important. Prior bad experiences in the labour market were an essential driver in these women's decision not to work. In fact, most economically inactive women were "active" in various ways, with 85% taking care of their children or other people's children, 65% following a training or course, and 54% doing volunteering. At the same time, 37% were not registered with the PES but actively searched for work through other channels, and another 37% were planning to search for employment in the future (VDAB, 2020[18]).

Box 2.5. The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on immigrant employment

Across the OECD, the initial impact of the pandemic on the labour market outcomes of immigrants has been disproportionately negative, essentially eliminating the progress observed over the previous decade. However, 2021 labour market data showed a return to or near pre-crisis levels for most countries, including Belgium (OECD, 2022[19]; FPS Employment and Unia, 2022[8]).

In Flanders, there is a strong gender dimension to how the COVID-19 pandemic affected immigrant employment (see Table 2.1). Between 2016 and 2019, migrant women experienced a more substantial boost in their employment levels than native-born women and migrant men. The favourable trend was particularly evident among women born outside the EU; their employment rate increased from 43% to 53%. Consequently, the employment gap vis-à-vis their native-born peers was reduced by 7 percentage points To compare, the employment rate of non-EU immigrant men increased from 65% to 71%, and the employment gap was reduced by 4 percentage points However, migrant women were also disproportionally hit by the COVID-19 crisis in Flanders, and their employment recovery was slower than that of their male counterparts. Consequently, in 2021, the employment gap between non-EU immigrant women and native-born women bounced back to the 2016 level, at 27 percentage points In contrast, the employment gap for immigrant men continued to decline towards 5 percentage points Unemployment and inactivity outcomes confirm the disproportional effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labour market position of migrant women in Flanders.

Table 2.1. Immigrant women's employment has disproportionally suffered from the COVID-19 economic shock

Employment rate and employment gap vis-à-vis the native-born, by sex and place of birth, 2016-21, Flanders

		2016	2019	2020	2021
Employment rate					
Men	Native-born	77.4	80.0	78.9	78.7
	EU-born	77.8	81.4	82.4	85.5
	Non-EU-born	64.7	71.1	71.4	73.4
Women	Native-born	70.4	73.6	73.5	74.9
	EU-born	65.2	71.6	70.7	70.6
	Non-EU-born	42.9	53.0	47.9	47.9
Employment gap vis-à-vis the native-born					
Men	EU-born	0.4	1.4	3.5	6.8
	Non-EU-born	-12.7	-8.9	-7.5	-5.3
Women	EU-born	-5.2	-2.0	-2.8	-4.3
	Non-EU-born	-27.5	-20.6	-25.6	-27.0

Note: Population aged 20 to 64. A negative figure refers to a higher employment rate among the native-born than the foreign-born.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the national LFS.

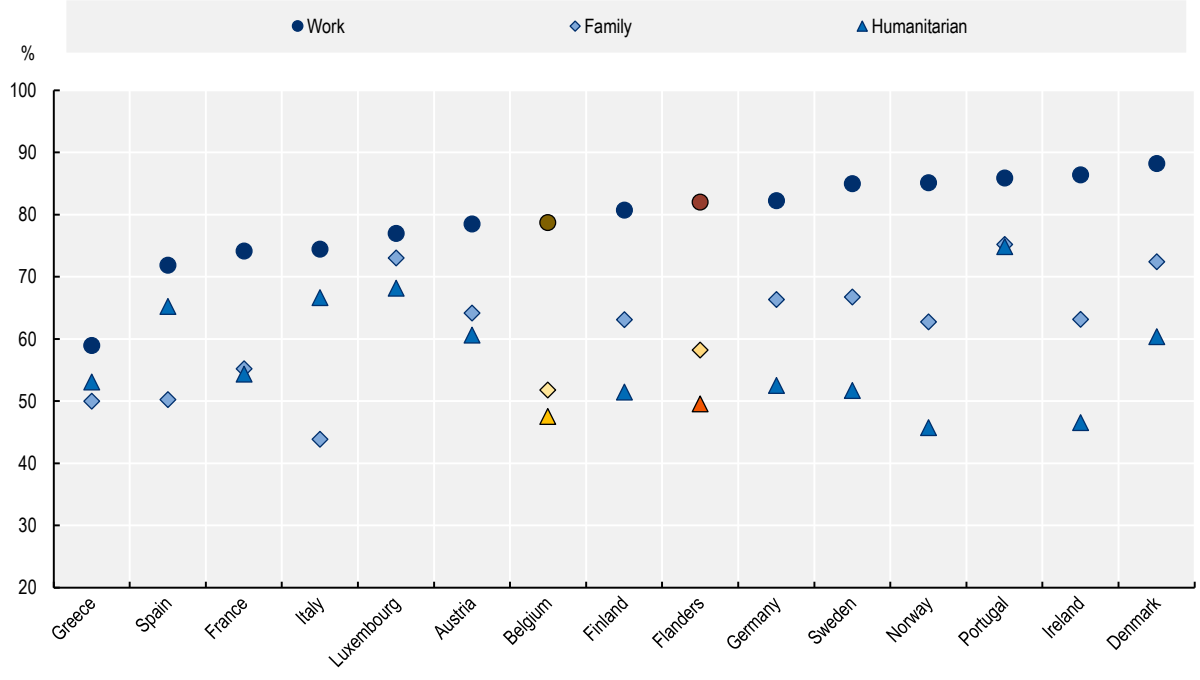
The success of integration is highly correlated with the purpose for migration

As elsewhere in the OECD, labour market outcomes in Flanders also vary markedly by reason prompting the decision to migrate (FPS Employment; Unia, 2019[20]; Lens, Marx and Vujić, 2018[21]). Humanitarian migrants tend to face considerable barriers to integration, stemming from their migration being driven by push rather than pull factors. They often had little to no time to prepare for migration, are more likely to suffer from health conditions like post-migration stress or trauma and are further hampered by asylum seeker-specific obstacles such as legal restrictions to access the labour market, protracted asylum procedures and a temporary or insecure residency status. In contrast to labour migrants, who often already have an employer upon arrival, refugees also arrive without a job. Moreover, unlike family migrants, refugees often have no family links to their host country and more limited networks to orient themselves and access information (OECD, 2016[22]; Herman et al., 2014[23]).

More than those who migrate for other reasons, refugees face a unique set of integration challenges, which is reflected in their employment figures (see Figure 2.15). In contrast to labour migrants, who perform relatively well in the Flemish labour market, refugees and family migrants have poor employment outcomes in international comparison. In 2021, the employment rate of refugees living in Flanders stood at 50%, lagging 32 percentage points behind labour migrants and 9 percentage points behind family migrants, respectively. Clearly, there are many attributes (particularly duration of residence) highly correlated with the reason for migration that may be driving the disparities across countries. Therefore, Chapter 3 builds on administrative data to further investigate the process of labour market entry and long-term outcomes among humanitarian and family migrants.

Figure 2.15. Refugees have low employment rates in Flanders

Employment rate, by main reason for migration, 2021, Flanders and selected European OECD countries



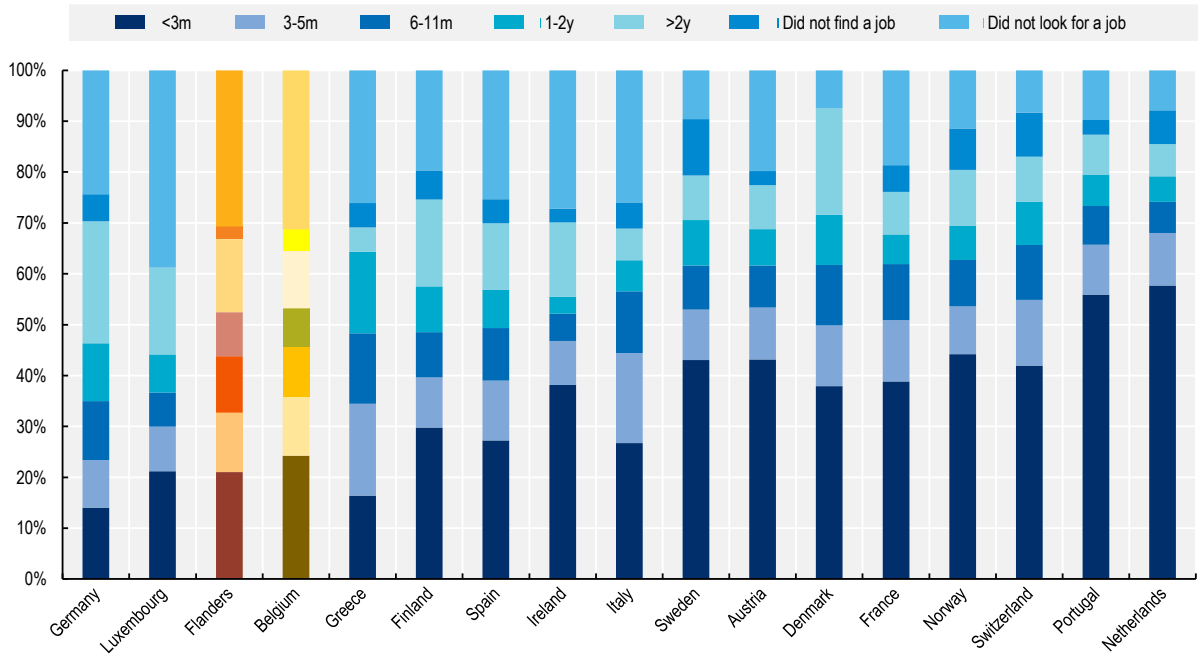
Note: Foreign-born population aged 15 to 64.
Source: OECD/European Commission (2023[4]) *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In*, https://doi.org/10.1787/1d5020a6-en; Flanders: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the 2021 ad hoc module of the national LFS.

Many non-EU immigrants never search for work in Flanders, and those who do take longer to find work than elsewhere

International evidence seems to indicate that migrants in Flanders face more barriers on their road to first employment than in many other European OECD countries. According to the 2021 ad hoc module of the European Labour Force Survey, close to one-third of non-EU immigrants in Flanders found their first job in less than six months, one of the lowest rates in international comparison (see Figure 2.16). Across the EU, half of non-EU immigrants only take up to five months to find a first job, and migrants are particularly fast in finding employment in the Netherlands and Portugal. At the same time, one in three non-EU migrants in Flanders never looked for a job, which is one of the highest shares recorded in the survey.

Figure 2.16. Migrants need more time to find a job in Flanders

Time required to find the first paid job in the host country among non-EU immigrants, 2021, Flanders and selected OECD countries



Note: Non-EU-born population aged 15 to 74. The variable covers only the duration of active job search in the host country, subtracting periods of being economically inactive. "Did not find a job" corresponds to the situation where the respondent looked for a job but did not find any. "Did not look for a job" includes different situations: (1) did not look for a job because a job was found before migration, (2) did not look for a job because do/did not have the right to work, (3) did not look for a job because of another reason. Data are ordered according to the sum of "<3m", "3-5m", and "6-11m"

Source: EU-LFS ad hoc module 2021 (Eurostat); Flanders: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the 2021 ad hoc module of the national LFS.

The return to education plays out differently for immigrants and the native-born

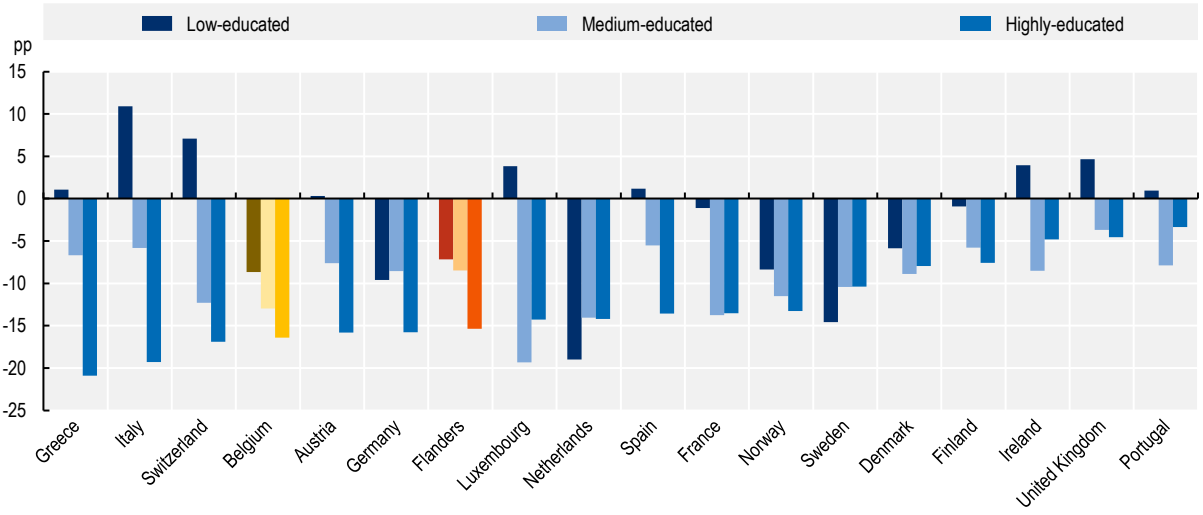
Flanders has an internationally high share of low-educated non-EU immigrants and poorer educational attainment goes some way to explain the weak labour market integration of immigrants. Nevertheless, studies for Belgium show that socio-demographic (age, gender, region of residence and type of household) and human capital characteristics (educational attainment) account for only a limited part (less than 20%) of the employment gap between non-EU immigrants and the native-born (Corluy, 2014[9]; National Bank of Belgium, 2020[11]; High Council for Employment, 2018[24]).

Differences in the return on education for employment are a particularly relevant factor. Indeed, studies for Belgium show that a high level of education is less beneficial for immigrants than for the native-born, whereas a low level of education is less detrimental for immigrants (National Bank of Belgium, 2020[11]; Corluy, 2014[9]; FPS Employment and Unia, 2022[8]). One explanation is that immigrants are more active in low-skilled sectors and are more inclined to accept lower wages, which boosts their chances of getting a job. Labour Force Survey data for the year 2021 confirm that the foreign-born and native-born population with an equal level of education still face very different labour market outcomes in Flanders. For the native-born, the employment rate increases significantly when they obtain higher degrees: from 52% for the low-educated to 79% for the medium-educated (+27 percentage points) to 91% for the highly educated (+12 percentage points). For EU immigrants, on the other hand, the penalty for being low educated is lower, whereas the return to higher education is higher. Low-educated EU immigrants have an employment rate of 64% while that figure reaches 75% for the medium-educated (+11 percentage point) and 90% for the highly educated (+15 percentage points). But for non-EU immigrants, the return on education is worse, as they combine a similar penalty for a low level of education and a smaller premium for a higher level of education compared to the native-born: from 45% for the low-educated to 70% for the medium-educated (+25 percentage points) to 75% for the highly educated (+5 percentage points).

These different returns to education result in an employment penalty of 15 percentage points incurred by tertiary-educated immigrants born outside the EU compared to the native-born, a large gap in international comparison (see Figure 2.17). The lower employment levels of highly educated immigrants indicate the difficulty of transferring human capital acquired in the home country to the Flemish labour market. Indeed, virtually every labour market in the OECD discounts foreign tertiary degrees, and the Flemish labour market is no exception. The employment gap between highly educated immigrants educated in the host country and those educated abroad is 11 percentage point in Flanders, and it rises to 18 percentage points for non-EU migrants with foreign qualifications. These differences are larger than the EU average, yet not more pronounced than in Belgium as a whole or its neighbouring countries (the Netherlands, France, and Germany). What is more, given that highly educated immigrants who received their training in the host country still experience employment gaps with the native-born, it is clear that other forms of Flemish-specific human and cultural capital, including host country language proficiency, are instrumental for labour-market insertion.

Figure 2.17. The employment gap vis-à-vis the native-born is particularly pronounced among high-educated non-EU immigrants

Employment gap between non-EU immigrants and the native-born, by educational attainment, 2021, Flanders and selected European OECD countries



Note: Population aged 15 to 64, not in education.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on EU-LFS; Flanders: the national LFS.

For the low-educated in Flanders, the employment gap between immigrants and the native-born stood at 7 percentage points in 2021. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the comparatively small disparity in the employment levels of low-qualified immigrants and native-born in Flanders is also due to poor outcomes of the latter group. Recent OECD work has shown that the low-educated population faces significant challenges in the Belgian labour market (OECD, 2020[25]). In 2018, only 47% of the low-educated aged 20-64 were employed, compared to 52% in France, 61% in Germany, and 63% in the Netherlands. With an employment rate for the low-educated of 53%, Flanders performed slightly better than Belgium as a whole and France, but still lagged far behind Germany and the Netherlands.

The challenges for raising the employment rate of the low-educated in Flanders are likely to heighten in the future. Projections on future labour market demand indicate that employer demand for highly skilled workers will continue to increase whilst the demand for low-skilled workers is expected to drop significantly (by up to 7 percentage points between now and 2030) (OECD, 2020[25]). Trends of job polarisation, which result in the displacement of low-educated workers in low-skilled jobs by medium-educated workers, further compound these challenges (High Council for Employment, 2020[26]). Given that, in 2021, 31% of the low-educated in Flanders were foreign-born (compared to 35% for Belgium as a whole), immigrants represent a particularly vulnerable group requiring special attention.

Besides lower employment, immigrants have less favourable job characteristics

Immigrants in Flanders are not only less often in employment, but they also tend to face less favourable job characteristics. Studies for Belgium show that, compared to the native-born, immigrants are more likely to work in low-skilled jobs with less favourable working conditions, in temporary work, and in jobs below their level of qualification (Lens, Marx and Vujić, 2018[21]; FPS Employment and Unia, 2022[8]). The disadvantage is the largest for non-EU immigrants, but there are also critical gaps in average job characteristics between EU immigrants and native-born. The quality of the jobs immigrants get into make them more sensitive to economic fluctuations and explain why they have more volatile careers (High

Council for Employment, 2018[24]; Lens and Oslejová, 2018[27]). At the same time, poor employment prospects may lead to a slight overall utility difference between employment and non-employment, encouraging some immigrants who are (or could have been) capable of supporting themselves through employment to rely on social benefits. The following section highlights immigrants' job characteristics in Flanders in an international context.

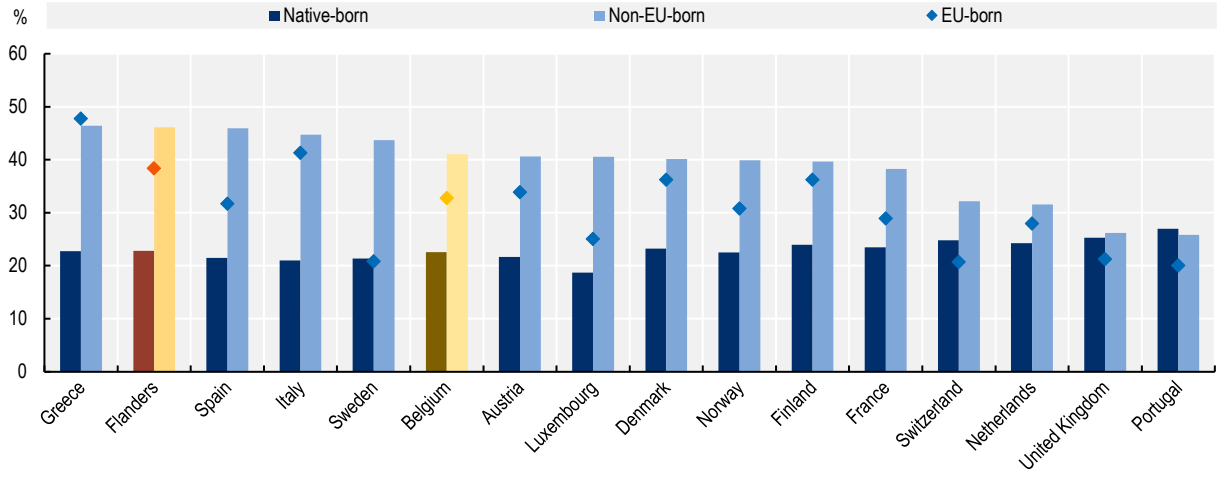
Collectively bargained minimum wages are high in Flanders and due to the high coverage of collective agreements, they effectively act as minimum wage floors (Fernandez et al., 2020[28]). The incidence of low pay (the share of workers earning less than two-thirds of median earnings) is therefore relatively modest in Flanders (11.5% in 2020) compared to the EU as a whole (15.8%) (OECD, 2022[29]). Still, the incidence of low pay is higher than in countries like France (9.5%), Denmark (8.7%) and the Netherlands (5.9%).

Figure 2.18 highlights the concentration of the foreign-born and the native-born in low-wage work. With over 46% of non-EU migrant workers working for a gross monthly wage in the lowest quartile of the wage distribution, concentration in Flanders is higher than in most other countries with a minimum wage – such as the United Kingdom, Portugal, the Netherlands and France. As foreign-born workers (especially the low-educated) are often concentrated in low-wage work in Flanders, they are likely disproportionately affected by minimum wages. While the national minimum wage does not appear high in Flanders compared to neighbouring countries, it is superseded by much higher sector minimum wages which apply to almost the entire workforce, due to high collective bargaining coverage (OECD, 2020[25]). While high minimum wages help to prevent in-work poverty, they can create a barrier to the employment of low-educated workers, especially for groups with further real or perceived productivity handicaps, such as immigrants (Pina, Corluy and Verbist, 2015[30]). As such, the willingness of employers to hire immigrants with poor language skills and additional training needs may be more limited in Flanders than elsewhere.

Where employer reluctance to hire foreign-born workers stems from concerns over productivity in the context of high minimum wages, labour market policies can overcome these demand side hurdles through employer incentives such as wage subsidies. Flanders has been among the OECD countries making the most use of this type of active labour market policies in recent years (see Chapter 5 for further discussion).

Figure 2.18. Non-EU immigrants are heavily concentrated in low-wage jobs

Share of employees in the lowest wage quartile, by place of birth, 2020, Flanders and selected European OECD countries



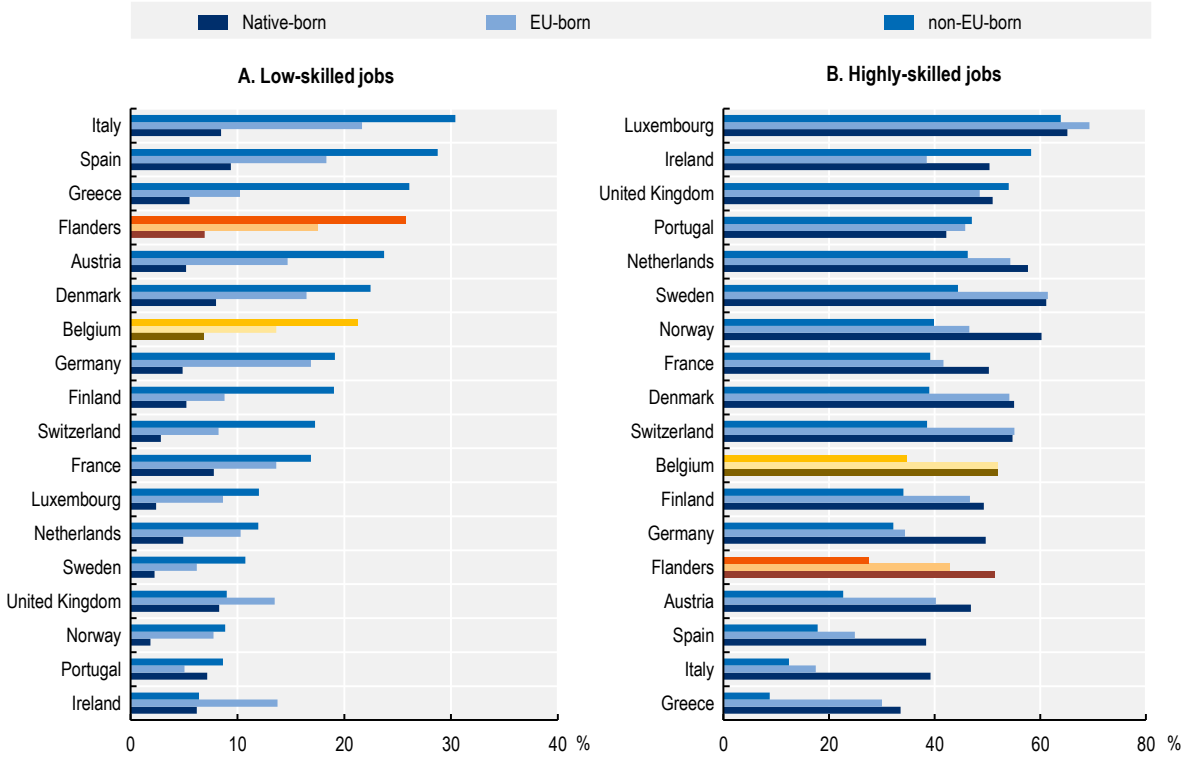
Note: Population aged 16 to 64 who are employed. The self-employed and those still in education are excluded. Wages refer to gross monthly earnings for employees.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on EU-SILC.

Despite having a relatively knowledge-intensive labour market (OECD, 2019[10]), Flanders' share of low-skilled employment (9% in 2021) is more extensive than in many other European OECD countries, particularly compared to Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Finland and Germany (where it makes up between 3% and 7% of total employment). An explanation for the higher prevalence of menial jobs in Flanders is the heavily subsidised Service Voucher Scheme (see Chapter 5 for further information). This scheme has been shown to account for around one-third of the low-skilled jobs in Belgium (High Council for Employment, 2020[26]).

Figure 2.19 shows that immigrants are heavily concentrated in low-skilled jobs in Flanders. While just 7% of the native-born in Flanders worked in low-skilled employment in 2021, this share rises to 18% for EU immigrants and 26% for non-EU immigrants. At the other end of the labour market, nearly half of the employed native-born held highly skilled positions, compared to 43% of EU immigrants and 28% of non-EU immigrants. In international comparison, Flanders has one of the highest shares of non-EU immigrants in low-skilled jobs and one of the lowest shares in high-skilled jobs.

Figure 2.19. A relatively large share of immigrants works in occupations requiring lower skills

Share of the employed population working in low-skilled and highly skilled jobs, by place of birth, 2021, Flanders and selected European OECD countries



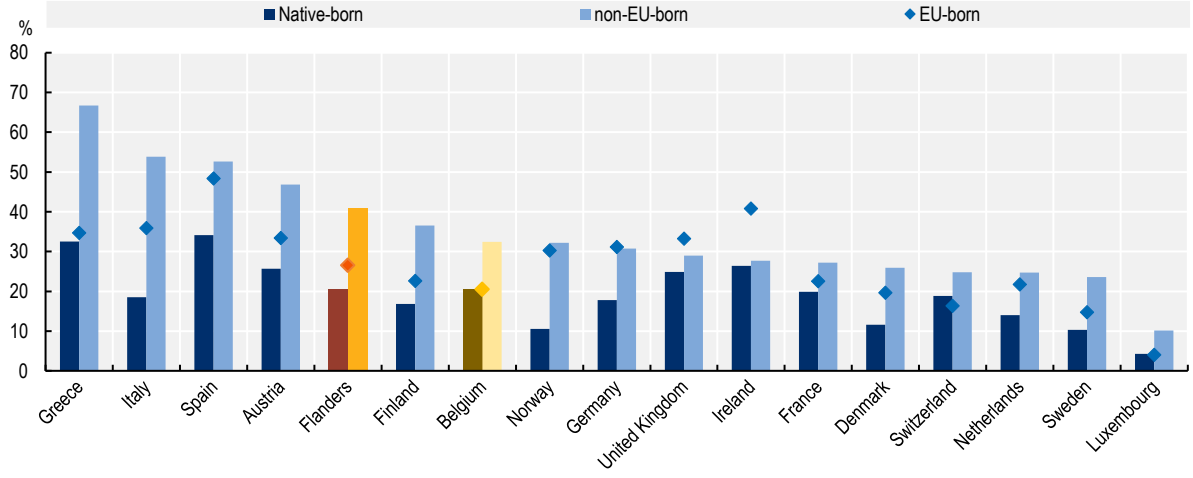
Note: Population aged 15 to 64 who are employed. Those employed in the armed forces and those still in education are excluded. Job skills are measured by the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO). Low-skilled occupations include jobs classified under the ISCO group 9: elementary occupations. High-skilled occupations include jobs classified under the ISCO group 1, 2, and 3: legislators, senior officials, and managers, professionals and technicians and associate professionals.
Source: OECD/European Commission (2023[4]) *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In*, https://doi.org/10.1787/1d5020a6-en; Flanders: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the national LFS.

Across OECD labour markets, education acquired abroad is often strongly discounted (Damas De Matos and Liebig, 2014[7]). A typical consequence of this is formal over-qualification. Over-qualification among the foreign-born frequently occurs when – uncertain about the value of immigrants' foreign qualifications – employers are unwilling to offer employment at a commensurate level. Immigrants who are pushed to find work quickly to become self-sufficient or to support a family are particularly vulnerable to getting stuck in a job for which they are overqualified. As in most European OECD countries, over-qualification is more widespread among immigrants than the native-born in Flanders (see Figure 2.20).[6] In 2021, 41% of non-EU immigrants worked in jobs for which they were formally over-qualified, compared to 21% of their native peers. Over-qualification rates among EU-born immigrants (27%) are also higher than those of the native-born, though by much smaller margins. The over-qualification gap between the native- and foreign-born in Flanders is relatively large in international comparison and considerably larger than in Belgium as a whole.

As expected, recent migrants are particularly affected by over-qualification in Flanders, with a formal over-qualification rate 14 percentage points higher than that of settled migrants. However, even settled migrants who have been in Flanders for ten or more years are 9 percentage points more likely than the native-born to be overqualified.

Figure 2.20. When employed, the qualifications of immigrants often remain underused

Over-qualification rate, by place of birth, 2021, Flanders and selected European OECD countries



Note: Population aged 15 to 64 who are highly educated and employed. Those employed in armed forces and those still in education are excluded. The over-qualification rate is the share of highly educated (ISCED 5-8) who work in low- or medium-skilled jobs (ISCO 4-9).
Source: OECD/European Commission (2023[4]) *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In*, https://doi.org/10.1787/1d5020a6-en; Flanders: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the national LFS.

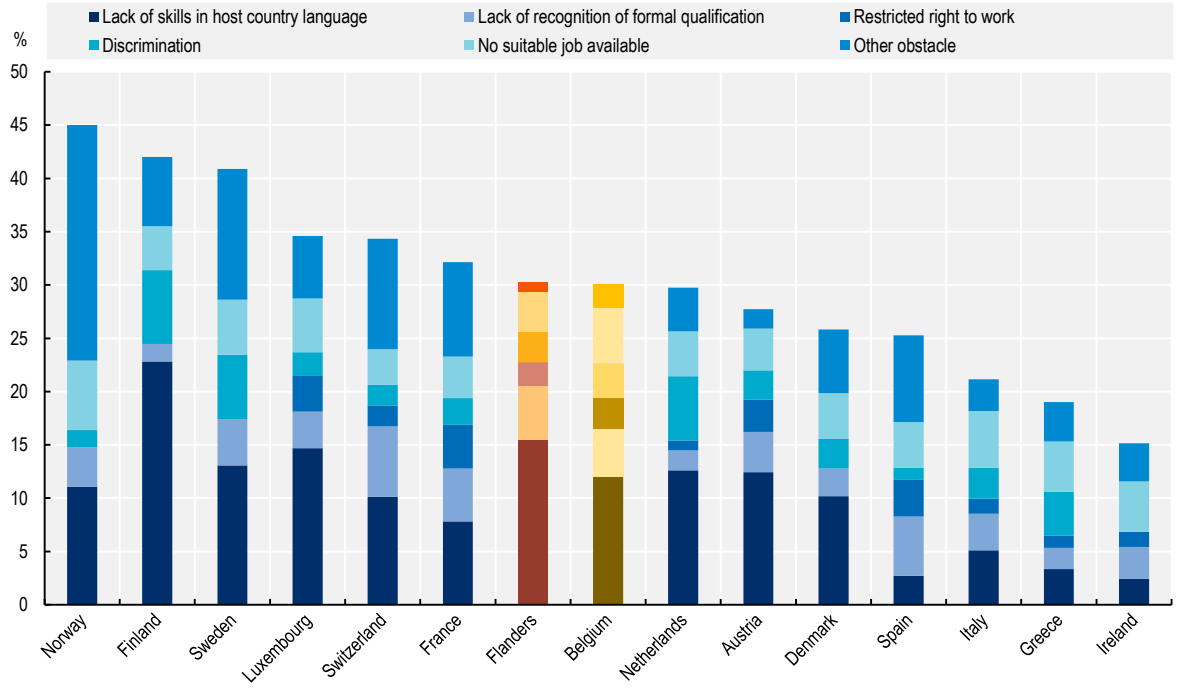
The lack of Dutch language skills is the main obstacle to getting a suitable job

According the 2021 Ad Hoc Module of the Labour Force Survey, around 30% of the non-EU immigrants living in Flanders in 2021 reported obstacles in getting a suitable job. This share is higher than the EU total (27%), but still well below countries like Norway, Finland and Sweden (see Figure 2.21). In most of the European countries, the lack of host-country language skills was the most mentioned obstacle. However, in Flanders, the lack of host-country language skills is – both in absolute and in relative terms – particularly important, with close to 16% of the non-EU immigrants reporting it as the main obstacle to getting a suitable job. Finland is the only European country where this share stood higher.

Still, there were significant disparities by sex and place of birth in the share of immigrants reporting difficulty in finding suitable work in Flanders. Non-EU immigrants and migrant women clearly stood out as the most vulnerable groups. Among immigrants who had ever worked or looked for a job in Flanders, the share who reported that they faced obstacles in getting a suitable job was three times higher among non-EU immigrants than EU immigrants. Moreover, 26% of migrant women said that they faced obstacles in the Flemish labour market, compared to 19% of men. While the lack of Dutch language skills was the most mentioned obstacle amongst all migrant groups, migrant women seemed to face this problem more often than men. The lack of recognition of a formal qualification obtained abroad, discrimination on the grounds of foreign origin, and the restricted right to work because of citizenship or residence permit prerequisites were other often-cited labour market obstacles for non-EU immigrants.

Figure 2.21. The lack of host-country language skills is a more critical obstacle to getting a suitable job in Flanders than in other countries

Share of non-EU immigrants who have had obstacles to getting a suitable job in the host country, by main obstacle, 2021, Flanders and selected European OECD countries



Note: Foreign-born population aged 15 to 74 who had experience in working or looking for a job. The term "suitable" for a job refers to one's formal education attainment level, not to the field of education and not to previous work experience.
Source: EU-LFS ad hoc module 2021 (Eurostat); Flanders: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the 2021 ad hoc module of the national LFS.

Immigrants are overrepresented in atypical work

In addition to earnings and job skill levels, non-standard work constitutes an essential dimension of employment. In international comparison, Flanders has a low rate of temporary employment but a high rate of part-time employment (Nautet and Piton, 2019[31]). Like most European OECD countries, immigrants in Flanders are hired on temporary contracts far more often than the native-born. In 2021, 8% of EU immigrants and 11% of non-EU immigrants in employment were working on temporary contracts, whereas the proportion of the native-born working on such contracts was just 6%.

Flanders does not stand out as an outlier in the extent to which foreign-born workers are employed on temporary contracts, rather to the contrary. Still, the relatively strict employment protection legislation for permanent employment means that temporary work may be particularly important to help new arrivals gain a foothold in the Flemish labour market (OECD, 2020[25]). The use of temporary contracts has increased substantially over the past decade (Nautet and Piton, 2019[31]), and the prevalence of new arrivals on this type of contract may also (partly) reflect this institutional evolution. Indeed, in 2021, 16% of recent migrants worked in temporary contracts in Flanders, which is more than twice as high as the share among their peers with more than ten years of residence (7%). As such, temporary work may provide new arrivals with a steppingstone into permanent work (for further discussion, see Chapter 5).

In international comparison, part-time work among employed women is relatively widespread in Flanders. In most European OECD countries (except for the Netherlands and Switzerland), foreign-born women have higher rates of part-time work than native-born women and this is also the case in Flanders. In 2021, around 47% of immigrant women (50% when born in a non-EU country) and 42% of the native-born women were part-timers. As in many other European OECD countries, involuntary part-time work is higher among foreign-born women in Flanders. In 2021, 17% of part-time working immigrant women declared that they wished to work more hours, against 12% of the native-born.

Box 2.6. Data collection for monitoring integration of immigrants and their children in Flanders

Administrative data

In Belgium, the Flemish and the Federal Government collect administrative data that have resulted in elaborated databases to measure the integration of immigrants and their children, such as the Crossroads Bank for Social Security (Belgium), the Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration (Flanders), and AGoDi (Flanders). By request, these administrative (and survey) databases can be linked using the individual national registration number.

The **National Register** is the main source for population and migration data in Belgium. It includes the population register (Belgians and foreigners with a permanent residence permit) and the register of aliens (foreigners with temporary residence permit for more than 3 months). Both registers contain data registered at the local level by cities and municipalities. The National Register also includes the waiting register in which asylum seekers are registered by the Service of Foreign Affairs (for further information, see Chapter 3). Based on the National Register, Statistics Belgium (Statbel) calculates the official population figures and international migration data.

The **Crossroads Bank for Social Security** is a key source for detailed longitudinal monitoring and evaluation research on integration of immigrants and their children in Belgium. For all inhabitants who are registered in the National Register, the data warehouse labour market and social protection of the Crossroads Bank provides detailed information at the individual and household level on the place of residence, (first) nationality and country of birth (also of parents and grandparents), immigrants' category of entry, demographic information, socio-economic situation (unemployment, social assistance, retirement, sickness, invalidity and disability, and child allowances, measures to enhance the labour market participation and specific reductions of social security contributions), labour market situation (wages, employer and sector, social security contributions, labour regime), socio-economic mobility (trends in labour regime and activity and employment rate), and level of education. The Data Warehouse does not yet include direct information on participation in civic integration and public employment service measures. Furthermore, because the Crossroads Bank for Social Security is a collection of administrative data from different governmental departments, its data only becomes available with a delay of one or two years.

The **Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration** of the Agency for Home Affairs of the Flemish Government is an internal database containing information delivered by the integration agencies. The Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration works as client tracking system with data on the civic integration trajectory (including Dutch-as-a-second language training) and background characteristics (e.g. birth nationality, category of entry) of migrants following a civic integration process. It forms the main instrument for systematic monitoring of civic integration in Flanders. Based on this data, the administration allocates financial means to the integration agencies.

The **AGoDI** Database of the Flemish Department of Education and Training provides information on the educational track, school careers, delays in school trajectories, dropout rates, the number, age, and nationality of students in reception education, and the transition of these newly arrived minors to mainstream education. The data allow to systematically evaluate the outcomes of cohorts of students on a longitudinal basis. A limitation, however, is that native-born children of immigrants can only be identified through a proxy of the spoken language at home.

Finally, the Flemish PES **VDAB** has an internal database containing information on all persons registered as job seekers, including their unemployment trajectory (inflow and outflow), background characteristics (e.g. educational level, language skills), and participation in activation measures (e.g. classroom training, workplace training, job search assistance, vocational language training).

Monitoring instruments

Consistent with the decentralisation the integration policy, monitoring and evaluation of integration are primarily carried out at the regional level. However, the federal government still has important instruments to support and monitor the integration policies of the regions. Notably, every two years, the Federal Public Service Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue and Unia undertake the **Socio-Economic Monitoring**; a state of integration of immigrants and their children in the Belgian labour market (including figures split by region) based on aggregated data drawn from the Crossroads Bank for Social Security.

At the regional level, the report **Social position and participation of people of foreign origin** by Statistics Flanders started in 2013 and systematically generates administrative and statistical data on migration and integration processes (linked to the themes of work, education, income, housing, health, and social participation) in Flanders. The **Living together in Diversity survey** is a large-scale survey conducted in 2017 and 2022 by the Agency for Home Affairs among approximately 5 000 people of Belgian, Moroccan, Turkish, Polish, Romanian, Congolese and Afghan parentage living in Flanders and Brussels. Additionally, in 2022, the Agency for Home Affairs conducted for the first time the **Barometer Living Together**, which surveys people of Belgian, EU and non-EU parentage about themes including citizenship, social networks, and equal treatment.

Finally, at the local level, the **Local Integration Scan** (part of the City and Municipal Monitor) gathers administrative data on the size and structure of immigrant populations and their native-born offspring for each of the Flemish municipalities. In addition, a selection of indicators charts the socio-economic position of immigrants and their offspring in terms of work, education, income, housing, and social participation, based on administrative data and citizen surveys.

Integration policy evaluation

Despite the need for evidence-based integration and labour market policy, comprehensive evaluations of the process, output, outcome, or impact of integration measures based on certain criteria of efficiency or effectiveness are – in comparison to the monitoring initiatives – not yet systematically embedded in Flanders.

University centres that were selected by the Flemish Government to evaluate the Flemish integration policy have been able to develop cross-domain microdata by connecting several administrative databases (De Cuyper, Vandermeerschen and Kuppens, 2017[32]; De Cuyper, Lambert and Pauwels, 2010[33]; De Cuyper, 2016[34]; Vandermeerschen et al., 2017[35]; Wood and Neels, 2020[36]). However, these processes have proven time-consuming and cumbersome. Given that high-quality administrative data on migration, integration, education and training, and job placement (all competencies in the remit of the Flemish Government) are available in Flanders, it seems highly appropriate to proceed with a **structural integration** of these data infrastructures in the short term. Such an administrative socio-economic panel would enable a continuous monitoring of integration outcomes and evaluation of policy interventions (Neels and Wood, 2019[37]).

Source: https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/maatschappelijke-positie-en-participatie-van-personen-van-buitenlandse-herkomst; https://gemeente-stadsmonitor.vlaanderen.be/jouw-gemeentescan; https://samenleven-in-diversiteit.vlaanderen.be/; https://www.barometersamenleven.be/.

Development of integration policy

From a selective and voluntary reception policy towards a general and obligatory civic integration programme

During the past decades, OECD countries have responded to increasing immigration flows by designing and implementing integration and civic integration policies (OECD, 2023[38]). Compared to other North-West-European countries, Belgium has long been characterised by a lack of coherent integration policies (Vandevoordt and Verschraegen, 2019[39]; Noppe et al., 2018[40]). Until the early 1980s, in the absence of a coherent political vision on integration, most of the integration support came from civil society organisations. The latter organised language classes, assisted in finding accommodation and set up various local experiments and projects related to reception policy for new arrivals. Between 1980 and 1990, after shifting integration to the regional level (see Box 2.7), civil and state actors collaborated closely to establish an integration policy in Flanders. Since then, new policy priorities have reformed the integration sector, shifting integration responsibilities from civil actors to the state. Throughout the 1990s, the Flemish Government created long-term project funds for civil initiatives and municipalities to develop local integration policies, which led to growing professionalism and specialisation of integration services.

By 2003, the formal integration policy in Flanders took shape (Loobuyck and Jacobs, 2009[41]; Noppe et al., 2018[40]; De Cuyper, Lambert and Pauwels, 2010[33]). The *Act on the Flemish Civic Integration Policy* (inburgeringsbeleid), which was adopted by the Flemish Parliament in 2003 and fully implemented one year later, was modelled after the Netherlands. The policy's cornerstone was a training programme and one-on-one counselling for newly arrived migrants. The programme focused on proficiency in Dutch and generally – but not necessarily – consisted of Dutch language courses, lessons of introduction to Flemish society and democratic values, and some help for accessing the labour market (see Chapter 3 for further discussion). Reception offices (three urban and five provincial) were the central providers and they co-operated with the municipalities, the Dutch language houses (who co-ordinated the organisation of language courses), Dutch language training providers and the Flemish Public Employment Service (PES) for the implementation of the programme.

The programme's target group has always been broader than the group obliged to undertake tuition. From 2004 onwards, the civic integration track became compulsory for refugees and for non-EU immigrants married to a non-EU national. Based on international regulations and European legislation, citizens of the European Economic Area and their spouses, children and parents are not compelled but entitled to go through a civic integration process. New arrivals aged 65 and older or seriously ill or disabled are also exempt from the requirement. Since its adoption, the Civic Integration Act was amended in 2006, 2008

and 2012, mainly to broaden the target group of the civic integration policy to other categories of newly arrived migrants, long-standing immigrants who receive social benefits or social housing, and even the native-born with immigrant parents. However, few long-standing migrants and native-born took up the programme, and from 2013 onwards, the focus moved back to new arrivals. The 2006 amendments additionally placed more emphasis on sanctions. Since 2009, a sanction system of administrative fines between EUR 50 and 5 000 is in place in case of non-participation when required, irregular participation, or not accomplishing the integration track without a valid reason (in practice, the fine is often around EUR 100).

As a result of higher immigration inflows and the programme's maturation, the number of civic integration participants (*inburgeraars*) went from 8 000 to 20 000 between 2005 and 2014, while funding for the reception offices went from EUR 9 million to 36 million over the same period. The average cost per person finishing the civic integration training stood at EUR 2 400 in 2014 (Court of Auditors, 2020[42]).

Box 2.7. The political context of Belgium and the role of the federal government regarding integration issues

In most OECD countries, responsibilities for integration are shared by several actors, which has often resulted in a certain complexity of the structures for integration. In Flanders, this complexity is particularly pronounced due to Belgium's federal structure (Martiniello, 2013[43]). Although Belgium is a relatively small country – with a little over 30 000 square kilometres and 11.6 million inhabitants, its historical north-south divide has led to a rather complex state structure. The country gradually transformed its unitary state into a federal one during six state reforms between 1970 and 2014, and it currently has three levels of government: a federal level, a linguistic level (the Dutch-speaking community, the French-speaking community, and the German-speaking community), and a regional level (the Flemish Region, the Walloon Region, and the Region of Brussels Capital). Every community and every region have their own government, complementary to the federal one. However, because the Flemish community and region largely overlap (except for the Flemish-speaking population in the bilingual city of Brussels), the Flemish community and regional governments have merged. That leaves the country with six governments and the same number of parliamentary assemblies. Post-1993 state reforms brought down a significant number of responsibilities from the federal to the lower levels. Integration policy has followed this trend; the lion's share of responsibilities now lies with the communities. Consequently, legal aspects, practices, policies and budgets attributed to integration differ considerably from one entity to the other (Adam, 2013[44]; Loobuyck and Jacobs, 2009[41]).

Nevertheless, the federal government remains an essential player via its control over immigration and asylum policy and through various competencies, such as social security (unemployment benefits), taxation and employment regulations. Furthermore, the federal level houses anti-discrimination responsibilities (see Chapter 5 for further discussion).

Co-operation between the various policy levels does not always run smoothly for various reasons. To co-ordinate the policy of the federal government and the federated states, an Inter-Ministerial Conference was established in February 2021. To support a comprehensive and coherent integration policy across policy levels, the Inter-Ministerial Conference seeks to offer a consultation platform where issues that fall under different competencies and policy levels can be debated. A working group made up of representatives of the different governments tasked with policies that pertain to migration and integration will prepare the consultations.

Further changes centralised and professionalised integration policies

A structural reform laid down in the *Integration and Civic Integration Act* of June 2013 further centralised the integration landscape (Noppe et al., 2018[40]; Pulinx and Van Avermaet, 2015[45]). One of the most critical aspects of the 2013 Act concerned the creation of an autonomous government-controlled Agency for Integration and Civic Integration (*Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering*), as well as two local agencies for the cities of Ghent (*IN-Gent*) and Antwerp (*Atlas*). In 2015, all existing institutions and organisations of the integration sector (the centre of expertise on Migration and Integration, the reception offices, the integration centres, the Houses of Dutch, and the social services providing translation and interpretation) were merged and integrated into one agency, to improve co-ordination and achieve efficiency gains.

However, the move toward a centralised integration agency did not always go hand in hand with better co-ordination and efficiency, notably in small municipalities. In a recent report prepared for the Flemish Parliament, the Belgian Court of Auditors (2020[42]) showed that, while the reform was supposed to be budgetary neutral, the integration agencies were much more expensive than the former integration sector. Throughout the 2015-18 period, subsidies rose from EUR 35 to 43 million. As a result, between 2017 and 2019, the agencies underwent a significant restructuring including numerous layoffs and budget cuts. According to the Court of Auditors, part of these budgetary problems could have been avoided through better management of the agencies' financial plan and staff. Challenges are also partly structural, as the financing model is not fully adapted to the agencies' needs. It was based on a subsidy at the end of year based on the number of civic integration contracts in that year, which did not allow for a flexible response to the strongly fluctuating workload. Following the Court of Auditors' report, the agencies now receive a subsidy based on the number of civic integration contracts and Dutch as a second language (Dutch L2) intakes in the year 2019, which is an important step forward.

Another modification concerns the level of Dutch that is aimed for at the end of the civic integration track. In 2014, this was raised from level A1 (i.e. breakthrough or beginner) of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to level A2 (i.e. waystage or elementary). Additionally, the obligation to participate was replaced by an expectation to produce results. Before, one was obliged to attend Dutch classes, be present 80% of the time and thereby demonstrate the intention to learn Dutch. After the reform, not only attendance is obligatory, but to receive the attestation of civic integration, passing the exam of Dutch at CEFR level A2 is necessary. For illiterate integration participants, however, other targets apply (A1 written and A2 oral).

The emphasis increasingly shifted towards civic integration and language learning as a means for integration

In addition to the civic integration programme, which groups the instruments that explicitly enhance immigrants' self-sufficiency, Flanders additionally advanced a broader-based integration policy, aimed at the mutual accommodation of immigrants and their receiving society (Noppe et al., 2018[40]). While civic integration was a direct competence of the Flemish Minister for Home Affairs, the integration policy was mainly realised through general measures within various policy areas of the Flemish Government. To streamline policies across different government departments and agencies, the 2013 Integration Act required every new legislation to publish a *Horizontal Integration and Equal Opportunities Policy Plan*, in which all agencies identify the planned steps to tackle integration issues. The Flemish Agency for Home Affairs co-ordinates, but each Agency is expected to contribute. Some horizontal co-ordination efforts were also taken up by the Flemish Committee for Integration Policy, headed by a Chief Diversity Officer with representatives from government agencies, local authorities, and interest groups. However, this committee was dissolved (and not replaced) in 2020, which led to a more splintered inter-agency exchange.

From 2014 onwards, policy makers' emphasis shifted more and more towards civic integration and strengthening the knowledge of Dutch as a means for integration, and few structural actions on integration

topics such as discrimination or anti-racism were developed in Flanders (Vandepol, Michielsen and De Cuyper, 2013[46]; Vandermeerschen, De Cuyper and De Rick, 2020[47]; Social and Economic Council of Flanders, 2016[48]). The fact that immigrants' access to citizenship and social provisions and services was made dependent on their skills in Dutch is a clear consequence of this policy shift (Pulinx and Van Avermaet, 2015[45]). Migrants who want to apply for Belgian nationality need to prove, amongst other things, their societal integration (through a certificate that testifies to the successful completion of the integration programme, a domestic degree of upper secondary level or above, or a five-year continuous employment period) and their competence in one of the official Belgian languages (Dutch, French and German) at CEFR level A2. In addition, eligibility for social housing in Flanders has been made dependent on candidates' proven knowledge of Dutch at CEFR level A2 (oral). Migrants who receive social security benefits but lack the necessary Dutch language skills (often based on the judgment of social service assistants) can also be obliged to take up language tuition. Finally, social services, such as the Public Centres for Social Welfare (PCWS), started monitoring immigrants' attendance in language classes, and non-attendance or insufficient attendance sometimes leads to temporary discontinuation of social assistance benefits.

Recent reforms have made civic integration much more demanding

The redrafted *Integration and Civic Integration Act*, which was adopted by the Flemish Parliament in July 2021 and (will be) gradually implemented over the 2022-23 period, substantially modifies the organisation of the civic integration programme. This section provides an overview of the main changes this Act introduces, but Chapter 2 offers a more in-depth discussion.

The first round of policy adjustments went into effect in March 2022. First, the civic integration programme's target group is defined more strictly. Asylum seekers with a pending request for international protection no longer qualify for the integration programme (before, they were entitled to participate four months after they lodged their asylum application). Also caravan dwellers and persons without legal residence are no longer explicitly subject of the integration policy. Second, the civic integration track is expanded with a third pillar: a compulsory registration at the Flemish PES for all working-age immigrants who have the right to work within two months after signing an integration contract. Before the reform, integration agencies referred only a small share of the integration participants (mainly those with a "professional perspective") to the PES. Third, expectations of formal language learning after the integration track are heightened. Immigrants who have completed their integration training and are unemployed will need to independently acquire an oral competence of Dutch at CEFR level B1 (i.e. threshold or intermediate) within two years and prove this competence by showing attestation or taking a test. Only persons who worked or studied continuously for six months during the 24 months after finishing the integration track are exempted, as well as persons with limited learning capacities (i.e. who are physically or mentally unable to obtain an oral competence of Dutch at CEFR level B1). Fourth, the result requirements of the integration programme are tightened. For civic orientation and Dutch L2, passing a course is evaluated by a combination of process evaluation (i.e. active and consistent attendance in class, task completion) and taking a standardised test. Sanctions are imposed for test failures in case of irregular participation. While the Dutch L2 test will be implemented in September 2023, the civic orientation test was formally introduced in March 2022.

In January 2023, another important modification will come into effect. The civic integration programme is expanded with a fourth pillar: a social networking and participation project. In addition to the first three pillars (civic orientation, Dutch L2, and registration at the PES), the new pillar offers newly arrived migrants a tailor-made programme of 40 hours to strengthen their social network and to enable participation in society. The programme can be a buddy project, (language) internship in a company, association or local government, volunteer work, and community work. Local governments are a priority partner for this part of the civic integration programme, as they are required to facilitate access to a diverse set of participation initiatives.

Finally, from September 2023 onwards, integration training will no longer be free of charge. Immigrants will be expected to pay EUR 360 for integration measures (EUR 90 for language and civic orientation courses and EUR 90 per examination). However, some groups of immigrants entitled to participate in the programme will be exempted from payment, as well as integration participants who reside in Brussels.[7]

The integration sector, the Flemish social partners and a variety of civil society actors have expressed concerns that the revised Integration Act will impose additional challenges on newly arrived migrants, first and foremost by asking a financial contribution for integration training (Social and Economic Council of Flanders, 2021[49]; Flemish Educational Council, 2021[50]). The introduction of fees, as noted by the Flemish Education Council (*Vlaamse Onderwijsraad*), conflicts with the 2018 *Adult Education Funding Act*. This Act lowered and, in some cases, even abolished the education enrolment fee for vulnerable groups. It also introduced the contractual obligation for the PES to provide its services to job seekers without charge. Another concern expressed by the social partners is the discontinuation of the refund policy for integration participants' transport and childcare expenses (since March 2022), formerly facilitating participation in the integration training, particularly of migrant mothers (see Chapter 3 for further discussion).

Other parts of the new Integration Act, notably the two new integration pillars, have been received positively (Social and Economic Council of Flanders, 2021[49]; Flemish Educational Council, 2021[50]). The compulsory registration at the Flemish PES is expected to boost and accelerate immigrants' attachment to the labour market. The introduction of a networking programme is generally considered as an innovative and promising project, and many actors are looking forward to seeing its potential results. While similar projects exist in other OECD countries, they are not usually an integral part of the civic integration track (Reidsma and De Cuyper, 2021[51]).

Key actors in integration policy

Many actors are involved in shaping integration policy at all levels

Flemish integration policy is developed in different departments and agencies of the Flemish Government.[8] The primary responsibility for integration lies with the Integration unit of the Agency for Home Affairs (*Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur*). The Integration unit sets up a regulatory framework, co-ordinates the horizontal equal opportunities and integration policy, co-operates with international stakeholders, monitors the implementation of integration policy, supports scientific research and data collection, and initiates and finances innovative projects or organisations at the local level. It also works closely together with the executive agencies who are tasked with the implementation of integration policies, as well as other Departments (e.g. Work and Social Economy) and (semi-)public agencies (e.g. VDAB).

Three executive agencies implement ministerial policies on integration; IN-Gent for the city of Ghent, Atlas for the city of Antwerp and the Agency for Integration and Civic Integration for the remaining parts of Flanders and the Dutch-speaking community of Brussels (hereafter the report uses "integration agencies" to refer to all three agencies). For scale, in 2020, IN-Gent issued 7% of the civic integration certificates, Atlas 21%, and the Agency for Integration and Civic Integration 72%. Based on the distribution of the number of integration contracts signed, the Agency for Home Affairs funds all three agencies, and the cities of Antwerp and Ghent additionally support Atlas and IN-Gent. In 2018, the Agency for Integration and Civic Integration had more than 500 employees and a budget of EUR 53 million (Court of Auditors, 2020[42]). Notwithstanding some minor discretionary space to adapt to local circumstances, the three agencies work in a similar vein. Their primary responsibilities are organizing civic integration training, offering social translation and legal services, and supporting local authorities in developing integration-related initiatives. Integration agencies do not provide language classes themselves but look for the course and provider that offers the best fit for the migrant (for further discussion, see Chapter 3). The agencies also have a

co-ordinating role in the provision of language training, amongst others by ensuring that the supply and demand of language courses are aligned.

The Department of Education and Training (*Departement Onderwijs en Vorming*) is involved in integration in multiple ways. First, the Department is a major player in offering formal education and Dutch L2 training. The 48 Centres for Adult Education (*Centra voor Volwassenonderwijs*) support the development of a wide range of skills, such as technical skills and languages, in modular and flexible formats (e.g. evening courses). Adults can also obtain a secondary education degree in these centres through "second chance education". The 13 Centres for Adult Basic Education (*Centra voor Basiseducatie*) provide courses in basic skills (e.g. numeracy or digital skills) and Dutch L2, which is their most popular course by a large margin. The Department of Education and Training is also responsible for integrating newly arrived minors through the organisation of reception classes (*Onthaalonderwijs voor anderstalige kinderen, OKAN*). Finally, the Agency for Higher Education, Adult Education, Qualifications and Study Grants (*Agentschap voor Hoger Onderwijs, Volwassenenonderwijs, Kwalificaties en Studietoelagen, AHOVOKS*) runs the National Academic Recognition Information Centre (*NARIC*) which is in charge of the diploma recognition process. NARIC Flanders is a part of the broader NARIC network of organisations that compare academic qualifications across the EU and of the ENIC network that UNESCO and the Council of Europe spearhead with the same goal. Next to diploma recognition, AHOVOKS also has a programme for the Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning (*Erkennen van verworven competenties, EVC*) for immigrants and native-born to formally certify skills for which no diploma has been acquired.

The Flemish employment policy vis-à-vis immigrants has traditionally purported to sustain integration policy. The Department of Work and Social Economy (*Departement Werk en Sociale Economie*) prepares and monitors all policies related to the labour market and therefore, also deals with the integration of immigrants and their offspring. The Department additionally manages the European Social Fund (ESF) in Flanders, which funds innovative initiatives to tackle a range of social issues, including integration. Some policies, such as dual learning, are shared responsibilities between the Department of Education and Training and the Department of Work and Social Economy.

The Flemish public employment service VDAB (*Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling en Beroepsopleiding*) is a central actor in the design and implementation of employment policies. VDAB is an external and autonomous agency under the supervision of the Flemish Minister for Work. It is managed by an independent executive board consisting of the Flemish social partners. More than 80% of the VDAB's funding comes from the government budget, with additional funds from the European Social Fund and the organisation's own resources. VDAB monitors the unemployed, assists them in their job search, and tries to increase their "employability" by offering various training programmes to remedy potential skill deficits. VDAB offers its services to all job seekers and employees in Flanders and not just immigrants, but it did gradually tailor its offer to immigrants, amongst others by setting up language training that combines classroom instruction with workplace experience (see Chapter 4 for further discussion). Flanders operates a relatively centralised PES, meaning that targets and performance measurements are set centrally based on the management agreement between the VDAB and the Flemish Government. However, local VDAB offices can implement and use the centrally provided measures with a certain degree of autonomy. VDAB has been designated as "labour market director", meaning that it must stimulate collaboration with other labour market actors and create partnerships to align different services with each other. For example, VDAB works closely with employers, sectoral groups, and adult education centres to supply training to job seekers. Moreover, agreements with the integration agencies were struck to safeguard a smoother referral of newly arrived migrants to career guidance, job search programmes, and vocational training (see Chapter 3 for further discussion).

Another important actor is the Flemish Agency for Entrepreneurial Training Syntra (*Vlaams Agentschap voor Ondernemingsvorming*) which provides non-formal education (entrepreneurial training, sectoral training, and additional specialised training) to both immigrant and native-born clients.

While many policies relevant for immigrant integration are decided at the regional level, integration essentially happens at the local level. Municipalities and cities play a key role in welcoming and guiding immigrants when they first arrive in Flanders but are also essential stakeholders as they have a certain discretion over fund allocation to implement regional policies or their own integration projects (soon this will include the fourth pillar of the civic integration programme). In Flanders, local perspectives are represented by the Association of Flemish Cities and Communities (*Vereniging Vlaamse Steden en Gemeenten*).

Municipalities in Flanders also play an essential role through their responsibility for social assistance. The Public Centres for Social Welfare (*Openbaar Centrum voor Maatschappelijk Welzijn, OCMW*) are local government agencies which provide social assistance to individuals, including income support and guidance to those with insufficient or no social security rights. All people residing legally in Flanders have the right to social assistance if they cannot provide for themselves, and immigrants are heavily overrepresented (see Chapter 3 for further discussion). The Public Centres for Social Welfare (PCWS) are regulated by the regions but administered locally, and the 2017 *Act for Local Governance* has interlinked them very closely with municipalities and cities. Funding comes from various sources, but the municipal subsidy and federal refunds are the most important. The Centres also play a role in labour market policy through social inclusion and support employment for those confronted with severe difficulties concerning labour market participation. They develop their own activation, training and employment policies and initiatives. This is easier for large offices with larger budgets (cities or municipalities provide the means) or those who have partnerships established than for small individual operating centres. Some larger PCWS have their own employment agency, while smaller ones must cluster to organise such an agency.

Finally, the Flemish Housing Agency (*Agentschap Wonen Vlaanderen*) – part of the Flemish Ministry for Environment – offers another form of social assistance: it helps those in need with social housing or rental allowances.

Social partners are highly involved in integration policy

Flanders has a strong tradition of consensus-based decision-making in concertation with the government and its social partners. The tripartite discussion between government, employers, and labour within the Flemish Economic and Social Consultation Committee (*Vlaams Economisch Sociaal Overlegcomité, VESOC*) is an essential pillar of all Flemish policy making and integration policy. Two independent advisory councils exert a strong influence on the government's approach to integration policy. The Flemish Education Council (*Vlaamse Onderwijs Raad, VLOR*) provides the Department of Education and Training with advice on all preliminary decrees related to educational matters. The Educational Council has different sub-councils for different levels of education, including one for lifelong (language) learning. Each council is composed of a wide range of stakeholder representatives (e.g. students, socio-cultural organisations, principals, VDAB, SYNTRA).

A second advisory council is the Social and Economic Council of Flanders (*Sociaal Economische Raad van Vlaanderen, SERV*). It negotiates agreements, conducts research, drafts reports, and provides advice to the Flemish Government a wide range of policy issues, including integration. The Social and Economic Council is composed of representatives of social partners (employers, unions). While the advice of these councils is non-binding, they have considerable influence on policy decisions.

Flanders has an active approach consulting civil society and immigrant organisations

In Flanders, most integration measures and support are funded and provided by the government. This sets Flanders apart in international comparison where non-governmental organisations often provide (though not necessarily fund) integration services (OECD, 2023[38]). While the Flemish Government – at all levels – continues to be the most important actor, civil society actors form an integral part of the integration sector.

Already in 2000, the Flemish Government recognised the Minorities Forum, now known as LEVL, as an official discussion partner on all issues affecting immigrants and their children. LEVL is a network and participation organisation representing immigrants and their native-born offspring. The organisation offers policy advice and community outreach and is regularly consulted by the Flemish Minister for Home affairs, when drafting policy.

Because of Belgium's rather complex institutional structure and the wide range of stakeholders involved, the activities of some NGOs or other organisations regarding the integration of immigrants and their children often fall in between the competencies of the federal, regional, or local levels. Moreover, many NGOs or local organisations in this field work project-based and are funded as such (directly or indirectly through, for example, the European Social Fund, European Integration Fund, or Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund). As a result, and as was evidenced by the OECD field mission, many civil society organisations lack a structural long-lasting co-operation agreement with the Flemish or federal government. Many non-governmental and non-profit organisations work on a local basis. Some of these organisations have a very broad target group such as immigrants in general, whereas others focus more on specific target groups (e.g. refugees, high-educated newcomers, migrant women).

Flanders is taking action to reappraise the role of the local governments in the integration process

Generally legitimated by the principle of subsidiarity, Flemish local authorities have always held an essential governance position, and in the integration policy field too they are considered key partners. In Flanders, municipalities and cities are expected to take up a "governing role" in the Flemish horizontal integration policy, following the awareness that integration needs to happen where people are – in their workplaces, their neighbourhoods, the schools to which they send their children and the public spaces where they will spend their free time (OECD, 2018[52]).

The Flemish Government supports cities and municipalities in various ways (Deprez, Platteau and Hondeghem, 2018[53]). Based on the 2009 *Integration Act*, municipalities could receive a subsidy for their local integration policy in addition to the resources from the Municipal Fund. At the time, receiving a subsidy depended on the municipality appointing an official responsible for integration policy and an alderman responsible for integration, concluding a co-operation agreement with a provincial or local integration centre, and making a financial contribution to the costs and operation of the integration service. In 2014, the modalities for receiving a subsidy changed. At least 10% of the inhabitants had to be of foreign-born parentage (or minimum 1 000 persons of foreign-born parentage had to live in the municipality), the municipality had to assume a "governing role" in the field of integration policy, and the municipality had to include integration policies in its strategic multi-year plan by subscribing to the Flemish policy priorities in the field of integration and by formulating indicators to monitor its integration policy. In 2014-15, 57 of the 308 municipalities received such a subsidy, which ranged between EUR 55 000 on average for smaller municipalities and EUR 132 000 on average for so-called "centre cities" (Deprez, Platteau and Hondeghem, 2018[53]).[9] In 2016, in the context of reducing municipalities' administrative burden, the integration subsidy was incorporated into the Municipal Fund so that resources were no longer earmarked and municipalities no longer had an obligation to report their expenses on integration. Between 2016 and 2018, based on the 2016 *Flemish Government Act*, 164 cities and municipalities could additionally apply for a subsidy from the Flemish Government to deal with the increased influx of refugees, which ranged between EUR 40 000 for smaller municipalities and EUR 532 000 for centre cities (Deprez, Platteau and Hondeghem, 2018[53]). Next to Flemish Government subsidies, local authorities can also directly apply for European funding, such as the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) of the EU. Research shows that most local authorities are aware of EU funding but have difficulties ensuring the continuation of funds for successful projects due to a lack of evaluation and project metrics (Ahmad-Yar, 2020[54]).

In addition to financial support, cities, and municipalities (as well as other public and private organisations) can rely on the expertise of the integration agencies to develop integration measures. The integration agencies' offer is centred on language policy and promotion, social cohesion and accessibility of services, and image building and data-driven communication. To help local authorities devise informed policies, the Agency for Home Affairs additionally set up the City and Municipal Monitor. This Monitor provides a wealth of context-specific information on migration and integration, demographics, administration, education, the labour market, health and living conditions (see Box 2.6). In international comparison, the central support offered to local authorities in Flanders concerning integration is quite unique (Idea Consult, 2021[55]). Nevertheless, research demonstrates that the degree of communication and co-ordination among local authorities and key players of the integration process varies significantly across cities and municipalities (Deprez, Platteau and Hondeghem, 2018[53]). As the OECD field mission demonstrated, for many local governments (especially smaller municipalities) it remains highly unclear what their "governing role" to design local integration policies entails in practice, and without well-defined expectations from the regional level, much is left to municipalities' own willingness and ability.

The creation of the Plan Living Together (*Plan Samenleven*) by the Agency for Home Affairs is a significant new development in this regard. As part of the revised Horizontal Integration and Equal Opportunities Policy Plan, the Flemish Minister for Home Affairs has allocated EUR 33 million over the years 2022-24 to focus on 24 projects that achieve seven clearly defined goals. These goals are to enhance city safety and quality of life, increase emphasis on learning Dutch, strengthen competencies, encourage more people to work, tackle discrimination, provide citizens with a network, and combat segregation. The Plan is intended for the 28 Flemish cities and municipalities with at least 7 500 non-EU-born inhabitants. Smaller municipalities can collaborate to reach the benchmark of 7 500. The minister will sign a separate contract with each municipality to decide which projects to carry out and which quantifiable objectives to pursue, with effectiveness and progress being regularly monitored. The requirement that municipalities need to co-finance at least 50% of their total integration budget is noteworthy. When implementing the Plan Living Together, local authorities can call on the expertise of the integration agencies.

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Notes

[1] With Dutch as its official language, Flanders (Vlaanderen) is the northern region of Belgium. The Flemish Region covers 44% of the Belgian territory and hosts 58% of the population (6.63 million inhabitants). It is made up of five provinces (Antwerp, Limburg, Western Flanders, Eastern Flanders, and Flemish Brabant) and 300 cities and municipalities. It is economically the most important region, contributing to close to 60% of the Belgian GDP, 76% of the country's foreign trade, and 60% of the country's household consumption. It also concentrates close to 60% of employment in Belgium.

[2] Given the large regional autonomy and structure of Flanders in the Belgian institutional context, Flanders is compared to Belgium as a whole and other European OECD countries (rather than to other regions).

[3] This report uses the words "migrants", "immigrants" and "foreign-born" synonymously. Unless mentioned otherwise, it includes all persons born abroad, regardless of their migration category, legal status, or nationality. Likewise, native-born include all persons born in the country, regardless of the country of birth of their parents or of the ethnic minority to which they may belong. Children of immigrants, in contrast, includes all persons with foreign-born parents. It thus includes children who are born in the country but have immigrant parents.

[4] The term "humanitarian migrant" refers to asylum seekers who are minimum four months into the asylum procedure and to persons who have successfully applied for asylum and have been granted some sort of protection (either inside or outside the asylum procedure). For the sake of simplicity, this report considers all recipients of protection – be it refugee status, subsidiary, or temporary protection – to be humanitarian migrants, given that the groups benefit from similar (and often identical) integration measures.

[5] Further analysis based on the Flemish Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration shows that this upskilling trend is driven by two evolutions: a gradual improvement in the educational attainment of new arrival cohorts relative to that of older arrival cohorts within countries of origin (especially among immigrants from new EU member states and non-EU countries), as well as an increase in immigration from countries of origin with higher overall levels of education (amongst others: India, Palestine, Brazil, Cameroon and the United States).

[6] Using a rich employer-employee database for the Belgian private sector over the period 1999-2010, Jacobs et al. (2020[56]) show that, controlling for a rich set of worker and firm characteristics – highly educated immigrant workers are more likely to be over-educated than their native-born counterparts, especially when they were born in low-income countries. Workers' years of tenure and citizenship acquisition moderate the effect. The decreasing level of over-education with the number of years spent with the same employer is compatible with a statistical discrimination story: asymmetrical information on the true productivity of immigrants diminishes as years of tenure increase. Finally, regarding the role of firm characteristics, they find that the likelihood for immigrants from low-income countries to be over-educated is significantly smaller in bigger firms and when working conditions are collectively renegotiated at the firm level.

[7] The civic integration track of new arrivals in Brussels is dependent on the language community the persons integrating choose to belong to. As civic integration remains free of charge for the French Community, the Flemish Government decided to exempt people living in Brussels from paying the fee when they opt for the Flemish civic integration track.

[8] There are ten policy domains in the Flemish Government, each consisting of a department supplemented by independent Agencies. With the formation of each new government, policy domains are distributed as portfolios across Ministers. Each policy domain has a corresponding Department. Since the composition of the portfolio under each Minister can change with each new government, it is custom not to refer to Ministries, but rather to Policy domains or Departments.

[9] In the Spatial Structure Plan of the Flemish Government, the term “Centre city” refers to cities with a relatively high number of inhabitants that perform a central function in the areas of work, care, education, and culture.

3 Integration of new arrivals in Flanders

This chapter starts by examining Flanders' civic integration programme, which is at the core of early integration efforts. The four pillars of the integration programme are discussed along with the programme's outreach and effectiveness. Next, the chapter turns to migrants' settlement patterns, the actors involved and the bottlenecks that currently affect the integration pathways of new arrivals. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the social assistance scheme and its function as the first stage in the integration process for recent migrants, particularly refugees.

The civic integration programme

Scope and target group of the integration programme

The programme is offered to all new arrivals but obligatory for those considered most in need of integration support

The civic integration programme (*inburgeringstraject*) plays a crucial role in the early integration services Flanders offers its immigrants. The training programme aims to welcome new arrivals to Flanders, help them learn Dutch, find a job, and – in the longer term – achieve social and economic self-sustainability. The programme's target group consists of all adult newcomers with valid and permanent residency perspective; some are obliged to participate in the programme, while others are only entitled and not obliged. Table 3.1 provides a detailed overview. In broad terms, non-EU family and humanitarian migrants are obliged to participate in the programme, whereas it is optional for immigrants from EU and European Free Trade Agreement (EFTA) countries and their family members, non-EU migrants who come for work and study reasons, and long-term residents of EU and EFTA countries. In offering comprehensive integration support to all permanent migrants, Flanders stands apart from many other European OECD countries. In Sweden and Norway for example, the public provision of integration services – bundled into a comprehensive programme as in Flanders – tends to be reserved for refugees and their accompanying families (OECD, 2023[1]).

Table 3.1. Overview of the obliged and entitled target group of the standard civic integration programme

Target group	Obliged to participate	Entitled, but not obliged to participate
- **Adult newcomers** who are registered for the first time in the National Register with a **residence permit of more than three months** - **Adult migrants** who move from Brussels or Wallonia to Flanders, and who have resided in Belgium for less than five years	- **Non-EU/EFTA nationals** with one of the following statuses: - **Family** reunification with **Belgians** who have not made use of EU free movement - **Family** reunification with **EU/EFTA** national - **Family** reunification with **non-EU/EFTA** national who is not a work or study migrant - Recognised **refugee** - **Subsidiary protected** - **Medical** residence permit - Victim of **human trafficking** - **Regularised** or discretionary residence permit - Long-term resident in EU country, with **second residence** in Belgium - **Belgian nationals** who are **born abroad** with at least one **foreign-born parent** - **Ministers** of a recognised religion	- **Belgian nationals** and their family members who have made use of EU free movement - **EU/EFTA nationals** and their family members - **Non-EU/EFTA nationals** who are **long-term residents** in an EU Member State - Non-EU/EFTA **labour and study migrants** and their family members - Persons with a **temporary protection** status - Persons with a certificate or diploma of primary, secondary, or higher **education** from educational institution **recognised** by the Flemish, French or German-speaking Community or by the Netherlands - Persons with a certificate of participation in **reception education** - Persons **aged 65+** - Seriously **ill or disabled** people - Persons who have already obtained a civic integration certificate

Source: OECD Secretariat adapted from https://www.agii.be/thema/vreemdelingenrecht-internationaal-privaatrecht/inburgering/inburgering-in-vlaanderen.

Since March 2022, asylum seekers can no longer take up the civic integration programme in Flanders. Before, they were entitled to participate four months after they lodged their asylum application. Asylum

seekers can still enrol in early language modules while staying in reception centres. Integration agencies also help them establish which language course best suits their learning capacities (see below). Yet, four months after their asylum application, asylum seekers are allowed to enter the labour market (see Box 3.1). According to the Flemish social partners, the exclusion from the integration track takes away the necessary guidance to do so (Social and Economic Council of Flanders, 2021[2]; Flemish Educational Council, 2021[3]). The reform also goes against one of the recommendations of a recent study on the literacy of asylum seekers in Belgium, to provide low-literate asylum seekers with more guidance in acquiring the basic skills needed to actively engage in the host society (Hooft et al., 2020[4]). It remains to be seen what role Fedasil and its partners will play in the framework of the recent Flemish action plan on the activation of asylum seekers (see Box 3.1).

Box 3.1. Asylum seekers' access to the Flemish labour market

One feature of asylum legislation in many OECD countries is to impose employment bans that prevent asylum seekers from entering the local labour market for a certain waiting period during the application process. Since December 2015, asylum seekers in Flanders are allowed to take a job four months after lodging their asylum application (as opposed to six months previously). Following this reform, Flanders (Belgium) is now among the European OECD countries with the shortest employment ban for asylum applicants (Greece, Norway, Portugal and Sweden allow immediate access to their labour markets). Since 1 January 2019, asylum seekers who have not received a decision on their application after four months are automatically entitled to work, this condition being notified on their residence permit.

Still, accessing the labour market is still quite far from getting a job. According to a recent study for Flanders by Vansteenkiste and De Graeve (2018[5]), 55% of the asylum seekers who were authorised to enter work registered with the Flemish PES, and of those who registered with the PES, 12% found work within 6 months, and 24% within 12 months. Apart from language training, there are no integration measures that specifically target asylum seekers in Flanders. However, in December 2021, the State Secretary for Asylum and Migration and the Flemish Minister of Employment launched an action plan called "Asylum seekers looking for a match" (*Asielzoekers zoekt match*), with the aim to bridge the gap between asylum seekers and the Flemish labour market. This action plan, developed by the federal reception agency Fedasil, is focused on competence building (though language training and vocation training), elimination of administrative barriers (e.g. the long procedure for recognition of foreign qualifications) and activation towards employment or voluntary work. The action plan is still an early stage; Fedasil has now issued project calls on activation of asylum seekers for the period 2022-23.

Source: https://www.fedasil.be/sites/default/files/projectoproep_activering_2022-2023.pdf.

Registration rates have declined for new arrivals entitled to participate

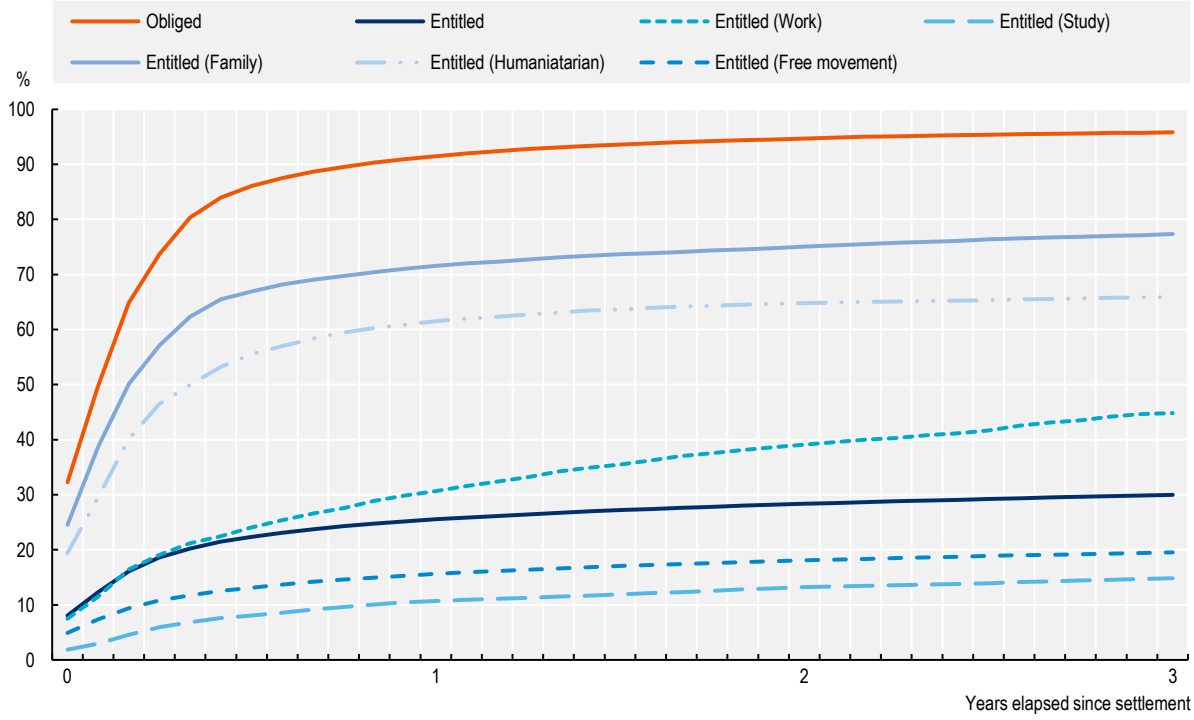
The civic integration trajectory starts after immigrants obtain a residence permit and are registered in a municipality. At that point, they can schedule an appointment with the integration agencies in one of the 64 contact offices. To increase awareness, the integration agencies send out invitation letters to new arrivals who did not schedule such an appointment on their initiative. Every month an extraction is made from the Belgian National Register with the names and addresses of newly arrived migrants in Flanders of the past month. Over the 2011-21 period, an average of 33 000 newly arrived adult migrants were extracted from the National Register each year and consequently became the target population of Flanders' civic integration programme.[1] Immigrants with a civic integration obligation must sign up within three months after receiving the invitation. Those who fail to comply can be sanctioned with an administrative fine and – in some cases – they can lose their social benefits (see below).

The civic integration programme reaches some migrant groups more than others. Focussing on the 2015-19 settlement cohort, more than seven in ten new arrivals from the obliged group signed up with an integration agency in the three months after arrival. This share gradually rose to more than nine in ten (see Figure 3.1). In contrast, less than two in ten new arrivals from the entitled group registered after three months and, in the long term, approximately three in ten were reached. Within the entitled group, there are significant differences by category of entry. The programme reaches a relatively large share of entitled family migrants (80%, mostly family migrants to EU citizens), humanitarian migrants[2] (67%, mostly asylum seekers), and non-EU labour migrants (53%). In contrast, registration rates are much lower among EU citizens (22%) and non-EU migrants coming for study purposes (16%).

On average, 14% of the new arrivals who settled in Flanders between 2015 and 2019 registered with an integration agency on their own initiative – before being extracted from the National Register. More than half of them did so within three months, 21% within 3 to 12 months, and 12% after more than one year. Late registrations are much more common among immigrants entitled to take up civic integration, particularly among non-EU migrants who migrated for work reasons.

Figure 3.1. The programme struggles to reach newly arrived migrants entitled to participate

Cumulative incidence of registering with an integration agency (*aanmelden*), by time since settlement, target group and category of entry, 2015-21, Flanders



Note: Permanent migrants (aged 18 to 59 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2015 and 2019. People with Dutch nationality at birth are excluded. Because immigrants can change target groups during their integration trajectory due to a change in their residence status, their last known status is used. For immigrants with an unknown last status, the first-known status is used. The cumulative incidence, or failure function, is computed as $1\text{-}S_t$ from the life table using the Kaplan-Meier approach.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration data.

According to previous evaluations, encouraging immigrants from the entitled group to take up integration training is a longstanding challenge (De Cuyper, Lambert and Pauwels, 2010[6]). However, the programme has lost even more of its appeal among "entitled immigrants" in recent years. A closer analysis reveals that primarily EU immigrants seem to have lost interest in the programme. A likely explanation is that civic integration has become more demanding in recent years, amongst others by raising the target level of Dutch from A1 to A2 (for further discussion, see Chapter 2). The more recent reforms, including a financial contribution for integration participants, standardised tests and two additional civic integration pillars, will possibly further erode the eagerness of new arrivals to voluntarily take up integration training (Social and Economic Council of Flanders, 2021[2]; Flemish Educational Council, 2021[3]).

This concern has moved the Flemish Government to exempt from payment several migrant groups. These include "entitled immigrants" who enrol in language training at a Centre for Adult Basic Education, receive social assistance benefits, actively seek work and pursue employment-related training, or reside in a municipality in Brussels. The Agency for Integration and Civic Integration's most recent annual report also mentions that activities were devised to strengthen the programme's outreach. However, details and results of these actions are not specified (Agency for Integration and Civic Integration, 2022[7]).

Integration participants have very different integration needs

Integration participants are a diverse group in terms of educational attainment and the languages they speak, bringing a wide range of integration service needs.

A significant share of the migrants who came for humanitarian reasons had only basic qualifications at arrival. Many of them have been obliged to leave school early in their origin country or were educated in much less advanced systems than the Flemish education system. Based on data from the Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration, more than four in ten humanitarian migrants who settled in Flanders between 2011 and 2021 started integration training with just primary or lower secondary education (see Table 3.2). Within the group of humanitarian migrants, there are significant differences by country of origin, with the proportion of low-educated individuals being 78% for Somalians, 69% for Afghans, 42% for Syrians and 36% for Iraqis. A recent study on low literacy among adults in asylum reception in Belgium shows that one in ten adult asylum seekers cannot read or write. Moreover, four in ten do not have sufficient skills to understand, process and use written texts at the primary school level (Hooft et al., 2020[4]).

At the same time, close to one in five humanitarian migrants had a tertiary education degree when they settled in Flanders and thus had very different integration needs. Notably, over the last decade, Flanders has received increasing numbers of highly educated asylum seekers and refugees. Data from the Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration show that the proportion of humanitarian migrants who were highly educated at arrival increased from 14% in 2011 to 21% in 2021.

Family migrants from the 2011-21 settlement cohort had higher education levels at arrival than refugees, but levels were still well below the educational attainment of the native-born. Here too, significant differences by country of origin play out, with Moroccan and Turkish immigrants having lower levels of education than Indian immigrants. In contrast, non-EU migrants who arrived for work and study reasons stand out with high levels of education at arrival (72% and 85% were highly educated, respectively). Finally, more than half of the EU citizens were medium-educated, which is a higher share than for the other migrant groups and the native-born.

Immigrants who lack basic literacy skills are likely to struggle to find work, learn Dutch and navigate their way in Flemish society. A sound mastery of the basic skills, literacy, numeracy, and problem solving, is also a necessary foundation upon which to build the other more advanced skills – such as language and job search skills – necessary for effective integration. Educational disparities should therefore be addressed early and effectively in the integration process to equip all new arrivals with the basic skills needed to be functional in the labour market and society. If not, the efficiency of further integration measures is likely compromised.

Table 3.2. There are large educational differences by reason for migration

Level of education at arrival, by category of entry, 2011-21 settlement cohort, Flanders

	New permanent arrivals						Native-born
Level of education	Work	Study	Family	Humanitarian	Other	Free movement	
Low	7.2	1.5	24.4	42.5	31.4	12.6	17.1
Medium	20.8	13.7	44.5	37.5	48.1	54.4	39.9
High	72.1	84.9	31.2	20.0	20.5	33.0	43.0

Note: Permanent migrants (aged 18 to 59 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2011 and 2021 and registered with an integration agency (*aangemelde inburgeraars*). Education at arrival: Low (ISCED 0-2): no formal schooling, or primary or lower secondary school as the highest completed level of education. Medium (ISCED 3-4): level equal to upper secondary school and postsecondary non-tertiary education, such as vocational education. High (ISCED 5-8): university degrees at the bachelor, master, or doctoral level. The educational attainment of the native-born is calculated on national LFS data for 2020.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration data.

The diversity of the languages spoken by new arrivals and the degree to which migrant languages differ from the official host-country language is another critical factor determining the potential for language training and the length of time the integration pathway will take. According to data from the 2021 Ad Hoc Module of the European Labour Force Survey, Flanders had among the highest shares (78%) of non-EU immigrants who, before migrating, had hardly or no proficiency in the host-country language. Only in Finland (85%), Sweden (84%) and Norway (82%), this share stood higher.

Immigrants born in the Netherlands accounted for close to 16% of the foreign-born in Flanders in 2020. Therefore, it is no surprise that the average linguistic difference between the Dutch language and the mother-tongue of the immigrant community – as calculated according to the Language Distance Index (see OECD (2018[8]) for further discussion) – does not stand out as particularly large in international comparison. However, the language distance differs significantly across migrant groups. Aside from immigrants from the Netherlands, most new arrivals in Flanders come from very different language families. Among integration participants who settled in Flanders between 2011 and 2021, the most common "mother tongues" were Arabic (20%), Romanian (6%), Polish (5%), Turkish (5%), Spanish (4%), Portuguese (3%), Pashtu (3%), Bulgarian (3%) and Berber (3%). Therefore, if the analysis focuses on the interquartile range of the Language Distance Index rather than the average, Flanders has among the most extensive linguistic distances of the surveyed countries. Because of the greater distance between the languages spoken by immigrants and the Dutch language, language training needs in Flanders are more extensive and long-term than in many other European OECD countries.

Content of the integration programme

The programme is multifaceted and tailored to individual needs

To respond to the diverse integration needs among the population of new arrivals, the civic integration programme in Flanders builds upon three primary tools: the initial assessment, the integration contract, and integration training (see Figure 3.2). The programme aims to endow each newcomer with the skills and knowledge required for integration into Flemish society and working life through the provision of sequenced integration measures adapted to individual skills and circumstances.

The starting point of the civic integration track is the initial assessment undertaken at the integration agency, ideally during the participant's first appointment. The initial assessment consists of an interview with the newcomer on the study and work experience, current circumstances, and career aspirations, and – depending on the participants' profile – tests of reading and writing, Dutch language skills, and cognitive skills (see below). The interview plays the role of identifying individual needs and forms the basis of the

following integration activities. Tests are employed to identify the current language ability and the likely speed of language acquisition. On average, the intake takes around one hour. If the newcomer does not yet speak sufficient Dutch, either the mother tongue, a contact language or the services of an interpreter are used.

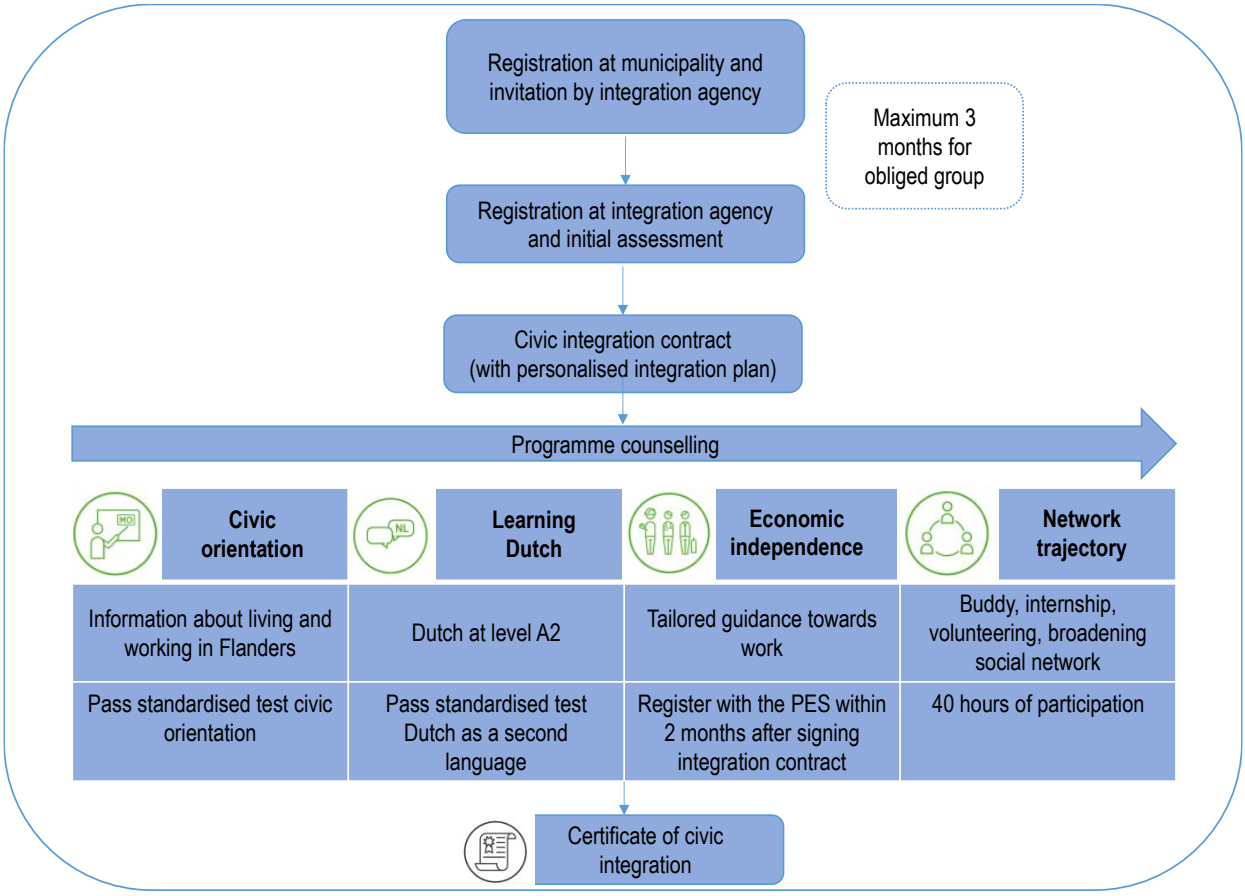
During their first appointment, participants meet their integration counsellor (*trajectbegeleider*), who provides them with guidance on everything related to the integration track. The counsellor keeps an overview of the participant's basic competencies, skills and network and is responsible for the programme's administrative follow-up and ensuring the participant attends the courses. The counsellor also connects the participant with the appropriate institutions or organisations for questions that call for special guidance (e.g. education for the children, legal or psychological help, suitable housing). Furthermore, counsellors can assist participants with the recognition of foreign credentials by providing accessible information on the procedure, offering support regarding the completion of an application file, and acting as intermediaries with the diploma recognition service (for further discussion, see Chapter 4). During the programme, the counsellor's role is gradually decreased. An often-mentioned challenge is that integration counsellors have high caseloads (on average, 125 clients), which can result in a lack of time to provide specific personal advice or build a relationship of trust.

Following the intake, the counsellor and the participant draw up a personalised integration contract, which sets out a roadmap of integration activities to prepare the newcomer for the Flemish labour market and society. After signing an integration contract, participants should begin their integration training, which consists of four pillars: Dutch as a second language (Dutch L2) courses, a civic orientation course, a trajectory to work, and – from January 2023 onwards – a network and participation trajectory (see Figure 3.2). In most cases, these activities occupy participants full-time (40 hours per week), with the relative weight accounted for by each activity varying with the participant's needs. The contract comprises all pillars and exemptions of the integration track and the estimated total duration, based primarily on the intended language learning trajectory. For "quick learners", the average programme duration is projected at 12 months, whereas for "slow learners", it is projected at 36 months (see below). A deferral or suspension of the programme can be granted if participants cannot follow integration training due to work, study, medical, or personal reasons.

The integration contract states the integration goals and obligations. New arrivals with a civic integration obligation must sign this contract and can be sanctioned with an administrative fine if they fail to comply with the contract terms. Immigrants entitled to undertake integration training have to sign a contract if they want to take up civic integration but under the revised Integration Act, they are no longer sanctioned in case of non-compliance. Since March 2022, the integration contract also includes a provision on fundamental rights and obligations to be respected in Flemish society. By signing the integration contract, immigrants declare to have been informed on these rights and obligations and to be willing to learn about them and respect them.

There are no benefits directly linked to participation in the civic integration programme in Flanders, as is the case in the Nordic countries, for example. However, immigrants who are unable to obtain sufficient means of livelihood through the labour market or through income sources obtained by other household members, can apply for a social assistance benefit (see below).

Figure 3.2. The flow of the civic integration trajectory



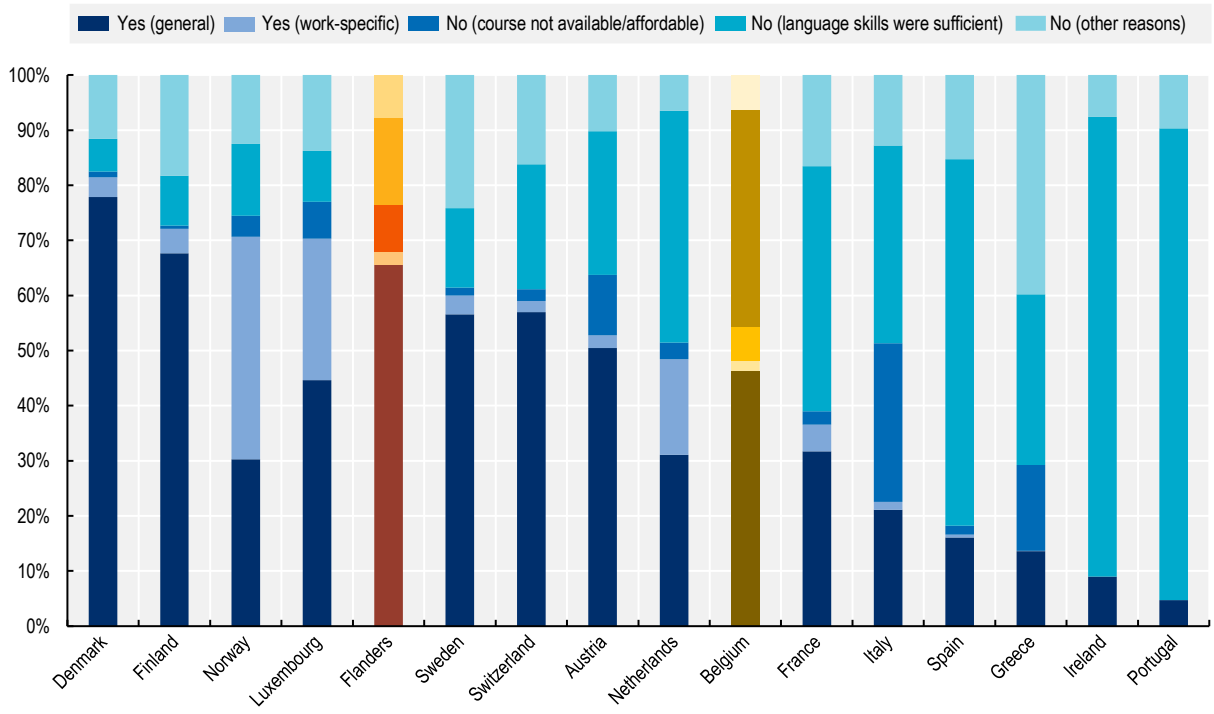
Source: OECD Secretariat adapted from the Agency for Integration and Civic Integration website, https://www.integratie-inburgering.be/nl/wat-kunnen-we-voor-jou-doen/inburgeringstraject-en-cursus-maatschappelijke-orientatie/inburgeringstraject-0.

Dutch language training is a critical component of integration training

Dutch L2 training (*Nederlands als tweede taal, NT2*) is the first pillar of the civic integration programme and represents the bulk of Flemish Government expenditures on immigrant integration. As Flanders mainstreams the supply of language courses and fully integrates them into the civic integration programme, participation in language training among immigrant adults is relatively high in international comparison. According to the snapshot provided by the 2021 Ad Hoc Module of the European Labour Force Survey, close to seven in ten non-EU immigrants residing in Flanders had participated in a Dutch language course after migration. Of the countries shown in Figure 3.3, only Scandinavian countries (except Sweden) and Luxembourg achieved a higher proportion.

Figure 3.3. A large share of the non-EU immigrant population participates in language training

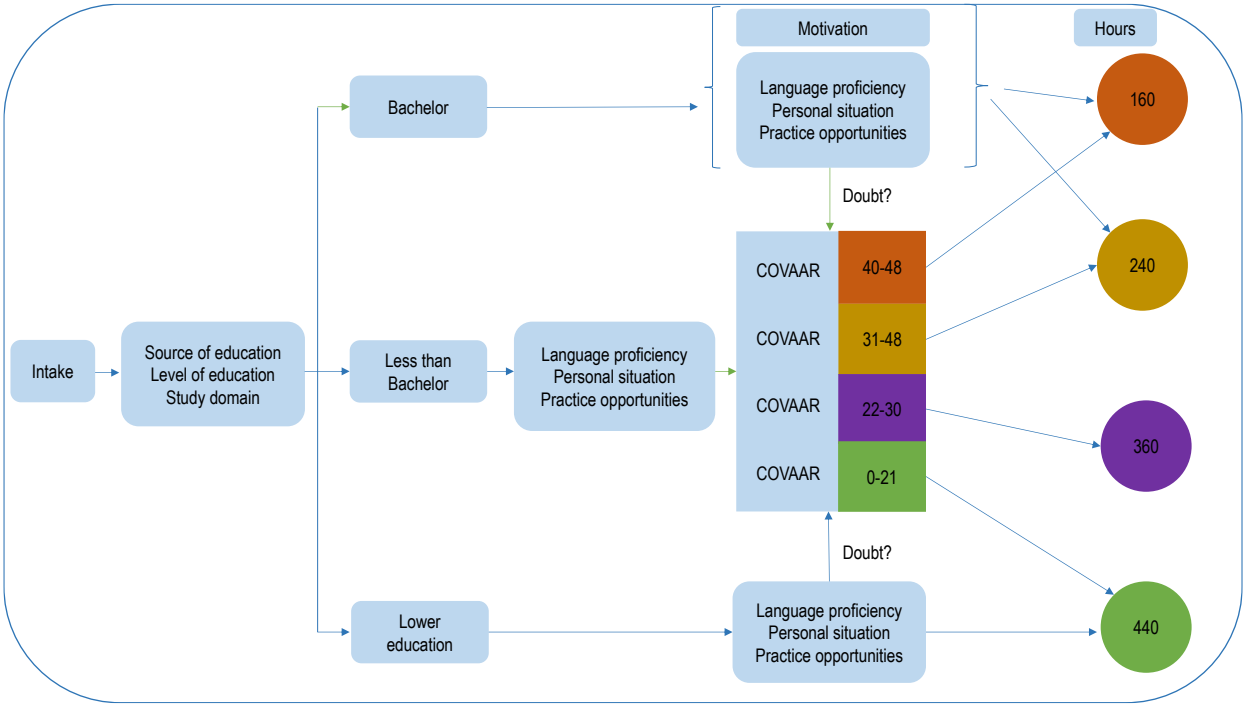
Participation in a course for the main host country language of non-EU immigrants after migrating, 2021, Flanders and selected OECD countries



Note: Non-EU-born population aged 15 to 74. Data are ordered according to the sum of "Yes (general)" and "Yes (work-specific)".
Source: EU-LFS ad hoc module 2021 (Eurostat); Flanders: national LFS.

The integration training aims to provide new arrivals with "basic" Dutch language skills. In practice, "basic" refers to CEFR level A2. Countries throughout the OECD are increasingly attempting to offer language instruction that is adapted to prior education or measured language aptitude (OECD, 2021[9]). In Flanders, a language counsellor employed by the integration agencies manages the participants' language learning trajectory. During a co-ordinated intake, the counsellor assesses the newcomer's educational attainment, acquired language skills, learning aspirations and personal situation. Depending on the profile of the participant, a cognitive skills test, reading and writing test and an entry test are taken (see Figure 3.4). The cognitive skills test (COVAAR) helps to assess language learning ability. If there are doubts about the participant's literacy, the counsellor takes a reading and writing test. Finally, testing of acquired Dutch language competencies is done via an entry test (NIVO). The initial assessment results in formal advice and subsequent referral to a language training provider. The advice is shaped by the following parameters (ranked by weight in the decision process): literacy, level of education, cognitive skills test score, knowledge of other languages, and personal factors such as motivation. The counsellors' advice is binding for the course entry level and the learning speed, but the participant is free to register with another provider than the one suggested.

Figure 3.4. How advice on the number of hours of Dutch as a second language training is given



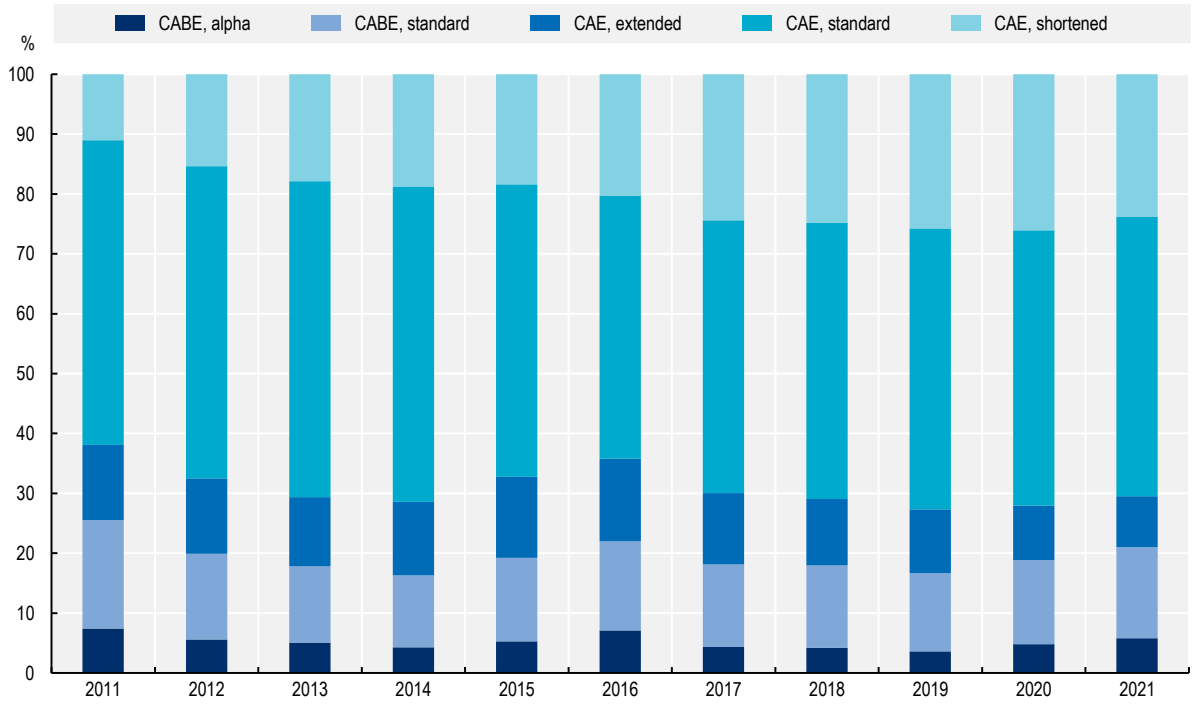
Note: The number of teaching hours corresponds to level A2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.
Source: OECD Secretariat adapted from the Dutch as a second language framework agreemen, https://www.integratie-inburgering.be/nl/wat-kunnen-we-voor-jou-doen/ondersteuning-voor-je-organisatie-of-lokaal-bestuur/publicaties/afsprakenkader-nt2.

The Centres for Adult Education (CAE) and Centres for Adult Basic Education (CABE) provide formal Dutch L2 training. These language providers have broadly similar learning objectives and funding structures but differ in the pace and format of instruction. Integration agencies generally refer “slow language learners” to the CABE, where a standard A2-level course with oral and written skills consists of 440 teaching hours. Illiterate or low-literate participants can follow language training at the CABE in two versions: 1 140 hours to acquire oral skills up to level A2 and learn to read and write at level A1, or 600 hours to acquire oral skills up to level A2 in an adapted version and limited self-reliance for written skills. “Fast language learners”, on the other hand, are generally sent to the CAE, where they can follow a standard trajectory of 240 hours, an extended trajectory of 360 hours, or a shortened trajectory of 160 hours to achieve level A2. For participants who are literate in a script other than Latin, the CABE and the CAE additionally offer a Latin script module of 180 hours and 40 hours, respectively, after which participants join regular Dutch language training. Finally, university language centres offer higher-speed courses of 160 hours specifically designed for new arrivals with higher educational aspirations who meet university admission requirements.

In 2021, one in five integration participants was referred to the CABE. Seven in ten were advised to complete the standard 480-hour training, whereas three in ten were advised to complete the Alpha track designed for low-literates or illiterates (see Figure 3.5). Four in five participants were directed towards the CAE, where the majority (59%) was advised to follow the standard 240-hour track, whereas 11% and 30% were recommended to take up the extended and the shortened version, respectively. Over the past decade, integration agencies have increasingly directed participants towards faster language learning tracks, which in turn had a considerable effect on the average duration of the civic integration programme (see below). This trend is partially explained by new arrivals being higher educated than their predecessors (the share of highly educated new arrivals increased from 23% for the 2011 cohort to 36% for the 2021 cohort). However, as a comparable pattern is observed across educational groups, a shift in the integration agencies’ policy on Dutch L2 advice (and the choices made by language counsellors) appears to be a more significant factor.

Figure 3.5. More integration participants have been advised to follow faster language-learning tracks

Dutch as a second language advice, by settlement cohort, 2011-21, Flanders



Note: Permanent migrants (aged 18 to 59 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2011 and 2021 and registered with an integration agency. "CABE" refers to Centres for Adult Basic Education; "CAE" refers to Centres for Adult Education". "CABE, alpha": 600-1 140 hours; "CABE, standard": 440 hours; "CAE, extended": 360 hours; "CAE, standard": 240 hours; "CAE, shortened": 160 hours.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration data.

While language training in the civic integration programme is primarily formal and organised by educational institutions recognised by the Flemish Government, a range of smaller (sometimes private) initiatives additionally accommodate informal language learning. Research shows that language learning can be significantly improved when language is taught in a practical way by pairing it with real-world activities (OECD, 2021[9]). Notably, each Flemish province organises "conversation tables" linking non-Dutch speakers with local citizens to practice Dutch in a social setting. All these courses are easy to find online (https://www.nederlandsoefenen.be/), even though the information is often only available in Dutch. Therefore, integration agencies and local municipalities often assist prospective learners in finding a suitable informal learning opportunity, based on their acquired Dutch language skills and education level.

Civic orientation as the second pillar of the integration programme

The second pillar of the integration training consists of a civic orientation course (*Maatschappelijke oriëntatie, MO*) on the know-how and skills needed to engage in Flemish society, as well as the values and standards of Flemish society. The 60-hour course is taught by trained instructors from the integration agencies. The content of the course is standardised, but teachers have some freedom to tailor their course towards individual learning needs. Course teachers generally aim for participants to actively contribute to the lessons by finding solutions to day-to-day situations, such as the use of public transport and the search for medical assistance or educational facilities, both individually and by working together with other course participants. Notably, participants can follow the lessons in their mother tongue or in a contact language, and if no contact language is available, an interpreter is provided. In 2021, the Agency for Integration and

Civic Integration organised the course in 36 different languages. Most of the participants took classes in Arabic (21%), English (18%), or French (11%), whereas only 2% followed the classes in Dutch (Agency for Integration and Civic Integration, 2022[7]). Courses are offered across the Flemish region and can take place during weekdays, evenings, and weekends to fit the participant's schedule. The complexity of the organisation of civic orientation and the undersupply of classes in the past years have forced some newcomers to register for a course that was not ideal for them or wait until a suitable course became available. However, in recent years, integration agencies managed to significantly shorten the waiting list for civic orientation, not in the least due to the expansion of digital learning opportunities (see Box 3.2) (Agency for Integration and Civic Integration, 2022[7]).

Box 3.2. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the availability of digital integration training

The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly accelerated the adoption of digital working arrangements and practices in the civic integration programme. Before 2020, civic orientation and language courses were primarily taught in classrooms, but since the pandemic participants with the necessary digital skills have the option to complete the civic orientation course online or in a hybrid fashion. While those who lack the necessary digital skills can still participate in physical courses, integration agencies aim to turn digital training into the norm. Digital language learning has also received renewed attention in Flanders, and its quality has significantly improved throughout and following the COVID-19 pandemic. While most adult education centres have switched back to classroom instruction when it was feasible to do so, university language centres remain proficient users of digital tools for more advanced language training.

Digitalisation is undoubtedly a valuable tool for increasing the accessibility of training for persons who, due to work, studies or personal reasons, find it challenging to attend physical courses (De Paepe, Zhu and Depryck, 2018[10]). Digital learning has also significantly shortened course waiting periods and improved the possibilities for self-study. At the same time, policy makers must be aware of the potential barriers to the use of such tools to avoid pitfalls in implementation, particularly for (digitally) illiterate newcomers (OECD, 2021[9]). A study on digital literacy among new arrivals in Flanders shows that the low-literate face many hurdles to integration. Digitalisation could add another one, especially if changes are implemented too quickly (Droogmans, Jordens and Maes, 2016[11]). Notably, having little or no digital skills has now developed into the main reason why newcomers start their civic orientation courses late (Agency for Integration and Civic Integration, 2022[7]).

With these challenges in mind, the Flemish Minister of Home Affairs spent EUR 15 million on digitalisation in integration and civic integration in 2021. With this funding, the integration agencies established *Digital units*, which put up various programmes and activities targeted at expanding the availability of digital services and enhancing the digital skills of integration participants. The integration agencies also incorporated a digital skills evaluation into their intake procedure. Participants who lacked fundamental digital literacy could enrol in a fast-track IT course offered by the Agency or external training providers. The 12-hour course (three modules of four hours) is designed to make the digital civic orientation course more accessible. It teaches students how to use a Chromebook, take part in online classes, and receive, process, and return digital information. In 2021, the Agency for Integration and Civic Integration organised around 50 IT courses for 277 participants. Additionally, the Agency lent out 4 720 Chromebooks in 2021. However, first results show that only about half of the participants transitioned to the digital orientation course after finishing the IT course (Agency for Integration and Civic Integration, 2022[7]), implying that continued efforts are needed to increase the digital skills of integration participants.

Note: Similarly, Atlas (city of Antwerp) set up the "Digilabo" project. In 2021, 2 805 students learned how to take online orientation courses via Zoom and Google Classroom during 215 "digisessions". In addition, 234 participants learned how to use various mobile applications during individual sessions. 2 286 participants borrowed a tablet from Digilabo to follow an online civic orientation course.
Source: OECD field mission; Agency for Integration and Civic Integration (2022[7]); https://2021.atlas-antwerpen.be/verhaal/digitaal-e-inclusie.

Recent reforms have made integration training more demanding

In an effort to address some of the shortcomings of the civic integration programme, the Flemish integration system is currently undergoing substantial changes in the way it is implemented.

From September 2023 onwards, language and civic orientation training in Flanders will no longer be free of charge. Participants will have to pay a fee of EUR 90 each for the civic orientation course and test and the Dutch L2 course and test (EUR 360 in total). Among the group newcomers entitled to participate in the training, some are exempt from payment, namely those who: attend language courses at the CABE, receive social assistance benefits, actively seek work and pursue job-oriented education, or reside in the city of Brussels.

Another noteworthy development is the introduction of standardised tests. From March 2022 onwards, passing the civic orientation course is no longer only determined by a combination of active and consistent attendance in class and the accomplishment of a personal action plan that was established at the start of the course. In addition to process evaluation, students are now required to take a standardised digital test. Tests of civic orientation are still the exception rather than the rule across the OECD. Most of the countries that have such tests (such as Austria, Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands) demand that the test be taken in the host-country language (OECD, 2023[1]). However, like Norway, Flanders allows test-takers to use their mother tongue or a contact language (currently 26 languages). To further ease the transition, the education inspectorate and the integration agencies have also streamlined the civic orientation course content by developing evaluable course objectives, a teacher manual, and a (digital) guidebook for students.

A standardised test for Dutch L2 (levels A1 and A2) will be implemented in September 2023. Together with permanent evaluation, the standardised test will replace the contextualised testing that the CABE and the CAE currently use to evaluate their students. Exemptions are only granted to participants with limited learning capacities.[3] Notably, for both civic orientation and Dutch L2, failure to pass the test means having to retake the test and paying the fee again.

The introduction of fees and standardised tests has not been well received by social partners and actors in the integration sector. In October 2022, the umbrella organisation for the 13 Centres of Adult Basic Education (LIGO) and 10 Centres of Adult Education filed a petition with the Constitutional Court to challenge the standardised Dutch L2 test. They argue that a standardised test that is taken at one point in time conflicts with the idea that language learning is a cyclical process and with the customisation that Dutch L2 training providers attempt to offer. Social partners have also expressed concerns about the risk for students to "teach to the test" and the possible negative effects on students' stress, motivation and study careers and on teachers' professionalism and motivation (Social and Economic Council of Flanders, 2021[2]; Flemish Educational Council, 2021[3]).

Newcomers are obliged to register with the PES to foster economic self-reliance

The third pillar of the civic integration programme in Flanders is the orientation of participants to the Flemish PES (VDAB). The PES then provides job counselling to help new arrivals develop a trajectory to work (see Chapter 4 for further discussion). Before the reform, integration counsellors would only guide a small proportion of the integration participants towards the PES, namely those who were actively looking for work. This early separation between newcomers seeking work at the time of arrival, and those who are not, may have been intuitive to the extent that only those seeking work tend to enrol themselves with the PES. However, such an early separation between the active and the inactive likely had long-lasting consequences. It may have made it difficult for those who were temporarily outside the labour force at the time of arrival (e.g. due to sickness or childcare duties) to find their way to employment.

Since March 2022, all participants of working age with the ability to work are required to register with the PES within two months after signing an integration contract. This reform intends for every participant to

receive the necessary guidance on employment opportunities. Only newcomers who can substantiate being "durably employed" are excluded from the requirement to register with the PES. Concretely, newcomers must show an employment contract of at least three months (or interim contracts for the same period without interruption).

Over the past few years, there have already been significant changes in how the PES approaches non-Dutch-speaking job seekers. Until 2016, job seekers generally needed to acquire basic competence in Dutch at CEFR level A1 before receiving assistance from the PES in their job search. And, as was also evidenced by the OECD field mission, most job seekers with little or no knowledge of Dutch would follow Dutch courses up to level A2 (the target level of the civic integration programme) before registering with the PES. However, the PES and social partners considered the results of these existing activation practices slow and ineffective (Van Hoof, Nyssen and Kanobana, 2020[12]; Social and Economic Council of Flanders, 2016[13]). With its *Integration through Work* programme, the PES essentially adopted a first-work approach based on the idea that job seekers who are not (yet) proficient in Dutch but who possess the required professional competencies can immediately receive counselling and be guided to work (VDAB, 2017[14]). The PES activation practices are now supposed to incorporate the Integration through Work logic fully (see Chapter 4 for further discussion).

During their intake with the PES, job seekers get assigned a job counsellor. Based on the job seekers' distance to the labour market and personal career goals, the counsellor guides the subsequent job search, mediates with potential employers, and develops a tailored pathway to work (see Figure 3.6). Four prototype pathways are distinguished by the PES for job seekers with limited Dutch language skills. The preferred pathway is "Quick mediation", where job applicants begin working right away and learn Dutch on the job. This route is only considered if candidates have the necessary technical skills, the employer and candidate can effectively communicate in a shared contact language, and Dutch is not a requirement for the position. The "Integrated pathway" integrates work or vocational training with language training into one overall programme (Dutch is used during professional training or in the workplace and combined with Dutch evening classes). In the "Combined pathway", work or vocational training and language training are combined but not integrated (Dutch language course in the morning and vocational training in the afternoon). Finally, the "Linear pathway" takes the longest. Modules tend to follow one another, and vocational training can only start after a certain level of Dutch is reached. This pathway is chosen when Dutch is an absolute prerequisite for a job (e.g. in accounting), when the job seeker has low learning skills, or when there is a considerable labour market distance. There is no rigid distinction between the pathways; a job seeker who starts in a linear trajectory can switch to a combined or integrated trajectory after some time.

The practical implementation of the Integration through Work reform went hand in hand with the reform of the language policy at the PES (VDAB, 2021[15]). The main principle of the PES is that all clients must receive the same quality of service, regardless of their language proficiency. However, implementing this principle is not always straightforward due to the Flemish language legislation, dating back to the 1960s.[4] When a client lacks the Dutch language proficiency required for their job target, lacks the Dutch language skills necessary to access counselling services, and no longer tries to improve his/her Dutch, the PES is not permitted to use a contact language or an interpreter. The PES client is, however, permitted to bring a friend or relative to act as a non-professional interpreter, but doing so can affect how well the service is provided. There remains a gap between the standard language level used by the PES in its communication (at least level B1), and the Dutch language proficiency of most newcomers. This "language gap" will likely aggravate with the acceleration of PES registration under the new third pillar (within 60 days after signing a contract). The PES has recently reinforced its language policy by providing career counsellors and education instructors with guidelines, resources, and training to support them in making communication choices, using the proper language tools, and making strategic use of other languages in training to support the learning of Dutch. The PES has also sought guidance from the Standing Committee for Language

Supervision for other initiatives, including the use of translation technology and how this may increase the accessibility of their services and communication.

The Flemish PES is also in the process of developing a new strategy called *Vijf voor Taal*, which intends to enhance services for job seekers with limited Dutch language proficiency, through four specific measures (VDAB, 2021[15]). First, the PES is working towards a more sophisticated and repeated screening of Dutch language proficiency (oral, listening, writing, and reading) so that a tailor-made trajectory to work with consideration for Dutch language learning can continuously be developed.[5] The intention is that these assessments are repeated at key moments in the job-seeking process (e.g. before and after a training module, in the event of re-entry into unemployment). It is also foreseen that not only job counsellors but also job seekers and employers will work with this new language screening tool when posting vacancies and when applying for jobs. Second, the ambition is to expand integrated pathways in which working or vocational training is combined with Dutch language training. Third, employers who employ or train job seekers with limited Dutch language skills will be able to call upon additional coaching and support. Finally, the job seekers' language acquisition trajectory will be more closely monitored.

The programme will be extended with an innovative participation and network trajectory

Flanders will further increase its efforts to build language learning into everyday life – both in the workplace and through social interactions – by adding a fourth pillar to the civic integration programme in addition to the first three pillars (Dutch L2, civic orientation, and registration with the PES). The fourth pillar is a 40-hour network and participation programme designed to help newcomers become more socially connected and actively participate in society. It is a mandatory step for participants obliged to follow the civic integration programme who are not working or studying, and sanctions may be imposed. For all others, it is optional. Participants can enrol at any point during their integration trajectory and there is no Dutch language prerequisite.

The participation and network trajectory may take the shape of a buddy project, a traineeship at a company, association, organisation or local government, an initiation in voluntary work or a conduit to organisations that support culture, youth, or sports. The main idea is that local citizens and organisations support newly arrived migrants with their social integration, practising Dutch, and orientation around the city. In exchange, locals learn about the migrant's culture and traditions. Although similar projects exist in other OECD countries, having a network and participation programme as an integral and compulsory component of the civic integration track is unique (Reidsma and De Cuyper, 2021[16]). The new fourth pillar also aims to answer to one of the long-standing shortcomings of the integration programme; that it does not succeed in augmenting inter-cultural contacts between newly arrived migrants and local citizens (Pulinx, 2016[17]).

The programme is scheduled to launch in January 2023. The 26 pilot projects (co-financed by AMIF) that were set up in 55 Flemish municipalities in 2021-22 highlight several organisational challenges (Briones Alonso, Van Ongevalle and De Cuyper, 2022[18]). First, as was also evidenced by the OECD field mission, the fourth pillar places a lot of pressure on local governance structures, the Public Centres for Social Welfare (PCSW) and civil society actors, who are responsible for developing and facilitating access to participation projects. Even though local integration projects exist in most of the municipalities, they now must create or unlock an offer tailored to the needs of a much larger group of recently arrived migrants, including for those who lack a contact language and have limited Dutch language skills. Furthermore, local governments are still unsure about how the fourth pillar will be funded and whether they will receive additional funds from the Flemish Government. The compulsory character of the project and the fact that integration participants are held responsible for its success pose another risk (however, integration participants are only held responsible if the condition of a sufficient and adapted offer is guaranteed). Finally, sustaining the time-intensive guidance of newcomers throughout the participation programme with a much more extensive influx appears challenging, especially considering the heavy caseloads integration counsellors already carry.

Effectiveness of the integration programme

Inter-Agency co-ordination still leaves a lot to be desired

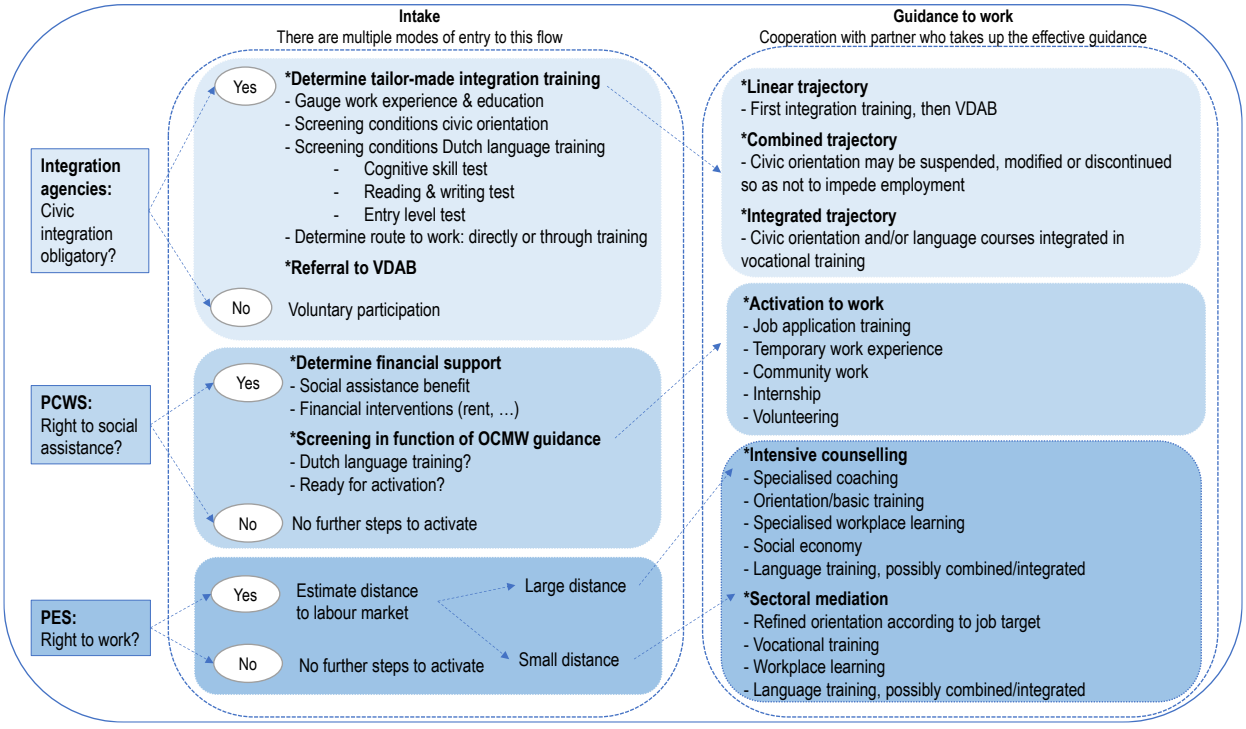
Multiple actors are involved in the provision of integration activities. Given that the civic integration programme is tailored to participants' individual needs, the actors and activities involved vary on a case-by-case basis. Figure 3.6 provides an overview of the main actors involved. In principle, the integration agencies are the primary managers of the integration trajectory. Through co-operation agreements with the PES and the PCSW, guidelines for counselling and referral of shared clients are established. In some cases, however, the management of the integration trajectory lies with the PES or the PCSW. Generally, the managing role rests with the PCSW in the case of newcomers who are not subject to a civic integration obligation, receive social assistance benefits, and are referred to the integration agencies by the PCSW. In those cases, the PCWS has control over the civic integration trajectory and can decide to take on the guidance to work itself or to engage the PES. However, the OECD field mission has demonstrated that the division of task between integration actors varies depending on the local context (with, for example, the PCWS taking on a much larger role in the city of Mechelen).

The OECD field mission additionally made clear that a communication gap between the actors is frequently reported, which results in inefficiencies because counsellors start the intake with the newcomer from scratch rather than building off the prior work of another actor. Due to the wide range of actors providing counselling services, new arrivals quickly lose track of whom they can best contact for which issue. The degree of communication and co-ordination among key players in the integration process also varies significantly across cities and municipalities. In local settings where different agencies face conflicts of interest and lack channels of communication, the integration of immigrants, particularly disadvantaged groups such as refugees and non-EU immigrant women, appears to be less successful (Ahmad-Yar, 2020[19]).

One of the objectives of the revised integration policy is to establish an integrated intake between the integration agencies, the PES and the PCSW. These integrated intakes can take different forms, such as group discussions, case discussions, and one-stop-shops, but the main idea is to strengthen and intensify the co-operation between the actors and increase the opportunity to participate in parallel activities. Eight pilot projects spread throughout Flanders tested different set-ups for an integrated intake in 2021-22, examining the effectiveness and customer-friendliness of the new role delineation, identifying gaps in the integration offer, and assessing the influence on staff capacity. A preliminary analysis found mixed results. Positive features included a better understanding of other organisations' offerings among counsellors and enhanced clarity for newcomers about the aims and expectations linked to the civic integration trajectory and the trajectory to work. The time commitment and impact on staff resources associated with integrated intakes, as well as the fact that for many migrants, the intake with the PES occurred too early in the integration process, were some of the obstacles that were identified.

Notably, a key barrier regarding co-ordination issues is that the integration agencies, the PES and the PCSW lack systematic access to individual-level data on the (prior) integration and activation measures that the newcomer has participated in. At the moment, as was also evidenced by the OECD field mission, only basic information is exchanged. For example, specific data on the start time, duration and outcomes of the various integration activities (civic orientation, Dutch L2 training, PES activation, PCWS activation) is not yet shared in a structural way. The recent co-operation agreement (2021-25) between the integration agencies, the PES and the PCSW aimed to streamline co-ordination efforts, amongst others by building a more efficient tool for data exchange. Yet, this has proven to be a very cumbersome process.

Figure 3.6 Actors of the civic integration track from intake to the labour market



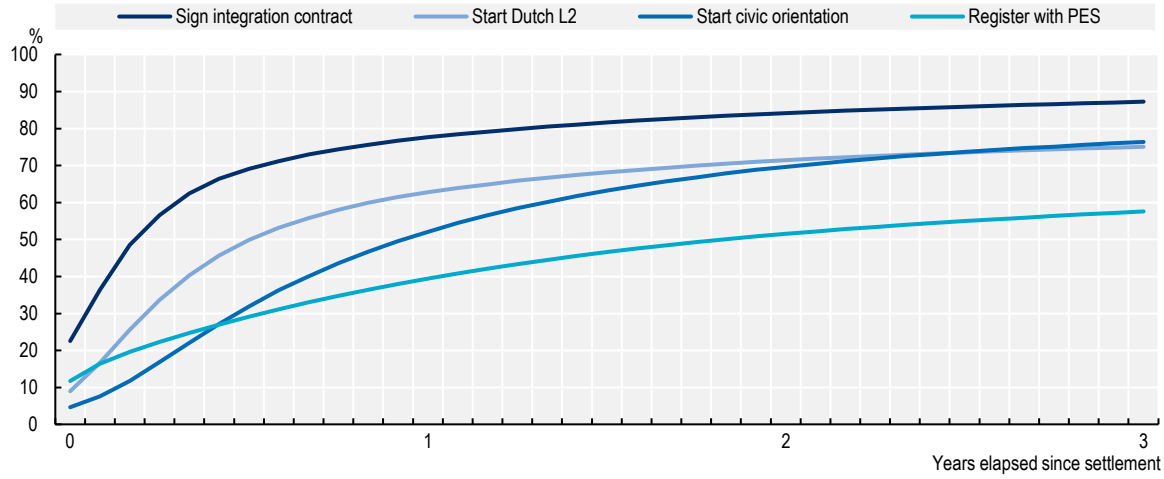
Some migrant groups experience more difficulties to participate in the various civic integration stages

As mentioned, there are large differentials by target group and category of entry in the proportion of new arrivals who were invited to participate in the civic integration programme but never register with an integration agency and thus, never started integration training. Others register and participate in the intake (the initial assessment) but drop out before signing an integration contract. Others sign an integration contract but never enrol in either civic orientation or Dutch L2 training, possibly because they are granted an exemption after taking a test.

To explore these differences, Figure 3.7 shows the cumulative share of integration participants (*aangemelde inburgeraars*) who have ever engaged in the various steps of the integration programme over the first years after arrival. Of those who settled in Flanders between 2015 and 2019, 87% signed an integration contract, 76% started civic orientation and Dutch L2 training, and 58% registered with the Flemish PES (VDAB) within the first three years after arrival. Note that the latter proportion likely has skyrocketed among more recent cohorts, as from March 2022 onwards registration with the PES became an obligatory pillar of the civic integration programme. Recent migrants will also interact with the PES much earlier in their integration process (within two months of signing an integration contract). Hence, a significant share will do so before having initiated civic orientation or Dutch language training.

Figure 3.7. Close to eight in ten integration participants take up language and civic orientation training, whereas six in ten register with the PES

Cumulative incidence of signing an integration contract, starting civic orientation, starting Dutch L2 training, and registering with the PES, by time since settlement, 2015-21, Flanders



Note: Permanent migrants (aged 18 to 59 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2015 and 2019 and registered with an integration agency. The cumulative incidence, or failure function, is computed as $1\text{-}S_t$ from the life table using the Kaplan-Meier approach.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration data.

Beneath these averages, there are notable individual differences in the propensity to engage in the various civic integration steps. Estimated effects from Cox regressions[6] (see Annex Table 3.A.1) show that, other things equal, the propensity of participation in integration training (Dutch L2 and civic orientation) was significantly higher among integration participants who migrated for humanitarian and family reasons than among other groups. Migrants who were in employment or study at the start of the programme also had a significantly lower propensity to engage in integration training, despite the more flexible integration offer for this group. Low-educated newcomers were also less likely than their higher educated peers to participate in integration training.

Finally, while migrant women had a higher propensity to take up integration training than men, childcare responsibilities remained a significant impediment for them. In many OECD countries, family commitments stand in the way of women's participation in integration measures. To ensure that migrant mothers have the possibility to learn the host country language and benefit from integration activities, several OECD countries have designed integration programmes in a way that they are flexible and compatible with childcare (OECD, 2017[20]). Recently, Flanders has also developed a custom-made civic integration trajectory for low-literate women with young children (see Box 3.3) (Agency for Integration and Civic Integration, 2022[7]).

Annex Table 3.A.1 also shows that the propensity to register with the Flemish PES was significantly lower among labour and study migrants than among other groups, women compared to men (particularly if women had young children at arrival), and low-educated migrants compared to higher educated ones. Note that these individual differences have likely decreased or even disappeared since the introduction of the obligatory registration with the PES. Increasing and accelerating newcomers' interaction with the PES may exert positive effects on their early labour market trajectories. Notably, evidence from the Netherlands showed that the time non-EU immigrant women and their children spend on contacting public employment agencies and going through job ads significantly increases the number of job offers these women receive (Van Hoye et al., 2019[21]).

Box 3.3. Tailoring integration services to the specific needs of low-literate women with young children

It is sometimes particularly challenging for migrant women with young children to participate in integration training regularly, due to a lack of (affordable) childcare and mobility (OECD, 2017[20]). Flanders has developed a customised civic integration trajectory for low-literate women with young children to overcome both practical and psychological barriers. The trajectory was installed after the positive evaluation of pilot projects in the Flemish provinces, Brussels, Ghent and Antwerp, which were set up in 2016 with the support of the European Fund for Asylum, Migration, and Integration (AMIF) and the Flemish Government. In these projects, the integration agencies worked with the Centres for Adult Basic Education and the Flemish Agency for Growing Up to offer low-literate migrant mothers a combined trajectory in which integration training was organised at pre- and primary schools. The main aim was to lower the practical barriers and to give migrant mothers a chance to participate in the civic integration programme. The courses were focused on Dutch L2 training but also on support in healthcare and education, raising opportunities for children, and strengthening the integration of mothers. There are no exact evaluation results, but when the participants were asked about their experiences, most reported feeling less isolated because of the contact and shared experience with other mothers. They also reported feeling more confident about going to the library, the local market, or making use of public transportation. Due to positive evaluation, combined trajectories for low-literate mothers with young children are now structurally part of the civic integration programme in Flanders. However, the number of available places is still limited, due to these trajectories' high costs and high demands in terms of time and energy.

Source: Vervaet and Geens (2016[22]); https://www.integratie-inburgering.be/nl/wat-kunnen-we-voor-jou-doen/inburgeringstraject-en-cursus-maatschappelijke-orientatie/inburgering-voor-laaggeletterde-ouders-met-jonge-kinderen

Civic integration trajectories remain mostly sequential, with little parallel training

There is growing support at the policy level for the notion that parallel and integrated approaches, i.e. the combination of various forms of integration training, will speed up the integration process of newly arrived migrants (OECD, 2021[9]; OECD, 2023[1]; Miltenburg and Dagevos, 2021[23]). Results for the 2015-19 settlement cohort in Flanders, however, seem to suggest that civic integration trajectories were still largely sequential (see Table 3.3). For example, only 37% of the integration participants started Dutch language training in parallel (i.e. within the same two-month window) with civic orientation classes. At the same time, a considerable share of integration participants registered with the PES more than 6 months after having taken up Dutch language training (34%) or civic orientation classes (26%).

Table 3.3. Civic integration trajectories remain mostly sequential

Relative timing of engagement in civic integration events, 2015-21, Flanders

(A)	(B)	Distribution of timing (B) vis-à-vis (A)					
		More than 6 months before	3-6 months before	Parallel start	3-6 months after	6-12 months after	More than 1 year after
Sign integration contract	Start Dutch L2 training	0.0	0.0	67.0	21.4	6.8	4.8
Sing integration contract	Start civic orientation	0.1	0.1	29.3	32.6	21.1	16.9
Sign integration contract	Register with the PES	8.0	5.7	30.7	14.8	14.8	26.4
Start Dutch L2 training	Start civic orientation	4.9	7.4	36.5	24.4	15.9	11.0
Start Dutch L2 training	Register with the PES	12.0	11.6	28.7	13.5	13.0	21.1
Start civic orientation	Register with the PES	25.0	14.4	25.0	10.1	9.3	16.2

Note: Permanent migrants (aged 18 to 59 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2015 and 2019 and registered with an integration agency.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration data.

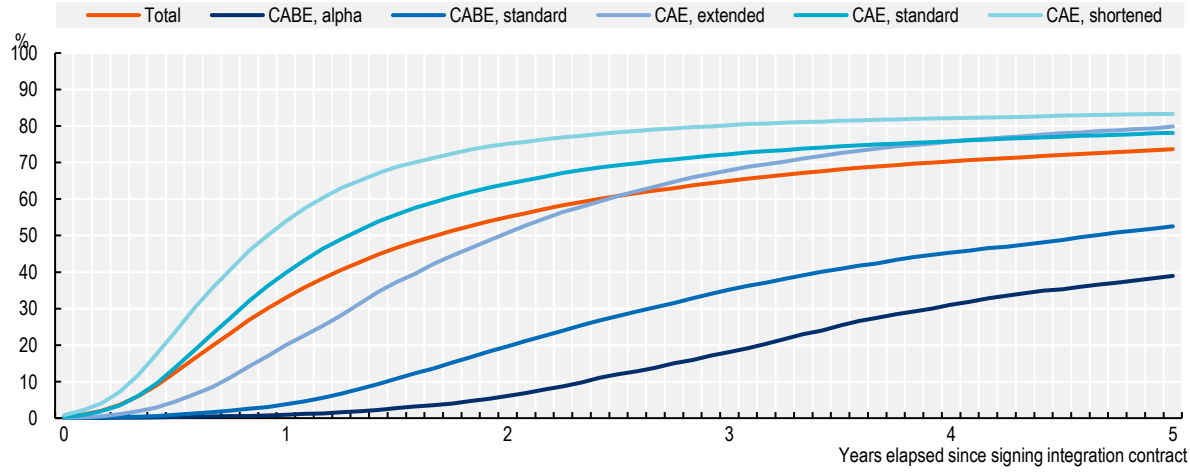
The focus on formal language learning implies protracted integration trajectories for slow learners

Once a newcomer has completed all pillars of the integration programme, they are awarded a civic integration certificate. For immigrants, this certificate may be helpful or even required in various circumstances, such as when applying for jobs, renewing a residence permit, or attaining Belgian nationality. Before, newcomers who wanted to acquire a certificate of civic integration at the end of the integration training generally needed to attend at least 80% of their classes and demonstrate via a language test that they had reached an A2 level of Dutch. Under the new Integration Act, all participants must pass a standardised test for civic orientation and Dutch at level A2 (from September 2023), have registered with the PES to receive an integration certificate, and complete the participation and network programme. For immigrants who – due to "limited learning capacities" – could not fulfil all the programme's pillars, a "declaration of efforts" is given instead. These limited learning capacities are determined by the integration agency and by language course providers.

Of the 2015-19 cohort, three in four (74%) participants obtained an integration certificate within 5 years after signing their integration contract. The average duration of the programme (i.e. the time between the contract and receipt of the certificate) was 17 months. While 43% of the participants finished the integration track in a year or less, one in five needed more than three years to obtain an integration certificate. As the scope of the civic integration programme is adjusted to individual skills and needs, it is no surprise that the programme's duration showed much variation. The average duration ranged between 12 and 21 months for those who followed language training at the CAE (shortened: 12 months, standard: 15 months, extended: 21 months). In contrast, civic integration trajectories were much longer for those who followed language training at the CABE (standard: 29 months, alpha: 37 months). Figure 3.8 shows that, within five years following the signing of an integration contract, approximately four in five CAE clients obtained an integration certificate, compared to half of the CABE clients and two in five clients in the CABE alpha track.

Figure 3.8. The focus on formal language training leads to long integration trajectories for slow language learners

Cumulative incidence of obtaining an integration certificate, by time since signing an integration contract and Dutch as a second language advice, 2015-21, Flanders



Note: Permanent migrants (aged 18 to 59 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2015 and 2019 and signed an integration contract. The cumulative incidence, or failure function, is computed as $1\text{-}S_t$ from the life table using the Kaplan-Meier approach.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration data.

The results from a Cox regression (see Annex Table 3.A.1) show that, adjusted for other variables, the propensity of obtaining a certificate was significantly higher among humanitarian migrants compared to other groups, women compared to men (except if women had young children at arrival), highly educated migrants compared to low educated ones, and those who were not at work or in education at the start of their civic integration track.

Civic integration trajectories differ considerably across local contexts

Even though Flanders has developed a centralised integration policy, there are considerable local disparities in terms of the implementation and outcomes of the civic integration programme (see Table 3.4). Notably, the proportion of participants receiving an integration certificate varied from 53% to 81%, while the integration programme's overall average duration spanned from 13 to 21 months. After adjusting for immigrant characteristics, the results of the Cox regressions (not shown) reveal that there were still significant differences across local contact offices concerning civic integration outcomes. A role is thus likely also played by underlying local conditions, such as the capacity of and the co-ordination and communication among integration stakeholders (Ahmad-Yar, 2020[19]). For example, in some smaller municipalities, having just one PES or PCSW caseworker to help immigrants navigate the local labour market was cited during the OECD field mission as posing a substantial impediment to co-operation and implementation, especially when this caseworker became ill or had to be away for other reasons.

Table 3.4. Civic integration trajectories and outcomes vary significantly across local contexts

Outcomes of the civic integration programme, by local integration agency contact office, 2015-21, Flanders

	Median	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Share that…				
Signs a contract	91.6	3.5	82.6	98.6
Starts Dutch L2	78.3	6.4	55.7	89.2
Starts civic orientation	82.7	4.6	68.8	91.4
Registers with the PES	62.5	5.1	52.8	76.8
Obtains a certificate	69.0	5.4	52.6	81.3
Average duration between intake and …				
Signing the contract	1.3	0.5	0.5	3.3
Starting Dutch L2	4.2	1.1	2.5	7.1
Starting civic orientation	9.1	1.2	6.1	12.8
Registering with the PES	6.9	2.1	1.7	13.1
Average duration between contract and …				
Obtaining a certificate	16.7	1.6	12.7	21.3

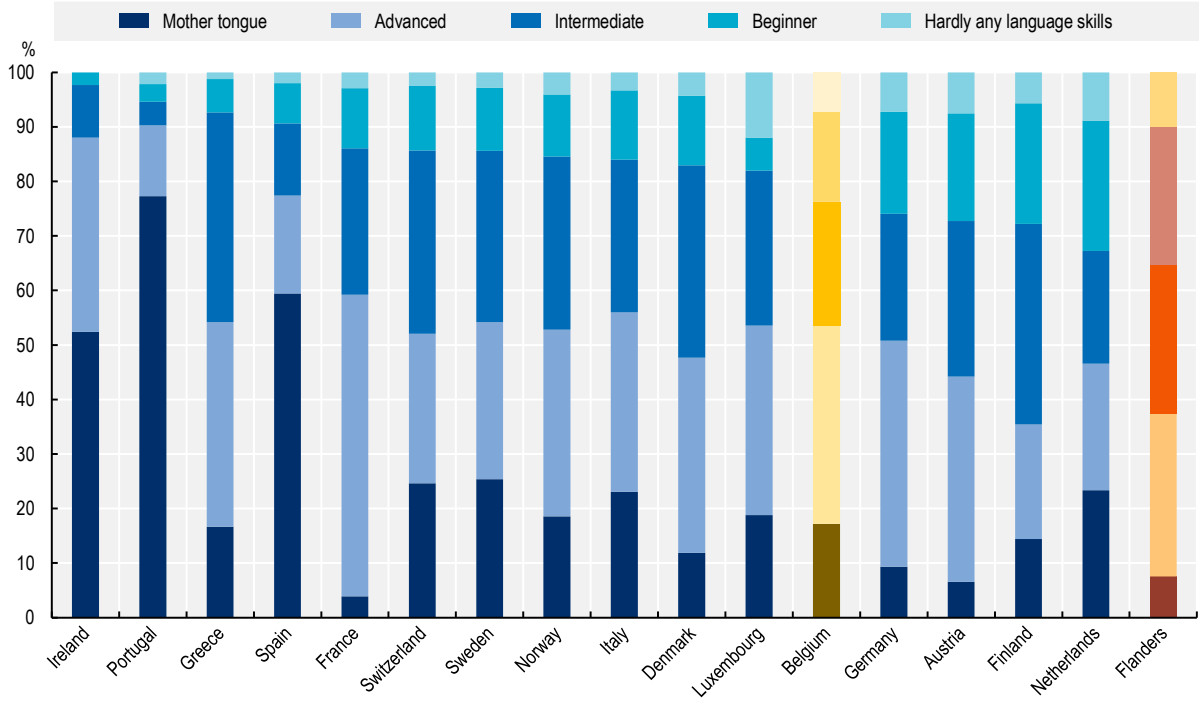
Note: Permanent migrants (aged 18 to 59 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2015 and 2019 and registered with an integration agency. The Agency for Integration and Civic Integration has 64 local contact offices (see https://www.integratie-inburgering.be/nl/contact/contact).
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration data.

Despite high participation rates, language training has not produced strong results…

The civic integration programme in Flanders has a strong focus on language learning, and a relatively high proportion of integration participants (*aangemelde inburgeraars*) at some point enrol in Dutch L2 training (75%). However, despite high participation rates, language training has not produced strong results in Flanders. This becomes immediately clear when we contrast Flanders with other European OECD countries. According to data from the 2021 ad hoc module of the Labour Force Survey, about one in three non-EU immigrants in Flanders felt that their current level of Dutch was at the level "Beginner" in 2021, which is the highest share of the countries considered in Figure 3.9. Given that a large proportion of the immigrants born outside of the EU were obliged to participate in publicly funded language training (47% between 2011 and 2021), this is a startling finding.

Figure 3.9. Host-country language skills among non-EU immigrants are low in international comparison

Current skills in the main host country language of non-EU immigrants, 2021, Flanders and selected European OECD countries

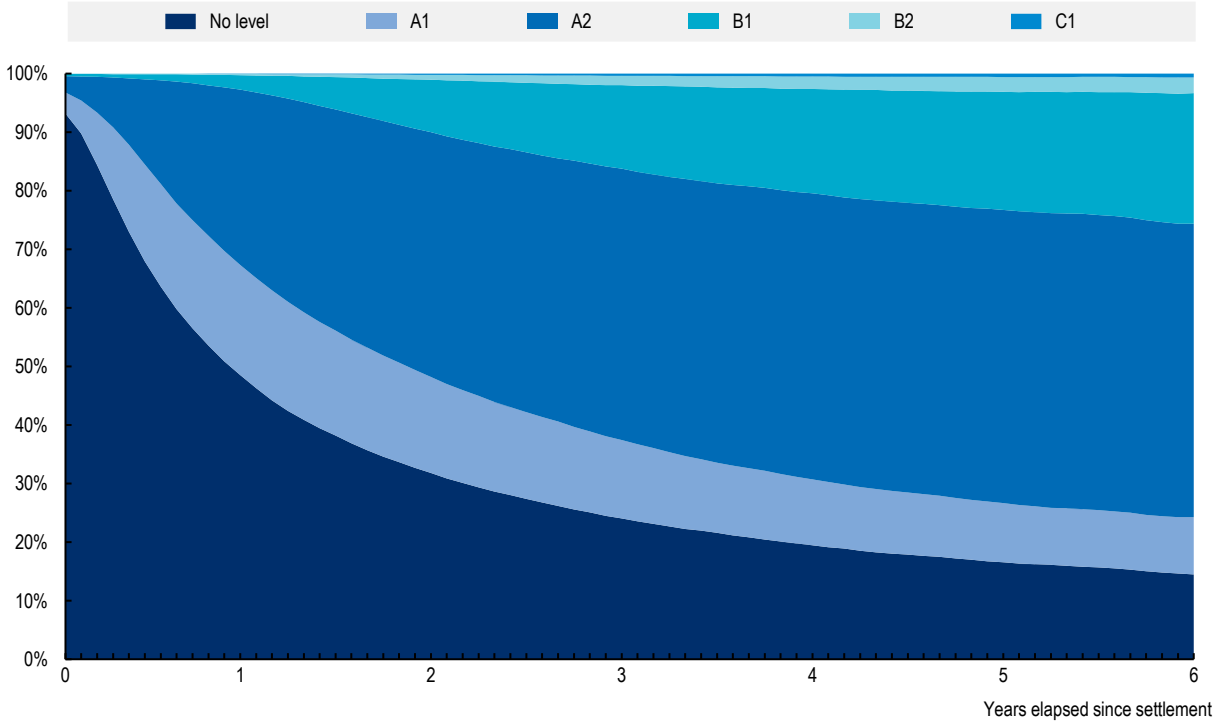


Note: Non-EU-born population aged 15 to 74. Data are ordered according to the sum of "Mother tongue", "Advanced" and "Intermediate".
Source: EU-LFS ad hoc module 2021 (Eurostat); Flanders: national LFS.

Data from the Flemish Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration confirms that many recent migrants appear to remain at low levels of Dutch proficiency, even after several years in Flanders (see also Meeus and De Cuyper (2015[24])). Focussing on the 2015-19 cohort, six out of ten integration participants who signed an integration contract achieved the target grade of A2 three years after arrival – often the grade necessary for entry into vocational training (see Chapter 4 for further discussion). Only about 16% attained a level of B1 or higher. These shares rise to 76% and 26%, respectively, six years after arrival (see Figure 3.10).

Figure 3.10. Many integration participants remain at low levels of formal Dutch language proficiency, even after several years

Level of formally acquired Dutch as a second language, by time since settlement, 2015-21, Flanders



Note: Permanent migrants (aged 18 to 59 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2015 and 2019 and signed an integration contract.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration data.

However, it is essential to highlight that Dutch L2 acquisition is only partially registered in the Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration. Language acquisition at lower levels (A1-A2) is also much better tracked than higher levels (B1-C1) (see Box 3.4). Data from the Department of Education and Training on all Dutch L2 courses completed at the Centres for Adult (Basic) Education indicate slightly more favourable outcomes. Note, however, that these statistics lump together registrations of recent and settled migrants. In school year 2020-21, there were more than 83 000 unique registrations at the CAE and just over 21 000 registrations at the CABE. 52% of the CAE registrations were for levels A1–A2 and 42% for level B1. Less than 6% of the enrolments were for courses at levels B2 to C1. Fifty-five percent of CABE registrations during that period were for A1-A2, 40% for the Alpha track, and 5% for the Latin script programme. That means that overall, close to four in ten unique registrations were for courses at levels above A2.

The average figures discussed so far mask a high degree of heterogeneity in the immigrant population. The results from an ordered logistic regression[7] (see Annex Table 3.A.2) show that formal Dutch language acquisition is positively associated with having migrated for humanitarian or family reasons, being female, not having young children at arrival, having migrated at a younger age, and a higher level of education. Furthermore, Dutch language acquisition is highest among immigrants with Afro-Asiatic (but not Arabic or Berber) or Austronesian and Sino-Tibetan-Asian languages as their mother tongue.

…a challenge which the revised Integration Act aims to tackle

The revised Integration Act aims to address the issue of immigrants not pursuing Dutch L2 levels beyond the minimum requirements. From March 2022 onwards, immigrants who are obliged to take part in the civic integration track will need to prove that they have independently attained Dutch oral skills at level B1 two years after receiving their integration certificate. Exempted groups include those who received a "declaration of efforts" because obtaining an integration certificate was impossible due to limited learning capacities and those who can prove that they worked and/or studied continuously for six months in the two years following the conclusion of the integration track. If immigrants fail to demonstrate that they are actively participating in a B1 level course for at least one year, sanctions can be imposed.[8]

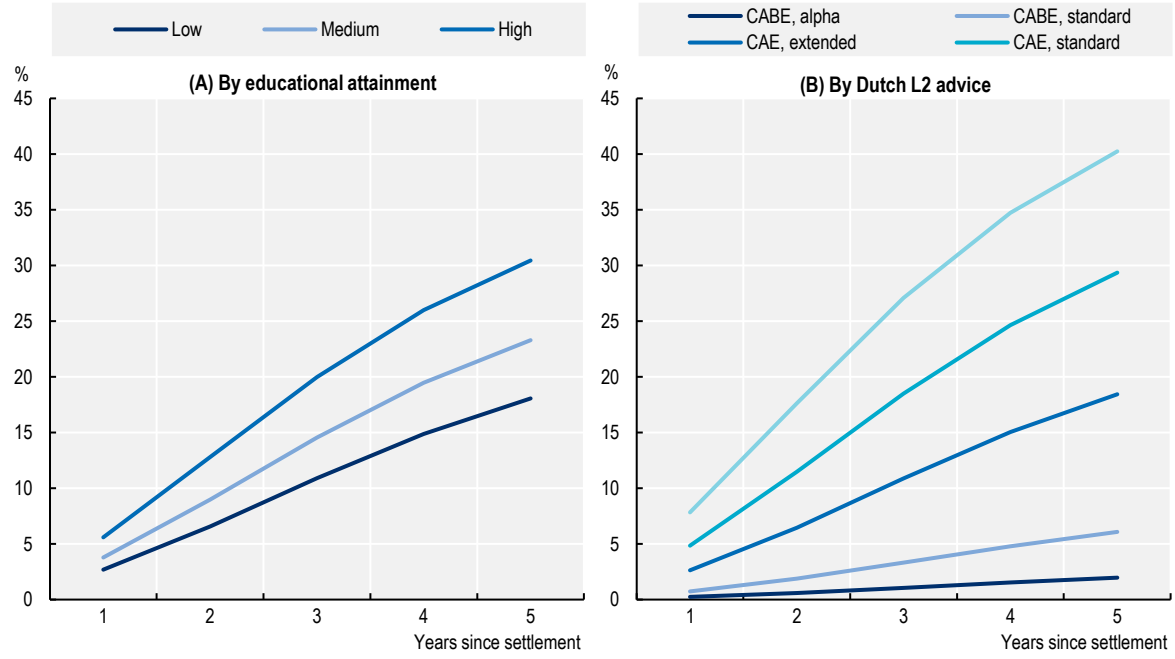
In international comparison, few OECD countries oblige immigrants to reach a B1 level or above, and even fewer ask immigrants to reach that level in the first few years after arrival (OECD, 2023[1]; OECD, 2021[9]). Countries with an obligation to reach a certain language level as part of their "civic integration programme" are Austria (A1 within 2 years), France (A1 within one year), Luxembourg (A1 within 2 years) and some cantons of Switzerland. The target level in the Netherlands was also revised in 2021 from A2 to B1, with an exception for individuals unable to meet it. The reform will hence make Flanders' target level among the highest in the OECD.

Like all students, immigrants are more likely to succeed when language courses are designed to meet needs-related, transparent, and realistic objectives. Therefore, countries that oblige immigrants to reach a certain language level within a prescribed number of years must carefully consider whether the target level is reasonable. Comparing previously achieved levels of language competence to the newly required levels highlights the ambition of the reform in Flanders. Average predicted probabilities from the logistic regression (reported in Annex Table 3.A.2) shows that the likelihood of achieving a B1 level of Dutch after five years, adjusted for other variables, varied from 18% for the low-educated to 30% for the high-educated integration participants who signed an integration contract (see Figure 3.11). The average predicted probability of holding a B1 was 40% for those who followed a shortened Dutch L2 track at the CAE. For those who took a standard or extended track, the probability was 11 and 22 percentage points lower. For those who followed language training at the CABE, the average predicted probability was very low: 6% after five years of residence. Clearly, it will take tremendous efforts to raise the Dutch proficiency of those with medium or high levels of education to B1. However, it will be even more of a challenge for low-educated migrants.

In recognition of the barriers some individuals may face to achieving the new target, Flanders offers exemptions from sanctioning immigrants with limited learning capacities. However, while there are good reasons to incentivise immigrants to learn the language, forcing them to attend language training by imposing penalties or sanctions may result in resentment or anxiety and weaken immigrants' intrinsic motivation to learn. There is a balance between designing policies that render participation attractive and acknowledging the importance of freedom of choice for motivation.

Figure 3.11. Language acquisition varies strongly by education and cognitive skills

Average predicted probability of obtaining a B1 level of Dutch, by time since settlement, educational attainment (Panel A) and Dutch L2 advice (Panel B), 2015-21, Flanders



Note: Permanent migrants (aged 18 to 59 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2015 and 2019 and signed an integration contract. Average predicted probabilities were calculated based on the ordered logistic regression, with formal Dutch language proficiency as the dependent variable, reported in Annex Table 3.A.2.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration data.

Box 3.4. Limitations of data on formal Dutch as a second language acquisition in Flanders

The Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration of the Flemish Agency for Home Affairs registers data on the Dutch L2 trajectories of new arrivals in Flanders. The Department of Education and Training's (Agency for Higher Education, Adult Education, Qualifications and Study Grants) Data warehouse DAVINCI, which compiles information on all Dutch L2 course enrolments and evaluations at the Centres for Adult (Basic) Education, serves as the primary source of information on Dutch L2 for the Crossroads Bank. When analysing and interpreting Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration data on Dutch L2 acquisition, there are some significant limitations to keep in mind. First, the Crossroads Bank only keeps track of the Dutch L2 trajectory of the newcomers who register with the integration agency and not of those who do not. Second, only data on language courses provided by the Centres of Adult (Basic) Education is gathered, meaning that language training at university language centres and privately managed organisations like the Flemish PES and Syntra is out of scope. Finally, the quality of Dutch L2 registration at lower levels (A1-A2) is significantly higher than that of registration at higher levels (B1-C1). Information on A1-A2 is based on DAVINCI data and extensive testing, making it possible to also track the people who reach these levels by informal learning. Given that A2 is the civic integration programme's target level, the integration agencies also closely monitor its progress. In contrast, for levels B1-C2, there is little testing, and information almost exclusively comes from DAVINCI; informal learning is thus hardly tracked. Integration participants are also not compelled to reach these levels, so there is less follow-up by the integration agencies.

For various reasons, immigrants may require a certificate demonstrating their proficiency in Dutch (f.e., to apply for specific occupations or to obtain Belgian nationality). The CEFR-compliant certifying, level-determining tests for levels A1 to B2 have been developed to meet this need. In 2021, 8 000 certified tests were administered, of which 86% concerned levels A1–A2 and only 14% B1–B2 (Agency for Integration and Civic Integration, 2022[7]).

Another source of Dutch L2 acquisition is the data from the Flemish PES. PES data contain information on all (vocation-specific) Dutch L2 programmes they provide or tender. Given that the PES language programmes cannot be easily translated into CEFR levels, they are discussed separately in Chapter 4.

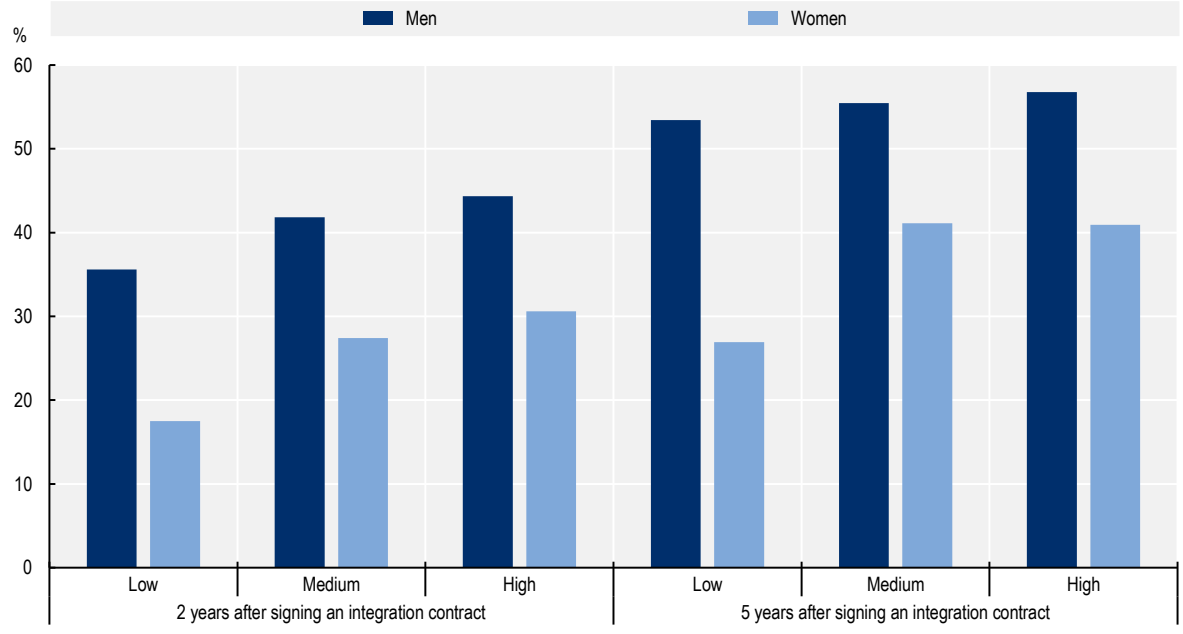
Source: Meeus and De Cuyper (2015[24]); https://onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/nl/cursisten/aanvullende-informatie/gebruik-persoonsgegevens-van-cursisten.

Few immigrants have employment once the civic integration programme ends

After completing the civic integration programme, new arrivals are expected to be able to function in Flemish society and find employment. Following the civic integration programme, however, many newcomers – particularly migrant women and the low-educated – are not working when the programme ends. Two years after having signed an integration contract, only 36% and 17% of low-educated male and female migrants, respectively, were in employment (see Figure 3.12). Five years after having signed an integration contract, these figures change to 53% and 27%, respectively. Even for highly educated migrants, the actual integration pathway is frequently much longer than two to five years, and many continue to have specific needs even after this period.

Figure 3.12. Few immigrants are employed after completing the civic integration programme

Share in employment, 2 and 5 years after signing an integration contract, by sex and educational attainment at arrival, 2005-16, Flanders



Note: Permanent migrants (aged 20 to 59 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2005 and 2015 and signed an integration contract. The definition of employment differs from that in the Labour Force Survey, as MIA panel data come from information in administrative registers.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the MIA panel (for more information, see Chapter 4).

Settlement patterns

One of the most critical findings observed in integration outcomes across OECD countries is that early intervention is critical to the success of integration policies (OECD, 2016[25]). The integration pathway of new arrivals in Flanders involves multiple stages and many actors, but the first port of call is often the municipality. Only once immigrants have found housing, and once it is clear in which municipality they will settle, can integration activities fully begin. Settlement and integration are thus inextricably linked.

Immigrants are concentrated in and around the Flemish centre cities

In most European OECD countries, the share of immigrants in the population is higher in urban areas with high population density and in large metropolitan areas than smaller cities and rural areas (Liebig and Spielvogel, 2021[26]). Flanders is no exception: the proportion of non-nationals is highest in the outskirts of Brussels, in the border region with the Netherlands in the provinces of Limburg and Antwerp, in central Limburg and the region between Antwerp, Ghent, Brussels and Leuven (the so-called "Flemish Diamond"). EU nationals tend to live close to the border, in Central Limburg and the outskirts of Brussels. Non-EU nationals are spread more equally across Flanders, with high concentrations in the "Flemish Diamond" and the former mining districts of Limburg. In 2021, close to four in ten non-nationals lived in one of the 13 Flemish centre cities,[9] even though the share relative to the local population varied drastically among them: it was 22% in Antwerp and 15% in Ghent, the two largest cities, but only 8% in Hasselt and 7% in Bruges.

Even though non-nationals are still spread unevenly across Flanders, the dissimilarity index – one of the most widely used indicators of residential segregation (see Liebig and Spielvogel (2021[26]) for a discussion) – has decreased from 36 to 27 between 2011 and 2021, suggesting that immigrants are now slightly more dispersed at the municipality level than a decade ago. However, this trend of greater dispersal may not hold at the neighbourhood level.

The choice of settlement for immigrants may depend on network effects and location-specific characteristics (such as local labour market and housing market conditions and the presence of public amenities). Using administrative data on Belgian municipalities between 1994 and 2007, Jayet et al. (2016[27]) tried to disentangle the network effect from the other factors. They found that housing and labour market variables drive the geographical distribution of immigrants in Belgium and that the attractiveness of certain municipalities predominates over the positive influence of social networks, even if the magnitude of the effects varies from one immigrant group to another.

Within cities, immigrants are overrepresented in disadvantaged neighbourhoods

Within cities, the foreign-born tend to be concentrated in specific neighbourhoods. In a recent comparative study, Andersson et al. (2018[28]) and Rogne et al. (2020[29]) analysed residential segregation patterns at the neighbourhood level in 2011 for Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden and Norway. They used geo-coded, micro-level register data from all five countries to compute comparative measures of segregation for non-European immigrants, across neighbourhoods covering the whole territory of each country, at different spatial scales (from small neighbourhoods with about 200 people to larger areas with about 51 000 people). At the smallest scale level (corresponding to neighbourhoods with 200 persons), they found strikingly similar patterns of concentration for the first four countries, while Norway stood out with a much lower level of segregation, as measured by the dissimilarity index (see Liebig and Spielvogel (2021[26]). At larger-scale levels, Belgium had a relatively strong concentration compared with the other countries.

The Belgian and Flemish case was further analysed by Costa and De Valk (2018[30]) and Imeraj et al. (2018[31]). They identified a process of clustering of deprived immigrants in Belgium's inner cities (Brussels, Antwerp and Liege). Despite the central location of neighbourhoods with high concentrations of immigrants and poverty, they found concentration to be very high and persistent, both in extension and in population density (Costa and De Valk, 2018[30]). The extent to which concentration varies by scale is more outspoken for some migrant groups and some cities. Predominantly Turkish and Moroccan communities and less wealthy immigrants have ended up in the nineteenth-century belt of Belgium's major cities, with the least attractive housing stock (Imeraj, Willaert and de Valk, 2018[31]). New arrivals born in non-EU countries tend to settle in these same central areas, where the housing stock is cheapest, oldest and most poorly equipped, socio-economic conditions are worse, and immigrant concentration is strongest (Schillebeeckx, 2019[32]; Gsir, 2010[33]).

The high residential concentration of immigrants across cities and neighbourhoods within cities is a universal phenomenon in OECD countries. However, the effects of residential concentration on integration are complex (Liebig and Spielvogel, 2021[26]; Dagnelie, Mayda and Maystadt, 2019[34]). On the one hand, arrival in an area with high concentration is often associated with better initial employment prospects for immigrants. On the other hand, in the longer run, immigrant concentration tends to hamper host-country language acquisition and, in many cases, educational advancement for children of immigrants (see Chapter 6 for further discussion). In Flanders (and Belgium), evidence on the effects of concentration on integration outcomes is lacking, even though it became clear from the OECD field mission that segregation represents a major concern, especially in municipalities with longstanding migrant presence.

The accessibility of housing steers immigrants towards poorer neighbourhoods

Housing is often considered a core policy area concerning neighbourhood composition and therefore migrant concentration (Liebig and Spielvogel, 2021[26]). In the case of Flanders, because of the liberal private housing market and the undersupply of social housing in urban areas, the availability of accessible and affordable housing plays a significant role in steering migrant populations towards specific neighbourhoods (Jayet et al., 2016[27]; Costa and De Valk, 2018[30]; Schillebeeckx, 2019[32]). The housing market in Flanders is predominantly a private one. Promoting home ownership has always been the cornerstone of Belgian housing policy (around 72% of all Flemish households are homeowners). Investment in the public rental sector remains very limited. The private rental market is also rather limited, especially for renters with a small budget. As a result, there is strong pressure on the rental market, and competition is fierce. Prices have increased, especially for houses and apartments of lower quality. Flemish cities such as Antwerp and Ghent are faced with a housing crisis for vulnerable low-income groups (De Decker et al., 2015[35]).

Given the obstacles immigrants face on the private housing market, the social housing sector is particularly relevant for tackling residential segregation. However, Flanders' social housing sector is small compared to other European OECD countries. Only 6% of housing in general and 12% of the housing in Flemish cities is social housing. In France, Denmark and the Netherlands, social housing makes up 15%, 20% and 29% of the national stock, respectively (OECD, 2022[36]; Beeckmans and Geldof, 2022[37]). Although stable over the past decade, this relatively low share of social housing is not enough to meet demand, as evidenced by the extensive waiting list of social housing-eligible households (around 180 000 households in 2021). In addition, and unlike many European OECD countries (Liebig and Spielvogel, 2021[26]), Flemish housing policies inhibit recent immigrants from accessing social housing due to the criteria of language and local anchoring. Immigrants need to have obtained a CEFR level A2 of Dutch before they are allowed to apply for social housing. Furthermore, Flanders reserves social housing for residents who have resided in a municipality for five consecutive years within a period of ten years, thus excluding recent migrants. In contrast, countries like the Germany and the Netherlands allow newcomers to apply for social housing immediately after completing an integration and language test.

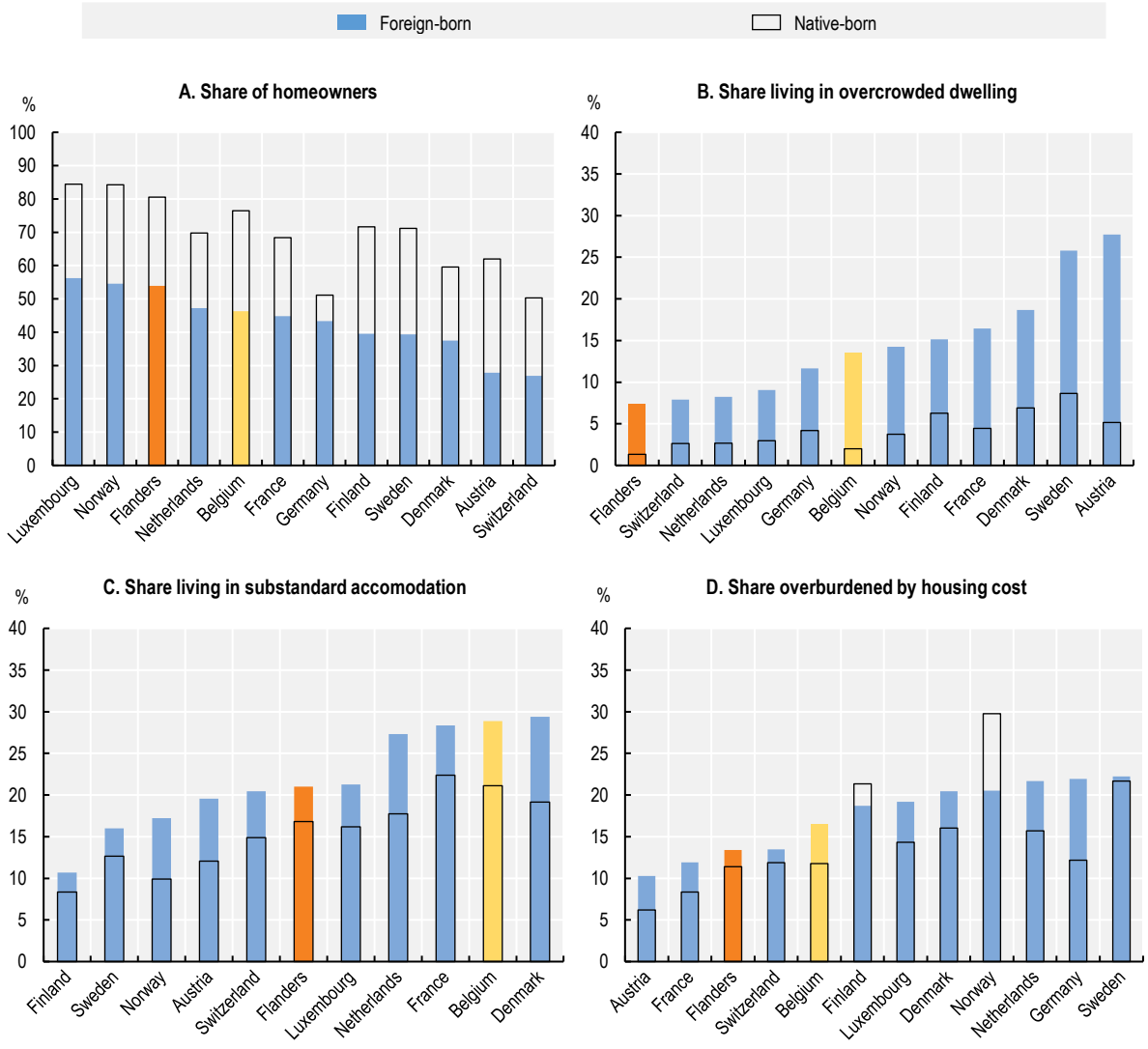
Due to Flanders' lack of public and social housing, low-income immigrant families are pushed to the private rental market with the lowest-quality housing stock. Here, they face many barriers in their highly pressured search for housing, including smaller networks, discrimination, and a lack of knowledge about the functioning of the housing market (Schillebeeckx, 2019[32]). Research measured a high incidence of discrimination against non-European immigrants in the housing market, especially in the bigger cities of Antwerp and Ghent (Van der Bracht, Coenen and Van de Putte, 2014[38]; Unia, 2014[39]). The fact that immigrants primarily depend on the private housing market, with marked deficiencies in its low-cost housing segment, represents a critical driver of their segregation in specific city neighbourhoods and poor housing conditions.

Even when immigrants leave concentrated neighbourhoods, they often remain trapped in lower-quality housing

Housing conditions are a vital component of households' well-being, and access to homeownership is an essential step in the integration process. In Flanders (Belgium), housing conditions overall are among the best in the OECD, according to the OECD Better Life Index. However, it is well-established that immigrants experience disadvantages in the housing market and have, on average, poorer housing conditions than the native-born (Noppe et al., 2018[40]; Van den Broucke, Heylen and Wets, 2015[41]). As in most European OECD countries, immigrants in Flanders are less likely to be homeowners. In 2020, slightly more than half of the foreign-born households owned the accommodation that they occupied, compared to eight in ten native-born households (see Figure 3.13). Immigrant households were also more likely to live in overcrowded or substandard accommodations. Furthermore, as many immigrant households have low income and prices in the larger cities are relatively high, rent takes a larger bite out of their family income than it does for native-born households. For most housing indicators, the widest differences vis-à-vis the native-born occur for non-EU immigrants.

Figure 3.13. Immigrants experience disadvantages in the housing market and have poorer housing conditions

Share of people who (A) are homeowners, (B) live in an overcrowded dwelling, (C) live in substandard accommodation, (D) are overburdened by housing cost, by place of birth, 2020



Note: A dwelling is considered overcrowded if the number of rooms is less than one room for the single person or the couple responsible for the dwelling (or two rooms if they do not form a couple), plus one room for every two additional adults, plus one room for every two children. Housing is considered substandard or deprived if it is too dark, does not provide exclusive access to a bathroom, or if the roof leaks. A household renting their dwelling is considered overburdened if the total rent costs represent more than 40% of the total disposable household income.
Source: OECD Settling In 2022 (forthcoming); Flanders: EU-SILC.

Increasing asylum inflows have led to an accommodation crisis…

The substantial – but not unprecedented – rise in asylum applications in 2015 caused a crisis for the Belgian Government in meeting its obligation to provide "bed, bath and bread" to applicants in the asylum procedure (see Box 3.5) (Wyckaert, Leinfelder and De Decker, 2020[42]; Beeckmans and Geldof, 2022[37]). The lodging of asylum seekers it is often determined by crisis management and the availability of vacant infrastructure at the time of crises. Rather than preparing for rising numbers of asylum seekers, authorities

have primarily looked for emergency solutions whenever sudden upsurges in the number of asylum requests led to severe shortcomings in the reception infrastructure capacity. In the asylum system, "optimisation processes" continuously occur, during which new temporary centres are opened when numbers increase and closed when numbers decline. Because of the organisation of reception infrastructure as a crisis measure, these infrastructures are mainly large-scale vacant infrastructures (e.g. holiday parks, nursing homes, hospitals, and military barracks), often in remote locations.

The recent rise in the number of asylum seekers has further intensified the challenge to find accommodation for asylum seekers in Flanders. Since October 2021, each day dozens of asylum applicants – mainly single men – do not receive access to a reception place, often for various days, if not for weeks. The situation further deteriorated following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine which led to a rise in the number people with temporary protection status (see Box 3.6). Asylum seekers who do not receive the reception to which they are entitled can go to the labour court to enforce that reception. In the year 2022, the Belgian federal reception agency Fedasil was convicted almost 7 000 times for failing to provide reception for asylum seekers.

…and policy gaps interrupt the housing pathways of refugees

In Flanders, the government does not provide initial housing, and new arrivals must therefore look for accommodation by themselves. Unlike countries such as Germany and the Netherlands, where refugees are allowed to apply for social housing immediately after completing an integration and language test, Flanders reserves social housing for residents who have resided in a municipality for five consecutive years within a period of ten years, thus excluding refugees (Beeckmans and Geldof, 2022[37]). Consequently, refugees must search for an affordable place to rent in the already oversaturated private rental housing market. Due to the lack of cheap rental accommodation, refugees limited social networks and discrimination by landlords and real estate brokers, this transition is highly problematic. As a result, refugees often end up in precarious housing conditions which complicate their integration process (Saeys, Vandevoordt and Verschraegen, 2018[43]).

While the refugee housing crisis is partly attributed to shortfalls in the housing market, policy gaps in Flanders' integration system provide another explanation (Wyckaert, Leinfelder and De Decker, 2020[42]). In Flanders, there is hardly any relationship between the policy domains of asylum and reception organised at the federal level and domains of integration and housing implemented at the regional level. Chapter 2 discussed how integration competencies were shifted towards the regional level and then gradually restructured. In that process, several features of integration support – including securing access to housing – were dropped from the regional political agenda. As a result, no state institution is responsible for administering the transition of recognised refugees into the housing market (Vandevoordt and Verschraegen, 2019[44]).

Most of the responsibility ended up with local authorities, causing pressure on cities and municipalities that was not at all compensated for by the regional level. Consequently, volunteers and non-governmental initiatives (ORBIT vzw, Flemish Refugee Action, Belgian Committee for Aid to Refugees, Caritas International Belgium, CIRE, Convivial) have increasingly provided housing support to refugees in order to fill the policy gap (Geldof, D'eer and Robeyns, 2019[45]). These organisations often act as mediators and provide information on how to search for housing, tenants' and landlords' rights and obligations, and maintenance of the accommodation. Some NGOs also provide accommodation for a short time to vulnerable persons or families in an emergency. However, many initiatives for housing support report being overburdened and in need of more structural support. Social workers of Fedasil, the integration agencies and the PCSW also assist asylum seekers and refugees in finding housing through linguistic assistance or legal and financial consultation. However, given that finding suitable and affordable accommodation for refugees is such a daunting task, the amount of time social workers can invest in the search process for housing remains limited.

Box 3.5. Accommodation and housing challenges for asylum seekers and refugees in Flanders

After having arrived in Flanders, asylum seekers often must rely on informal housing settings for several days before applying for international protection. Their asylum application must be filed at a refugee accommodation centre in Brussels, managed by the Belgian federal reception agency Fedasil. Once their application is registered, asylum seekers are entitled to some material assistance, which includes short-term accommodation in the reception centre (on average, one to three weeks). The Immigration Office registers the application, takes fingerprints and investigates whether Belgium is responsible for processing the application according to the Dublin Regulations. If so, the application is reviewed by the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons.

A recent audit of the asylum system published in October 2022 has identified significant bottlenecks in the asylum policy, chief among them the lack of personnel, co-operation between the asylum services, and efficient (digital) processes for data exchange. As a result, there is a vast backlog of cases at the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (15 685 in 2021). In response, the federal government recruited 700 new staff members in 2022 and took steps towards replacing the current Aliens Act with a new Migration Code, aiming to make the asylum procedure more coherent and leading to swifter procedures and more legal certainty. Another recommendation from the recent audit, currently under political discussion, is the consolidation of the Belgian asylum services into a single organisation.

Once the asylum application has been submitted, most asylum seekers are allocated to one of the large-scale collective asylum centres in Belgium, where they stay for the entire application procedure. Fedasil manages around 60 to 80 asylum centres, some in collaboration with partners such as the Red Cross or Caritas. The allocation is based on the availability of lodging in asylum centres, the balance between Belgium's regions and sometimes language proficiency or the presence of family members (Fedasil, 2019[46]). Unlike other European OECD countries (such as Norway and the United Kingdom), where the majority of accommodation centres are decentralised and asylum seekers are frequently housed in single homes, asylum seekers in Flanders (as in the Netherlands) are primarily housed in centralised asylum centres (Bakker, Cheung and Phillimore, 2016[47]; Beeckmans and Geldof, 2022[37]). Asylum seekers are entitled to material assistance during their asylum application process, which can last from six months to five years (one year on average). Fedasil is responsible for the support and material reception of asylum seekers in the broadest sense, including (collective or individual) housing, food, medical care, and legal aid ("bed, bath and bread").

Once asylum seekers have received refugee status (or another form of protection), they are expected to leave the asylum centre. To smoothen this transition, nearly all 300 Flemish municipalities host local reception initiatives (*Lokale opvanginitiatieven*) set up by the PCSW. Refugees can stay there for up to two months after leaving the asylum centre. Once outside the formal structures of asylum centres and local reception initiatives, refugees are expected to find their own accommodation. For most refugees, however, this term of three months is unfeasible as the search for housing takes five to six months on average (Wyckaert, Leinfelder and De Decker, 2020[42]). Unlike some other European OECD countries (Denmark, Norway and Sweden), Flanders does not pursue stringent policies to enforce a dispersal of refugees after initial reception. While asylum centres and local reception initiatives are spread across the country (implying a dispersal of asylum seekers through these initial reception facilities), refugees are allowed to register themselves anywhere in the country after recognition (Beeckmans and Geldof, 2022[37]). Drawing on data from National Register, El Moussawi and Schuermans demonstrate that recently arrived Syrian and Iraqi refugees tend to move to (sub)urban areas after they have been granted status, drawn by the presence of existing diaspora (El Moussawi and Schuermans, 2021[48]).

Social assistance

Social assistance is the only social protection scheme to which newly arrived migrants can have rapid access

In theory, foreigners in Flanders are entitled to social security benefits under the same terms as Belgian nationals. In practice, however, newly arrived immigrants are unable to avail themselves of these benefits since a work history (or at least a minimum qualifying period) is often required, which, in many cases, they cannot meet. Because social assistance, in contrast to other social benefits, does not have any requirements such as waiting periods and compulsory payment of contributions, it forms the only social protection programme to which newly arrived immigrants can have relatively rapid access in the largely contributions-based Belgian social protection system (Mussche, Corluy and Marx, 2013[49]).

Social assistance schemes, the residual safety net in most OECD countries, provide a tax-financed means-tested minimum income to working-age people who are unable to obtain sufficient means of livelihood through the labour market, a social insurance benefit or through income sources obtained by other household members (Immervoll, 2010[50]). In Flanders (Belgium), the social assistance scheme is subject to a household-based means-test, which includes the income of the partner, children and parents living in the same household. Other eligibility criteria are being at least 18 years old, residing legally and continuously in Belgium, being available for work, and having exhausted all social insurance rights. The federal statutory framework on social assistance is administered by the PCSW, one in each Flemish municipality (De Wilde et al., 2017[51]).

A social assistance benefit can be granted based on two Acts; the *Right to Social Integration* and the *Right to Social Assistance* Act.[10] Recognised refugees, stateless persons and people having more than five years of residence in Belgium are eligible for the benefit under the first Act. Other foreigners who cannot claim the minimum income benefit under the *Right to Social Integration* Act can claim the social assistance benefit under the second Act (Carpentier, 2016[52]). Asylum seekers with material aid in reception centres cannot claim a social assistance benefit, except in some specific situations.

The level of the social assistance benefit set by the federal government is the same for both Acts. On 1 January 2022, the monthly (maximum) amounts were EUR 759, 1 138 and 1 538 for a person within a childless couple, a single person and a person or family with dependent children, respectively. As the federal government is apprehensive that beneficiaries have sufficient work incentives, benefits are substantially below the net minimum wage (EUR 1 842 in June 2022). In fact, social assistance benefit amounts are rather low by international standards, especially for single persons and couples with children. As a result, social assistance beneficiaries in all household types live with an income that is below the relative poverty line (Van Mechelen and Marchal, 2013[53]).

Like in other OECD countries, the social assistance scheme in Flanders is intended as a temporary safety net for people in need. To facilitate the transition to the labour market, several activation measures were designed for social assistance beneficiaries who experience a large distance to the labour market. Some other programmes targeting the long-term unemployed are also open to them. The most important activation measure, called “Article 60”, involves temporary employment where the PCSW (partly) subsidises the wage costs. The wage subsidy is attributed for a period just long enough to allow the participant to become entitled to an unemployment benefit. Other activation measures generally involve a waiving of, or a reduction in employers’ social insurance contributions, but some also subsidise the wage costs. Some programmes are directed at the non-profit sector. Others can be used by all private-sector employers. As the target group is generally the long-term non-employed, a minimum number of days without employment in a reference period is required to be eligible. In all activation measures, participants are paid at least the minimum wage. In the *Right to Social Integration* act, the goal of labour market integration is given much more emphasis than in the *Right to Social Assistance* act.[11]

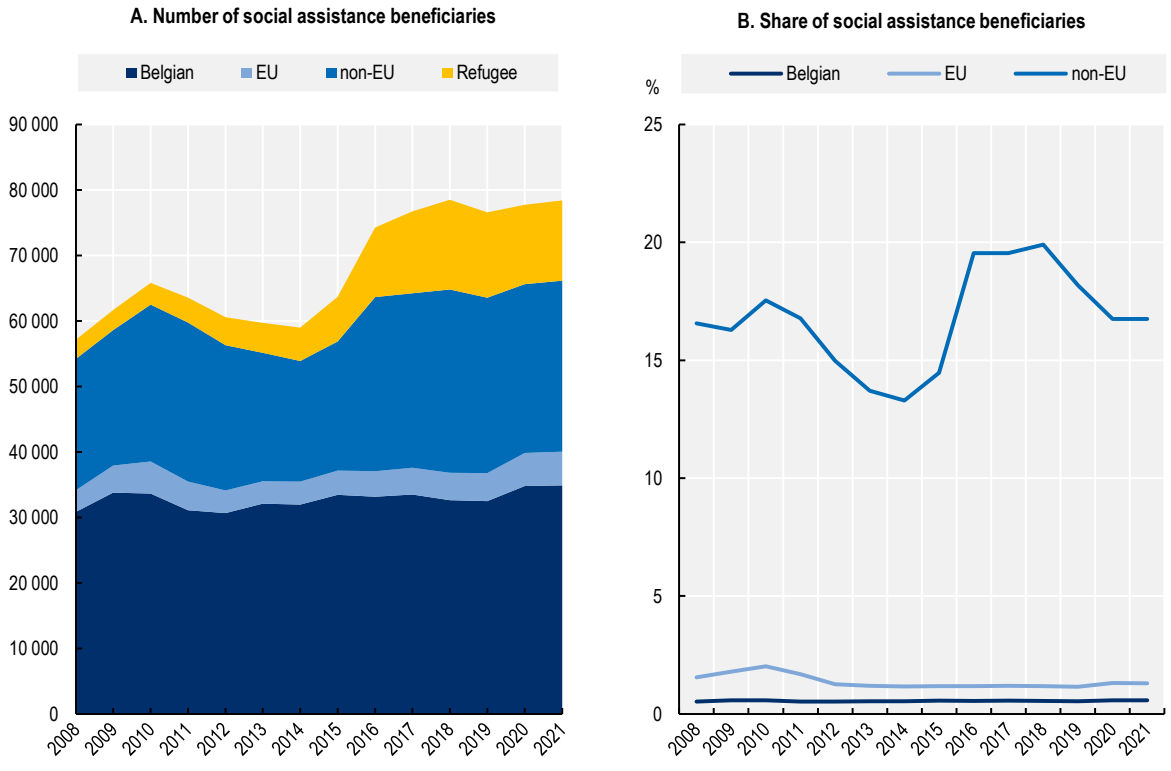
Non-EU nationals have considerably higher rates of receipt and longer periods of receipt compared to EU and Belgian nationals

In 2021, 1.2% of the population (close to 78 000 people) in Flanders received a social assistance benefit under one of the applicable acts (see Figure 3.14). In international comparison, the social assistance scheme covers a relatively small fringe of the population because unemployment benefits are relatively generous (De Wilde et al., 2017[51]; OECD, 2022[54]). Even though the Belgian unemployment benefit system is difficult to access, once individuals are in receipt, there are fewer conditions imposed in terms of availability requirements or accepting job offers to continue receiving benefits (OECD, 2020[55]). Moreover, new arrivals, often cannot meet the eligibility criteria for an unemployment benefit. To receive an unemployment benefit in Belgium, one needs to have worked a certain number of days (468 days, or approximately 67 weeks, over a reference period of 117 weeks), be available for the labour market and actively seek work and be registered as a job seeker with the PES.

Due to the specific situation of recent immigrants and the design of the unemployment benefit scheme, the share of immigrants in social assistance in Flanders is relatively high in international comparison (Immervoll, Jenkins and Königs, 2015[56]). Figure 3.14 shows that, in 2021, 55% of the social assistance beneficiaries in Flanders were non-nationals, and 16% were refugees. Due to high asylum inflows in 2015 and after that, the refugee share has risen considerably, coming from 5% in 2008. The rate of social assistance benefit receipt in the total population was also much higher among non-EU nationals (17% in 2021) than among EU nationals (1.3%) and Belgian nationals (0.6%).

Figure 3.14. Non-nationals account for half of social assistance beneficiaries

(A) Number of social assistance beneficiaries and (B) share of beneficiaries in the total population, by nationality, 2008-21, Flanders



Note: Total population. The analysis uses nationality as the Federal Public Service for Social Integration does not have data by country of birth.
Source: OECD Secretariat based on Federal Public Service for Social Integration data.

Newly arrived immigrants can apply for social assistance benefits from the moment they move into a house in a specific municipality. The PCSW have one month to process the application. Next, a meeting with the migrant is arranged, and a social worker is appointed to provide guidance and counselling. The bureaucratic burden and waiting lists are often mentioned as practical obstacles (European Migration Network, 2016[57]). Sometimes, immigrants must wait several weeks before a social worker is appointed, a meeting is arranged, and a residence check takes place. Long handling times of the application for social assistance benefits can result in severe financial difficulties for migrants during the initial period after arrival (De Wilde et al., 2017[51]). As was evidenced by the OECD field mission, the high caseload social workers often must manage, especially in larger cities, is an important bottleneck in this regard.

Non-EU immigrants and refugees not only have a higher rate of social assistance receipt, but also longer periods of receipt. Carpentier et al. (2017[58]), using longitudinal data from the Belgian Crossroads Bank for Social Security, examined the labour market trajectories of individuals who entered the social assistance scheme between 2004 and 2005. Their research showed that, controlling for beneficiary characteristics and the local economic context, non-EU immigrants exited from social assistance at a slower pace than EU immigrants and the native-born. Additionally, non-EU immigrants also had a higher propensity to re-enter the social assistance scheme after leaving.

These differences in social assistance trajectories were primarily brought about by variations in the type of exit. Compared to their native-born peers, non-EU-born beneficiaries were less likely to transition from social assistance into activation measures or the unemployment scheme, which were both trajectories that more often led to longer-term exits. In contrast, non-EU immigrants and the native-born had higher transition rates into paid employment, which was a pathway that entailed a high risk of re-entry into social assistance. The researchers showed that taking part in an activation measure was often followed by either employment or a period of unemployment with a low likelihood of re-entry (see also FPS Employment and Unia (2019[59])). In Belgium, the right to unemployment benefits is typically indefinite in duration, hence exits from unemployment were also relatively durable. On the other hand, employment following social assistance was frequently of an insecure and unattractive nature, causing many to return to social assistance after a short period in work (Carpentier, Neels and Van den Bosch, 2017[58]).

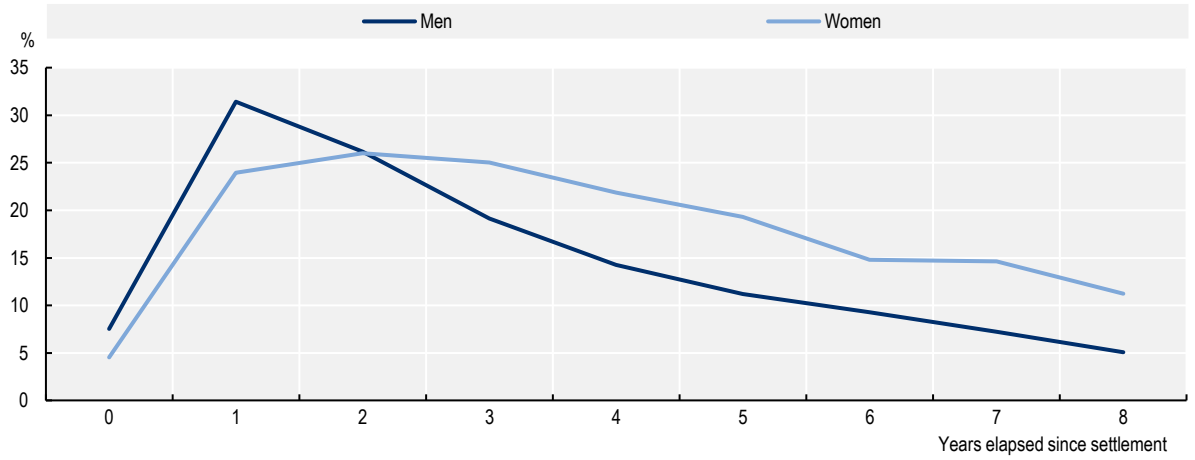
Immigrants "integrate out of" social assistance, yet receipt continues to be high many years after immigration

According to international research (Hammarstedt, 2009[60]; Hansen and Lofstrom, 2003[61]; Bratsberg, Raaum and Røed, 2014[62]) and research for Flanders (Carpentier and Schoumaker, 2018[63]; Carpentier, 2016[52]), social assistance benefits are a vital source of income for immigrants during their first years in a new country. Over time, once they enter the labour market in larger numbers, immigrants typically "integrate out of" social assistance receipt.

Focussing on the 2005-15 settlement cohort, Figure 3.15 confirms that social assistance receipt peaked one year after arrival (at 31%) for male humanitarian migrants and two years after arrival (at 26%) for females and started to decline thereafter. However, migrant women stayed longer in social assistance than men, signalling the former's poorer labour market attachment. After ten years, 11% of the women were still in receipt of social assistance, compared to 5% of the men.

Figure 3.15. Refugee women stay longer in social assistance than refugee men

Share of humanitarian migrants in receipt of social assistance, by time since settlement and sex, 2005-16, Flanders



Note: Permanent migrants (aged 20 to 59 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2005 and 2015 and who migrated for humanitarian reasons.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the MIA panel (for further information, see Chapter 4).

Box 3.6. Reception and access to integration measures for Ukrainian refugees in Flanders

As in other OECD countries, Flanders extended different types of support and assistance to new arrivals from Ukraine, including providing emergency shelter, social assistance, as well as ensuring access to health services and integration measures. On 7 March 2022, the Flemish Government set up the Flemish Taskforce Ukraine to manage the co-ordination of the refugee challenge. This task force consists of the leading civil servants (and their representatives) of the relevant Flemish policy areas, including housing, social welfare, integration, work, and education.

Reception and housing

As in most receiving countries, ensuring access to housing has been one of the main challenges in Flanders. The rapid influx of Ukrainian refugees soon exhausted existing reception facilities, especially as the numbers of other asylum arrivals was also high in 2022 (for further discussion, see Chapter 2). Ukrainians receiving a temporary protection status and indicating a reception need (around 27% of the total) are housed for a few nights in the emergency shelter “Ariane”, organised by Fedasil. Due to the high occupancy rate in the emergency shelter, Fedasil is only able to accommodate families with young children for the time being. After an initial reception period, Fedasil tries to move refugees on to the available public and private housing opportunities at the local level, a procedure which is becoming more and more difficult due to a lack of accommodation places.

As in other European OECD countries, Flanders at least initially relied heavily upon the willingness of private citizens to host refugees in their homes. Building on a wave of solidarity among Belgian citizens after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the State Secretary for Migration launched a campaign called “#Plekvrij” (Free Space) to look for emergency housing for Ukrainian refugees. A screening procedure was developed for receiving families. To map out reception places, the Flemish Government launched a ‘housing tool’ consisting of a central database in which all the reception addresses are recorded. By 1 April, the Flemish Government, together with the local authorities, managed to create 18 000 reception places. It was estimated that the share of Ukrainian refugees in temporary private accommodation reached 85-90% in Belgium in the first months of the crisis (OECD, 2022[64]).

As private accommodation is mostly a short-term solution, the transition to more durable housing for Ukrainian refugees is a looming challenge, especially in the Flemish context of significant pre-existing housing constraints. Therefore, the Flemish Parliament temporarily eased quality standards in the rental regime, allocated vacant social spaces suitable for collective housing (such as monasteries and hospitals) and tasked Flemish Social Housing Society (*Vlaamse Maatschappij voor Sociaal Wonen*) with the preparation of mobile housing units. Additionally, the government built two emergency villages (*Nooddorpen*) in the cities of Mechelen and Ghent. The aim was to realise 30 000 reception places by the end of 2022.

Based on the number of registrations in the National Register, the Flemish Government subsidises cities and municipalities EUR 180, 180 and 120 per Ukrainian refugee in June, September, and December, respectively (estimated at a total of EUR 3.5 million end of June). Additionally, flat-rate (EUR 400-1 000) and daily (EUR 15-180) subsidies are provided per public reception location, with the amount depending on the type of reception location.

Developing housing solutions for children arriving from Ukraine unaccompanied or separated (accompanied by adults other than their parents) is an area of particular focus. Until 22 November, 1 096 unaccompanied minors had been recorded, 81% of them between 12-17 years old. To quickly complete a larger volume of screening and matching to be able to accommodate Ukrainian children in foster families, the capacity of foster care services in Flanders has been temporarily strengthened.

Access to assistance and public services

Flanders has additionally taken measures to mitigate the risk of social and economic exclusion of refugees from Ukraine and to assist them in meeting their basic needs. Compared to other receiving OECD countries, measures in Flanders are relatively generous – providing Ukrainian refugees with almost the same offer as other refugees.

Ukrainians with temporary protection have full access to healthcare services and when they join a health insurance fund, they are entitled to increased reimbursements. Through so-called “care points”, Flemish authorities additionally provide initial medical care to refugees from Ukraine before they have access to the regular healthcare system, including screening for/vaccination against tuberculosis, COVID-19, measles, mumps, rubella and diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis. Flanders has also recognised the need to provide mental health support. Both the Centres for General Welfare (*Centra Algemeen Welzijnswerk, CAW*), a first-line organisation that offers psychosocial support, and the Centres for Mental health care (*Centra voor Geestelijke Gezondheidszorg, CGG*), an organisation that offers specialised mental health care, have received additional funding to assist Ukrainian refugees.

Finally, upon registration with a municipality, Ukrainian refugees with a temporary protection status are entitled to social assistance. If they meet all the requirements, they can apply for an equivalent social assistance benefit and other social benefits from the PCSW of their main residence. In addition, Ukrainian families who live in Flanders are entitled to child benefits (*Groeipakket*). On the 10th of August 2022, 9 216 unique Ukrainian minors were entitled to and received a child benefit.

Access to integration measures

As discussed above, Flanders’ civic integration programme for new arrivals includes Dutch language training, civic orientation courses, a trajectory to work, and – from January 2023 onwards – a network and participation trajectory. Contrary to other refugees, refugees from Ukraine under temporary protection are entitled but not obliged to participate in the programme.

To facilitate the swift integration of high numbers of refugees from Ukraine, the Flemish Government set up an introductory civic integration trajectory. Integration agencies receive additional funding for the organisation of modularised and easily accessible information sessions in the Ukrainian language. Like

the introduction that asylum seekers receive from the reception centres during their asylum procedure, these sessions focus on an introduction to Flemish culture and society, including essential rights, duties, values, and norms. During (mostly online) sessions, the most urgent and important questions are answered to guide Ukrainian refugees and help on their way for their stay in Flanders. Until 21 August 2022, 7 320 unique people have registered for one of these information sessions.

Ukrainian refugees also have access to publicly funded Dutch L2 training. Like for other new arrivals, integration agencies offer advice on the number of hours of Dutch language training to Ukrainian refugees, based on an intake. On the 21st of August 2022, 7 861 Ukrainians had participated in a Dutch L2 intake. The Agency for Home Affairs is currently co-ordinating together with the integration agencies to map out the possibilities for a medium- and long-term response to Ukrainian refugees' integration needs.

Source: Flemish Government (2022[65]) ; https://www.vlaanderen.be/vlaanderen-helpt-oekraine; https://www.vvsg.be/kennisitem/vvsg/vluchtelingen-uit-oekraine.

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Annex 3.A. Additional tables

Annex Table 3.A.1. Propensity of engaging in civic integration events using Cox regressions

	(1) Register with integration agency	(2) Sign integration contract	(3) Start Dutch L2	(4) Start civic orientation	(5) Register with the PES	(6) Obtain integration certificate
Target group (*Entitled*)						
-Obliged	1,40***	1,32***	1,13***	1,27***	0,86***	1,15***
Category of entry (*Free movement*)						
-Work	1,25***	0,99	0,95	0,97	0,57***	1,33***
-Study	1,26***	1,20***	1,09	1,39***	0,62***	1,33***
-Family	3,83***	2,17***	1,73***	2,05***	1,05**	1,46***
-Humanitarian	3,47***	1,85***	1,21***	2,19***	0,91***	2,00***
-Other	2,91***	1,97***	1,56***	2,06***	0,96	1,67***
Sex (*Men*)						
-Women	1,16***	1,08***	1,09***	1,06***	0,79***	1,22***
Children <6y old (*No*)						
-Yes	1,33***	1,04*	0,99	1,06***	0,95**	0,99
Women*children	0,85***	0,87***	0,85***	0,85***	0,84***	0,86***
Age at arrival (*18-29*)						
-30-39	1,02**	1,03**	1,04**	1,06***	1,06***	0,98
-40-49	1,05***	1,07***	1,06***	1,09***	1,05**	0,93***
-50-59	1,00	1,03	1,03	1,11***	1,02	0,78***
Level of education (*Low-educated*)						
-Medium-educated		1,12***	1,09***	1,17***	1,02	1,15***
-Highly educated		1,13***	1,13***	1,17***	1,05***	1,54***
Labour market status *(Not employed / in education)*						
-Employed		0,86***	0,76***	0,79***	1,00	0,67***
-In education		0,70***	0,70***	0,63***	0,83***	0,80***
Dutch L2 advice (*CAE, standard*)						
-CABE, alpha		0,88***	0,76***	0,83***	0,71***	0,25***
-CABE, standard		0,83***	0,71***	0,80***	0,86***	0,35***
-CAE, extended		0,98	0,85***	0,99	0,93***	0,71***
-CAE, shortened		1,07***	1,08***	0,99	1,07***	1,27***
Cohort of settlement (2015)						
-2016	0,96***	1,00	0,99	0,92***	1,21***	0,96*
-2017	1,05***	1,12***	1,09***	0,97	1,45***	0,94***
-2018	1,04**	1,16***	1,10***	1,02	1,75***	0,95*
-2019	1,01	1,17***	1,11***	1,07***	2,32***	0,99

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001 based on robust standard errors. Exponentiated coefficients (hazard ratios) greater than 1 indicate a positive association with the propensity to engage in a civic integration event and coefficients smaller than 1 indicate a negative association.
Note: Permanent migrants (aged 18 to 55 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2015 and 2019. The sample for Model 1 includes all migrants. The sample for Models 2-5 includes only those who ever registered with an integration agency. The sample for Model 6 includes only those who ever signed an integration contract. Time until the start of the civic integration event is the dependent variable. All models include fixed effects for the 64 local contact offices of the integration agency. All independent variables are time constant. The presence of young children, level of education, labour market status, Dutch L2 advice, and mother tongue are measured during the intake with the integration agency.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration data.

Annex Table 3.A.2. Propensity to have higher formal Dutch as a second language acquisition using an ordered logistic regression

Independent variables	Odds ratios
Target group (*Entitled*)	
-Obliged	1,24***
Category of entry (*Free movement*)	
-Work	0,51***
-Family	1,46***
-Humanitarian	2,45***
-Other	1,59***
Sex (*Men*)	
-Women	1,28***
Children <6y old (*No*)	
-Yes	0,89***
Women*children	0,71***
Age at arrival (*18-29*)	
-30-39	0,99
-40-49	0,90***
-50-59	0,57***
Level of education (*Low-educated*)	
-Medium-educated	1,43***
-Highly educated	2,19***
Labour market status (*Not employed / in education*)	
-Employed	0,50***
-In education	0,71***
Dutch L2 advice (*CAE, standard*)	
-CABE, alpha	0,04***
-CABE, standard	0,14***
-CAE, extended	0,52***
-CAE, shortened	1,69***
Mother tongue (*Arabic*)	
-Romance	1,09**
-Germanic	1,13*
-Balto-Slavic	1,19***
-Other Indo-European	1,15***
-Berber	0,97
-other Afro-Asiatic	1,46***
-Nilo-Saharan and Niger-Congo	1,07
-Turkic	0,92*
-Austronesian and Sino-Tibetan	1,26***
-Other language family	1,33***
Cohort of settlement (2015)	
-2016	1,11***
-2017	1,13***
-2018	1,12***
-2019	1,08**

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001 based on robust standard errors. Coefficients (odds ratios) greater than 1 indicate a positive association with the propensity to reach higher Dutch L2 levels and coefficients smaller than 1 indicate a negative association.
Note: Permanent migrants (aged 18 to 55 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2015 and 2019 and signed an integration contract. Non-EU migrants who came for study reasons are excluded. Formal Dutch language proficiency (time varying) is the dependent variable. All independent variables are time constant. The presence of young children, level of education, labour market status, Dutch L2 advice, and mother tongue are measured during the intake with the integration agency.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration data.

Notes

[1] This report uses “time since settlement” to refer to “time since being extracted from the National Register”.

[2] The term “humanitarian migrant” refers to asylum seekers who are more than four months into the asylum procedure and persons who successfully applied for asylum and have been granted some form of protection. For the sake of simplicity, the report considers all recipients of protection – be it refugee status, subsidiary, or temporary protection – to be humanitarian migrants, given that the groups benefit from similar integration measures.

[3] The integration agency decides cases of limited learning abilities involving civic orientation, and the Centres for Adult Education decide cases involving Dutch L2.

[4] See https://www.vlaanderen.be/taalwetwijzer/.

[5] The new scale consists of six language levels based on the CEFR (no knowledge/starter (A1), basic (A2), intermediate (A2+/B1), good (B1+), and very good (B2/C2)), instead of the current four (none, limited, good, very good).

[6] The multivariate analyses of this chapter use Cox proportional hazards regression models. The advantage of the event history approach is that it allows to take right-censored cases into account and avoid bias caused by cases who were at risk for less than the maximum observation period. The Cox proportional hazards regression has the additional benefit of making no assumption about the baseline transition rate. It is a so-called semiparametric event-history analysis model in that it is fully flexible regarding the underlying distribution of, here, the transition into civic integration events, but the ratio of the probability of transition between individuals with different values of included variables is constant over the entire process. As our main interest is the direction and strength of the covariate effects on the event occurrence (not the duration), the Cox regression is appropriate.

[7] Formal Dutch language acquisition is measured at an ordinal scale (no level, A1, A2, B1 or higher) and hence ordered logistic regression is applicable.

[8] As part of the broader initiative to enhance language learning at higher levels for low-educated newcomers, from 2023 on, the CABE will be able to provide oral/written training at level B1, which was previously only offered at the CAE.

[9] In the Spatial Structure Plan of the Flemish Government, the term “centre city” refers to cities with a relatively high number of inhabitants, which perform a central function in the areas of employment, care, education, and culture, amongst other things.

[10] At the initial stage, the social assistance benefit is the most important. However, clients can also apply for a one-time installation allowance, a prepayment on family benefits and compensation for medical costs as long there is no health insurance. Once the application for social assistance has been approved, clients can also apply for other social benefits such as a social pass for public transportation, culture vouchers, a social tariff for gas and electricity, or financial compensation for educational courses.

[11] Public Centres for Social Welfare have fewer financial incentives to support people under this Act to exit from social assistance, as the federal government fully reimburses their social assistance benefit.

4 Developing, activating, and using migrant skills in the Flemish labour market

This chapter starts by discussing the challenges that emerge in the labour market trajectories of various migrant groups in Flanders from a skills perspective. Next, it considers the policies for unlocking migrants' full skills potential through the identification, use, activation, and further development of those skills. The chapter examines migrants' access to and take-up of these policies, as well as their effectiveness in terms of gaining a (stable) foothold in the Flemish labour market.

Employment trajectories of immigrant populations

As discussed in the previous Chapter, Flanders invests substantially in the integration of newly arrived migrants during their first years of settlement – in terms of language abilities and knowledge of the Flemish labour market and wider society. After the successful completion of the civic integration track, migrants can either search for and enter employment, enrol in additional language and vocational training, or pursue further education. These additional services are not managed by the integration agencies but instead are provided by mainstream policies and services. Integration support for migrants at this point is mostly untargeted.

The following section builds on longitudinal administrative data (see Box 4.1) to investigate the long-term labour market integration of different migrant groups in Flanders. Migrant's labour market integration generally takes time. As elsewhere, newly arrived migrants often dominate the policy debate in Flanders. However, it is key that the long-term integration of established migrants is considered. This chapter shows that some established migrant groups are struggling to integrate and have become quite distant from the labour force. Notably, the labour market outcomes of long-term settled refugees and female family migrants are poor, also in international comparison. These groups are facing challenges that need to be addressed.

Box 4.1. Data sources of this chapter

Labour market trajectories, and uptake and effects of integration and activation measures

This chapter uses data from the Migration, Integration and Activation (MIA) panel. The MIA panel was developed by researchers from the University of Antwerp, in the framework of the VIONA Chair in Migration, Integration, and the Labour Market (Neels and Wood, 2019[1]; Wood and Neels, 2020[2]). The MIA panel links longitudinal microdata from the Crossroads Bank for Social Security on labour market outcomes with data from the Flemish PES on activation measures, and data from the Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration on civic integration measures, for the 2005-16 period.

The MIA panel consists of two samples:

- "Respop": a sample of the working-age population aged 18 to 65 between 2005 and 2016, disproportionally stratified by age and parentage (Belgian, Southern European, and non-European; based on nationality at birth and parents' nationality at birth).
- "Newpop": a sample of the population of newly arrived migrants who settled in Flanders between 2005 and 2015 and became target group of the civic integration programme, disproportionally stratified by category of entry (refugee and other migrants), and proportionally stratified by settlement cohort.

Employment – as measured in the Crossroads Bank for Social Security – covers self-employment, work in the regular job market, subsidised work, and all possible combinations of these. Employment for which no Belgian social security contributions were paid (e.g. informal work, cross-border work, working for supra-national institutions) are out of scope.

Uptake and effects of vocation-specific language training, recognition of foreign qualifications and domestic qualifications

The analyses and figures in this chapter on the uptake and the effects of vocation-specific language training, recognition of foreign qualifications and domestic qualifications are based on a longitudinal administrative data panel developed by the OECD Secretariat. The panel links longitudinal microdata from the Flemish PES with data from the Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration. The VDAB dataset contains information on the total population of registered jobseekers for the 2014-21 period and includes

information on participation in vocational language training and jobseekers' qualifications (whether it is foreign, recognised, or domestic). The Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration dataset contains data on the total population of newly arrived migrants who settled in Flanders between 2005 and 2021 and who became target of the civic integration programme. It also includes information on whether and when newcomers got their foreign qualifications recognised.

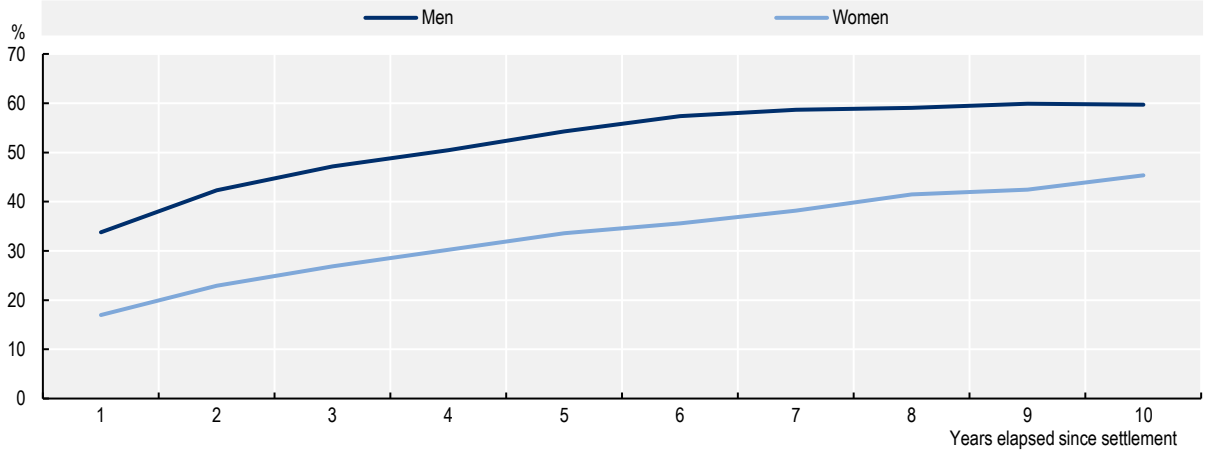
Note: See Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion of the databases that were linked in the panels.

Immigrant women often face a double disadvantage

As in other European OECD countries (Ala-Mantila and Fleischmann, 2018[3]), gender strongly correlates with labour market outcomes in Flanders. Figure 4.1 shows that newly arrived migrant women needed more time to integrate into the Flemish labour market than men, and that women's employment levels remained well below men's even ten years after settlement. Generally, men's estimated employment trajectories increased faster during the initial years and then flattened after about seven years, whereas migrant women experienced a slower but steadier increase in their employment levels. These patterns imply that the gender employment gap among migrants in Flanders increased during the first years after arrival, reached a peak estimated at 22 percentage points after six years, and narrowed thereafter.

Figure 4.1. Migrant women experience a slower and more gradual integration process

Estimated employment trajectories, by sex, 2005-16, Flanders



Note: Foreign-born (aged 20 to 55 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2005 and 2015. Average predicted probabilities are based on a logistic regression, with employment as the dependent variable. The independent variables are years elapsed since settlement, sex, age, marital status, presence of young children at arrival, category of entry, level of education at arrival, year of observation. The model includes interactions between years elapsed since settlement and the other variables.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the MIA panel (newpop) (see Box 4.1).

The reason for migration influences labour market outcomes in the long term

The category of admission, whether individuals came for work and education, family, or humanitarian reasons, is also a key factor correlating with different labour market integration pathways (Zwysen, 2019[4]; Dumont et al., 2016[5]). In Flanders, labour immigrants have the highest estimated employment rates (around 60%) when they arrive, and these remain relatively stable over the duration of residence (see Figure 4.2).[1] For family migrants, the picture strongly differs between men and women. Male family

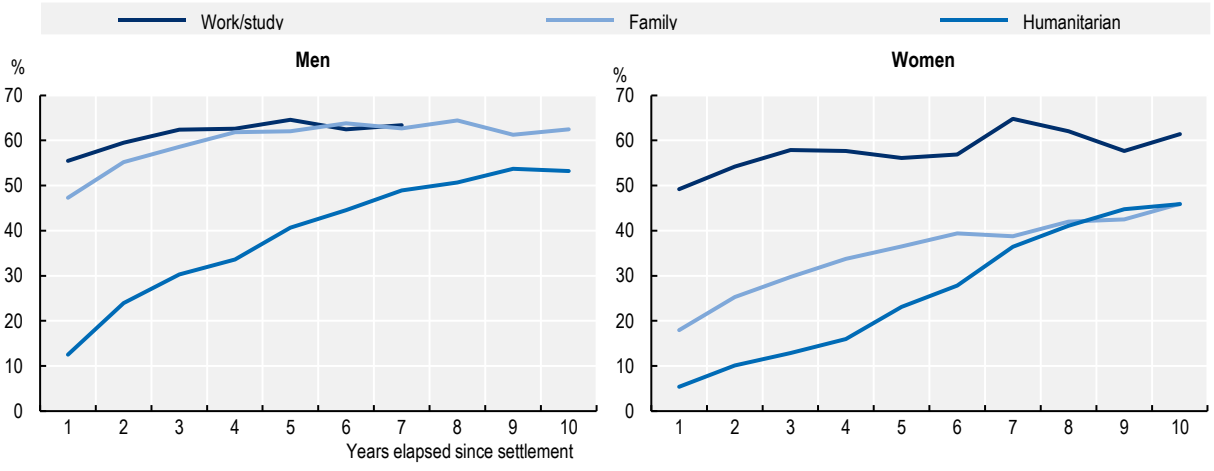
migrants have high estimated employment probabilities early in their stay (from 50 to 60%), whereas female family migrants have much lower employment probabilities to begin with, which increase gradually over the first ten years in Flanders but stay below 50%.

Humanitarian migrants face more barriers than other migrants in finding employment. They frequently suffer from psychological distress as a result of their forced migration and hazardous migration route, often obtained their qualifications and work experience in a very different labour market context and face legal barriers to accessing the labour market during sometimes lengthy asylum procedures (Liebig and Tronstad, 2018[6]). As a result, humanitarian migrants have relatively low estimated employment rates during their first years in Flanders. However, as in other European OECD countries (Fasani, Frattini and Minale, 2022[7]; Bakker, Dagevos and Engbersen, 2017[8]; Luik, Emilsson and Bevelander, 2018[9]), humanitarian migrants catch up with other migrants; a process which transpired faster for women than for men. For both male and female humanitarian migrants, however, estimated employment probabilities stabilise after a ten-year period, at 53% for men and 46% for women, respectively.

Studies on the trajectories of earlier cohorts of immigrants point out that refugees face a "double jeopardy" in the Flemish (Belgian) labour market (Lens, Marx and Vujić, 2019[10]; Carpentier and Schoumaker, 2018[11]; Herman et al., 2015[12]). On the one hand, refugees take significantly longer to enter their first employment compared to labour and family migrants. Over time, refugees catch up to some extent. A substantial share of refugees eventually gets a job and the employment gap with labour and family migrants gradually decreases over the first years after arrival. Then again, remaining in employment is as much a challenge as getting a job. Once refugees built up a limited employment history, they run a greater risk of exiting their first employment. The relatively low employment rates of refugees are hence not only due to a slow integration process upon arrival but also reflect a disproportional risk of exiting the labour market.

Figure 4.2. Humanitarian migrants take longer to move into employment but catch up to some extent

Estimated employment trajectories, by category of entry and sex, 2005-16, Flanders



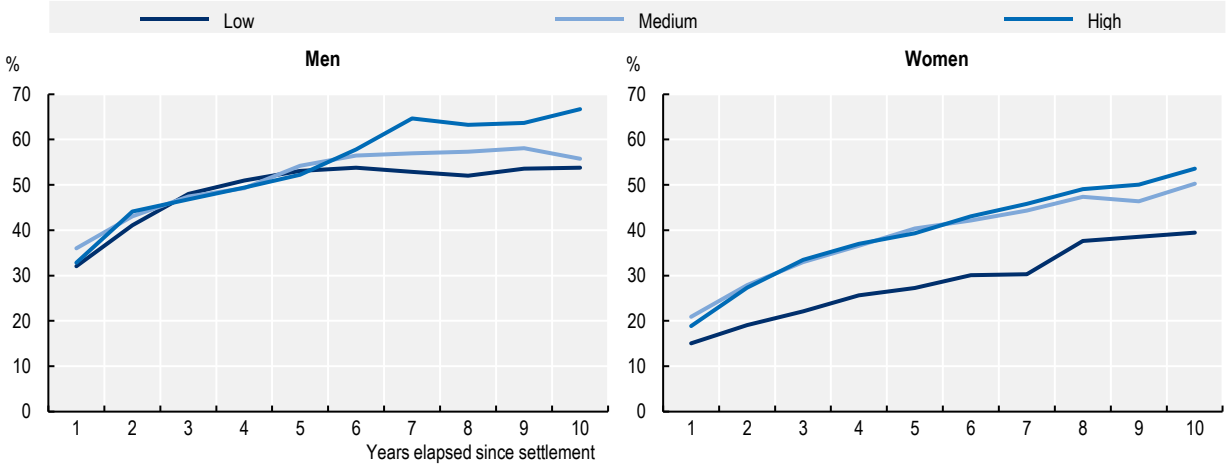
Note: Permanent migrants (aged 20 to 55 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2005 and 2015. In contrast to the previous Chapters, where we identified "Free movement" as a separate category, EU nationals are included in the categories "Work/study" and "Family". Average predicted probabilities are based on two logistic regressions (for men and women), with employment as the dependent variable. The independent variables are years elapsed since settlement, age, marital status, presence of young children at arrival, category of entry, level of education at arrival, and year of observation. The model includes interactions between years elapsed since settlement and the other independent variables.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the MIA panel (newpop) (see Box 4.1).

The importance of formal education is less clear-cut

In most OECD countries, those who arrive with low qualifications struggle to find stable employment (Damas de Matos and Liebig, 2014[13]). While all migrants have low estimated levels of employment initially in Flanders, for those with a secondary or tertiary level of education, employment probabilities increase at a faster rate than for those with primary or lower secondary education. However, employment trajectories by level of education differ considerably between men and women (see Figure 4.3). Among men, estimated employment gaps by level of education remain very similar within the first five years after arrival, and only after that, differences emerge, to the benefit of higher educated migrants. In contrast, among women, differences are much more pronounced early on and persist over time, with an estimated employment gap of 14 percentage points between low- and high-educated migrant women after ten years in Flanders.

Figure 4.3. Low-educated migrant women have a slow labour market integration process

Estimated employment trajectories, by level of education and sex, 2005-16, Flanders



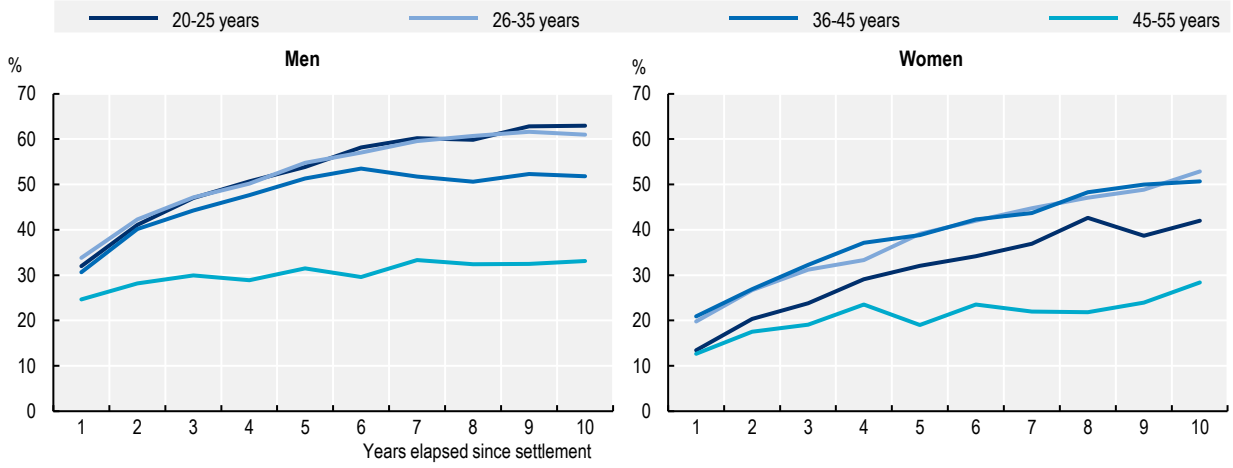
Note: Permanent migrants (aged 20 to 55 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2005 and 2015. Average predicted probabilities are based on two logistic regressions (for men and women), with employment as the dependent variable. The independent variables are years elapsed since settlement, age, marital status, presence of young children at arrival, category of entry, level of education at arrival, and year of observation. The model includes interactions between years elapsed since settlement and the other independent variables.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the MIA panel (newpop) (see Box 4.1).

Being over 45 at arrival hinders labour market integration

Age at arrival also affects migrant's employment trajectories. In Flanders, for both men and women, there is an overall pattern that migrants who are younger at arrival have much higher estimated employment levels than those aged over 45 years at arrival (see Figure 4.4). Moreover, the gap between migrants aged 46 to 55 to younger age groups increases with time for both men and women. Notably, among migrant women, the youngest age group (20-25y) also records relatively weak employment outcomes in the first years of arrival, a trend likely related to childbirth and care responsibilities.

Figure 4.4. Flanders has poor labour market outcomes among migrants aged above 45 at arrival

Estimated employment trajectories, by age at arrival and sex, 2005-16, Flanders



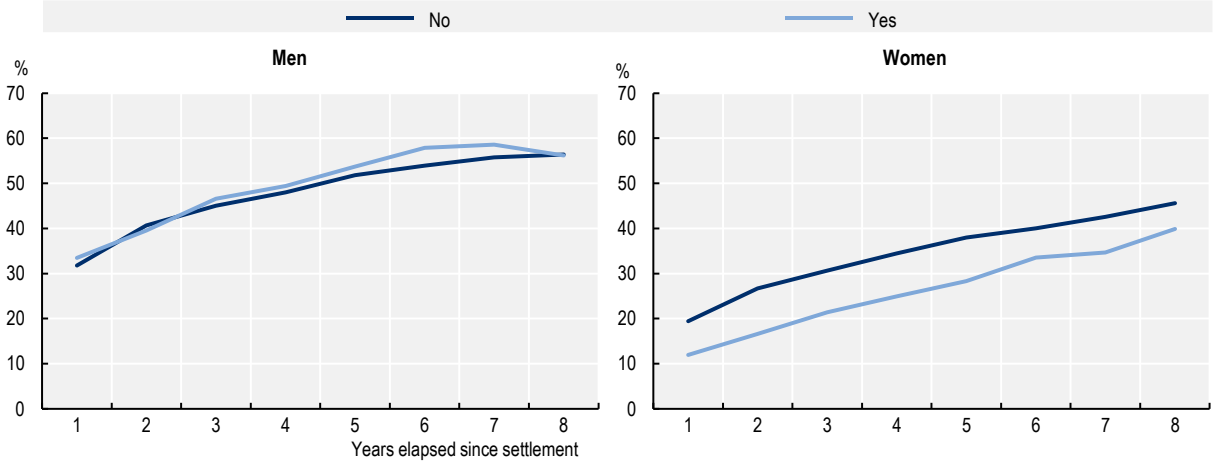
Note: Permanent migrants (aged 20 to 55 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2005 and 2015. Average predicted probabilities are based on two logistic regressions (for men and women), with employment as the dependent variable. The independent variables are years elapsed since settlement, age, marital status, presence of young children at arrival, category of entry, level of education at arrival, and year of observation. The model includes interactions between years elapsed since settlement and the other independent variables.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the MIA panel (newpop) (see Box 4.1).

Migrant women experience difficulties in juggling employment with childcare duties

Indeed, a key issue for migrant women's labour market integration is childcare. When migrant women are disaggregated into two groups; those who have young children (aged below 6) upon their arrival in Flanders, and those who do not, women with children have significantly worse employment outcomes (see Figure 4.5). In contrast, having young children upon arrival hardly affects migrant men's employment trajectories and even exerts a slightly positive correlation on their likelihood of being employed. Not only are migrant women with young children more likely to be outside employment upon arrival; the initial disadvantage also takes many years to overcome. Even after ten years in Flanders, the estimated disparity remains at 4 percentage points While the civic integration programme in Flanders was to some extent adapted to the needs of migrant mothers with weak labour market attachment (for further discussion, see Chapter 3), few targeted measures exist, in contrast to other European OECD countries (see Box 4.2).

Figure 4.5. Foreign-born women with young children upon arrival take longer to find employment

Estimated employment trajectories, by presence of young children (<6y) at arrival and sex, 2005-16, Flanders



Note: Permanent migrants (aged 20 to 55 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2005 and 2015. Average predicted probabilities are based on two logistic regressions (for men and women), with employment as the dependent variable. The independent variables are years elapsed since settlement, age at arrival, marital status, presence of young children at arrival, category of entry, level of education at arrival, and year of observation. The model includes interactions between years elapsed since settlement and the other independent variables.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the MIA panel (newpop) (see Box 4.1).

Research for Flanders shows that motherhood has a stronger negative effect on employment for migrant women and native-born women with migrant parents, than for native-born women with native-born parents. This stronger motherhood-employment link among the former population is driven in large part by less stable pre-birth employment trajectories, indicating the importance of path dependencies in the Flemish labour market (Kil et al., 2018[14]; Maes, Wood and Neels, 2021[15]).

Furthermore, while Flanders has extensive childcare support systems and parental leave policies in place to help parents balance work and family life, the uptake of these policies is significantly lower among migrant women and their native-born daughters than among native-born women of native-born parentage. To be eligible for parental leave, one must have worked for the same employer for at least 12 months in the 15 months preceding the application. However, given that migrant women and their offspring are more often outside the labour market, they are often ineligible to parental leave (Marynissen, Wood and Neels, 2021[16]; Kil, Wood and Neels, 2018[17]). Similarly, because Flanders' formal childcare system has large waiting lists and childcare agencies must ensure minimum occupancy rates, they prefer parents who are well-established in the labour market and have predictable demand for childcare. As a result, migrant mothers and their offspring are again put at a disadvantage (Biegel, Wood and Neels, 2021[18]).

Migrant mothers' labour market participation is generally considered to have a crucial impact on the outcomes of their own native-born children, and particularly on their daughters. Across the OECD, having had a working mother at 14 years old increases the employment probability of native-born children of immigrants by 8 percentage points, which is twice as much as for their peers with native-born parents. For daughters of non-EU-born women, the difference is most pronounced: having a working mother instead of one staying at home increases daughters' employment rate by 16 percentage points (OECD, 2017[19]).

Box 4.2. OECD examples of integration programmes supporting migrant mothers

Norway's "Job opportunity" programme

The programme targets unemployed migrant women aged 18 to 55 who, after some years in Norway, still have difficulties in entering the labour market and need basic skills and are not covered by other labour market schemes. About 60% of all participants have children. The programme is adapted to individual needs and consists of various qualification measures, such as language courses, work practice and other training elements, as well as health-promoting activities. It can last up to two years, with a possible extension of one year. Participants with little to no education are eligible for a four-year programme. All participants receive social benefits, while taking part in the programme. Participants have to apply for the programme and are thereafter selected on their suitability in terms of succeeding in the programme.

In 2020, 34 projects received funding to support 1 200 participants – both new participants and those from previous years. The majority are enrolled in the programme for longer than a year. In 2020, around 350 women finished the programme, three in four successfully, as 58% found employment and 14% pursued further education. A challenge is the fact that most successful participants still have low earnings. Only around half of the participants can be considered self-sufficient after the end of the programme. However, this share is just 4% at the start. In 2020, 49% of participants who completed or stopped the programme, had a self-sufficient income. What is more, while before participation three in four women (75%) had their family and others as source of main income, after the programme this share was reduced to 27%.

Germany's "Strong in the workplace" programme

The programme aimed to enable migrant mothers to sustainably secure their livelihoods. In 90 projects across Germany, from 2015 to 2022, migrant women received individual support on their path towards employment. The federal programme worked through a network of contact points that provide daily and low-threshold language training, peer-to-peer counselling, as well as mix of coaching and courses. Local contact points implemented the modular programme individually and co-operated with the local job centres and employment agencies. Partner job centres reported that the contact points are much closer and more intensive to the mothers and can provide more targeted advice to these women.

Finland's "Your turn, mothers" project

The project is an initiative in the city of Vantaa. The aim of this project is to develop a new model of integration education for immigrant mothers, enabling quicker passage through integration courses. The model also enhances Finnish language learning preparing immigrant mothers to better socialise and communicate. It wants to encourage immigrant stay-at-home mothers to learn Finnish as a first step and do that together with their children that they can take to the courses. Improved language skills enable quicker entry into vocational studies or working life and better preparedness to support their small children in language learning and integration into Finnish day-care and school systems.

Source: OECD (2017[20]), *Making Integration Work: Family Migrants*, https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264279520-en; OECD (2022[21]), *Skills and Labour Market Integration of Immigrants and their Children in Norway*, https://doi.org/10.1787/6109d927-en; https://www.regjeringen.no/en/topics/immigration-and-integration/asd/Verkemiddel-i-integreringsarbeidet/jobbsjansen/id2343473/; https://aiditmukana.fi/alasivu/.

International comparison shows that refugees' longer-term integration is problematic, especially among women

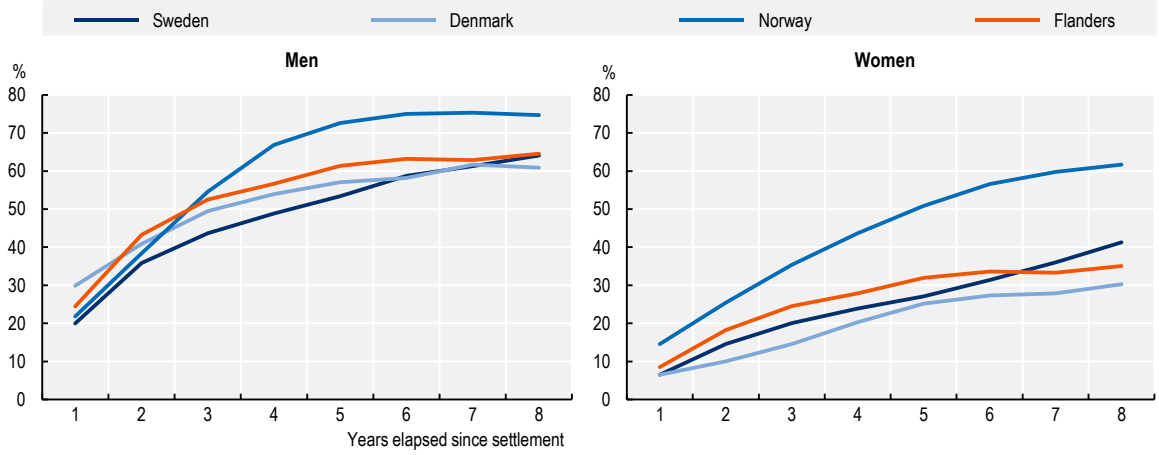
Generally labour market outcomes improve with the years as immigrants gradually acquire the skills required by the host country, including language skills. For many OECD countries a trade-off exists between on the on hand rapid labour market integration and on the other hand investing in migrants upskilling and education. Flemish integration policy increasingly aims for a fast transition of new arrivals into the labour market (Van Hoof, Nyssen and Kanobana, 2020[22]; VDAB, 2017[23]). This is particularly the policy for newly arrived humanitarian migrants (Lens, Marx and Vujić, 2019[10]).

Other countries with similarly extensive civic integration programmes, are Norway, Denmark, and Sweden. These countries have chosen in part diverging approaches over the last years on getting immigrants into rapid employment vis-à-vis investing in qualifications (see Box 4.3). Compared to these Nordic countries, estimated employment rates in Flanders for refugee men are slightly ahead in the first two years after arrival but thereafter the strong initial increase flattens. Nevertheless, still after about 6 to 8 years, they remain above what it is observed in Denmark and Sweden but behind Norway. For refugee women, the picture is less favourable. That is, refugee women have a lower starting point in terms of estimated employment rates, and their progress is slow. While it remains slightly above peer systems in Denmark and Sweden for the first years, after about five years in the country the estimated employment rate of refugee women settles at a low rate of about 35% and does not seem to increase in the following years.

In summary, outcomes in Flanders are relatively favourable in terms of employment trajectories in the early years, in line with the policy focus on rapid employment. However, after about five years, the progress comes to a halt at a particularly low rate for refugee women (see Figure 4.6).

Figure 4.6. Refugees' employment rates level off after five to six years

Estimated employment trajectories of refugees and family immigrants reunified with refugees, by sex, 2008-16, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Flanders



Note: Refugees and family migrants reunified with refugees (aged 20 to 55 at arrival) who settled in the host country between 2008 and 2015. Only those who participated in civic integration/introduction programme are included. For Flanders, "refugees and family migrants reunified with third-country nationals" were selected, instead of "refugees and family migrants reunified with refugees" as in the Nordic countries. Average predicted probabilities for Flanders are based on two logistic regressions (for men and women), with employment as the dependent variable. The independent variables are years elapsed since settlement, age at arrival, age in the year of observation, marital status, presence of young children (<6y) at arrival, category of entry (refugee, subsidiary protection, family), level of education at arrival, and year of observation. The regressions for the Nordic countries additionally include place of birth and local unemployment rate as independent variables (see Hernes et al. (2019[24])).
Source: Nordic countries: OECD Secretariat adapted from Hernes et al. (2019[24]), *Nordic Integration and Settlement Policies for Refugees: A Comparative Analysis of Labour Market Integration Outcomes*, https://www.doi.org/10.6027/TN2019-529; Flanders: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the MIA panel (newpop) (see Box 4.1).

Box 4.3. Nordic approaches to getting immigrants into rapid employment vis-à-vis investing in qualifications

Denmark focuses on rapid employment

The Danish *Integration Act* (2016) clearly highlights the goal of quick employment so that newly arrived migrants are to become self-sufficient "as soon as possible". While the Act enables a variety of educational and training options, it is explicitly stated that these should be only employed if the migrant is unable to find (any) employment within one year. Lack of education or Danish language proficiency, or the fact that the immigrant can only hold unskilled positions, is not a sufficient argument to deprioritise employment-focused integration measures, such as on-the-job training and subsidised employment. An exception is made for participants between the age of 18 and 25 who lack higher education. They are required to take education, but only if it is considered likely that they will be able to complete such an education on normal terms.

Sweden focuses on relevant employment

The Swedish *Establishment Act* (2018) has a strong focus on getting immigrants into relevant jobs, particularly if they have prior qualifications that could be of use in the Swedish labour market. Even though some recent initiatives, such as the fast track for newly arrived refugees and the intensive year-programme, aim at accelerating the transition to the labour market, getting immigrants into occupations that match their skills levels is still a top priority. The changes in 2018 also strengthened the focus on education and qualification. Compulsory education was introduced as a new measure in the integration programme for participants who had lower education levels on arrival. Such persons – if they were considered unable to get employed after a two-year programme – could be required to take further education, in order to receive financial assistance. The aim here was to strengthen and improve immigrants' chances of obtaining the high qualifications demanded on the Swedish labour market.

Norway has grown more aligned in objective with Sweden

In Norway, the *Integration Act* (2021) emphasises that the integration programme should ensure "formal qualifications and a stable labour-market attachment", and introduces completed or partially completed education at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels as possible programme objectives. With the new Introduction Act, and the resulting strengthened focus on ensuring formal qualifications and a stable labour-market attachment, Norway is now more aligned in objective with the Swedish introduction programme. This is particularly the case for those with low education at start, who are encouraged and enabled with the changes to invest in their education first. Here Norway's approach increasingly differs from the Danish. At the same time, changes in Norway with respect to the short programme time and limited educational offers for those with upper secondary education suggest that those with medium skill level may have a shorter time to invest in further upskilling or tertiary education, despite the needs of the highly skilled labour market in the future.

Source: OECD (2022[21]), *Skills and Labour Market Integration of Immigrants and their Children in Norway*, https://doi.org/10.1787/6109d927-en; Hernes et al. (2019[24]), *Nordic Integration and Settlement Policies for Refugees: A Comparative Analysis of Labour Market Integration Outcomes*, https://www.doi.org/10.6027/TN2019-529; Hernes, Bolvig and Liljeberg (2022[25]), *Scandinavian Integration Policies for refugees: An updated comparative analysis of qualification and labour-market integration outcomes*, https://www.doi.org/10.6027/temanord2022-534.

The effect of integration measures on migrants' employment outcomes

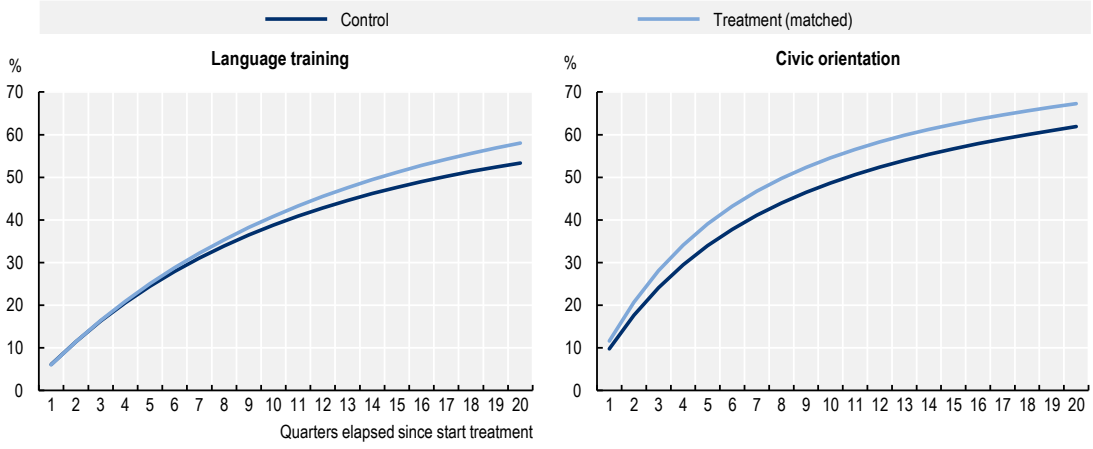
Integration training has a small direct effect on migrants' entry into employment…

International evidence suggests that integration training has often only a limited effect on labour market integration (Liebig and Huddleston, 2014[26]; Kogan, 2016[27]). Frequently, no direct link emerges between immigrants' labour force participation or earnings and participation in language training (Clausen et al., 2009[28]; Lochmann, Rapoport and Speciale, 2019[29]). One reason is a trade-off between language fluency and early work experience. If newcomers spend too much time becoming fully fluent, they are less likely to gain early work experience, which delays their chances of finding the right job. Indeed, research for Finland and Denmark suggest that the negative impact of language training found in the short run may be caused by a lock-in effect, and that language investments are crucial and only pay off in the longer run (Arendt et al., 2020[30]; Sarvimäki and Hämäläinen, 2016[31]).

A recent evaluation for Flanders by Wood and Neels (2020[2]) considered the effect of participation in civic orientation and Dutch language training on the likelihood for non-employed migrant newcomers to enter stable regular employment during the 2005-16 period (see Box 4.1). Controlling for selective inflow into integration measures and indirect effects via increased participation in PES activation measures, they show a positive return of participation in civic orientation and Dutch language training on non-working newcomers' probability of finding stable employment (see Figure 4.7). However, the return is small. In the short term for civic orientation and in the longer term for language training, non-working participants had a 5 percentage points higher likelihood to transition into stable employment compared to "matched" profiles who did not participate. Analysis also suggests that those who participate in the integration programme have weaker labour market profiles than those newcomers who do not participate.

Figure 4.7. Participation in integration training has a small direct effect on newcomers' likelihood to transition into stable employment

The effect of participation in (A) language and (B) civic orientation training on the transition to stable employment amongst non-working migrant jobseekers, 2005-16, Flanders



Note: Permanent migrants (aged 18 to 64) who settled in Flanders between 2005 and 2015. The unit of analysis is all non-employment spells (pooled) that start within the 2005-16 period. The cumulative incidence curves compare between participants ("treatment") and non-participants ("control") of the training measure in question on a quarterly basis the share of unemployed/inactive jobseekers who have ever transitioned into an employment spell of four consecutive quarters. Dynamic matching (based on demographic and human capital characteristics, (prior) unemployment and activation characteristics, and job aspirations) is used to control for selective inflow into the measure and compares participants of the measure with non-participants who are identical in terms of observable characteristics (so-called "statistical twins").
Source: OECD Secretariat adapted from Wood and Neels (2020[2]), "Wegwijs naar werk: longitudinale analyse en evaluatie van inburgerings- en activeringstrajecten in Vlaanderen, 2005-2016", https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/wegwijs-naar-werk-longitudinale-analyse-en-evaluatie-van-inburgerings-en-activeringstrajecten-in-vlaanderen-2005-2016-eindrapport-van-de-viona-leerstoel-migratie-integratie-arbeidsmarkt, based on the MIA panel (newpop) (see Box 4.1).

…however, increased language proficiency comes with a large employment premium for some migrant groups

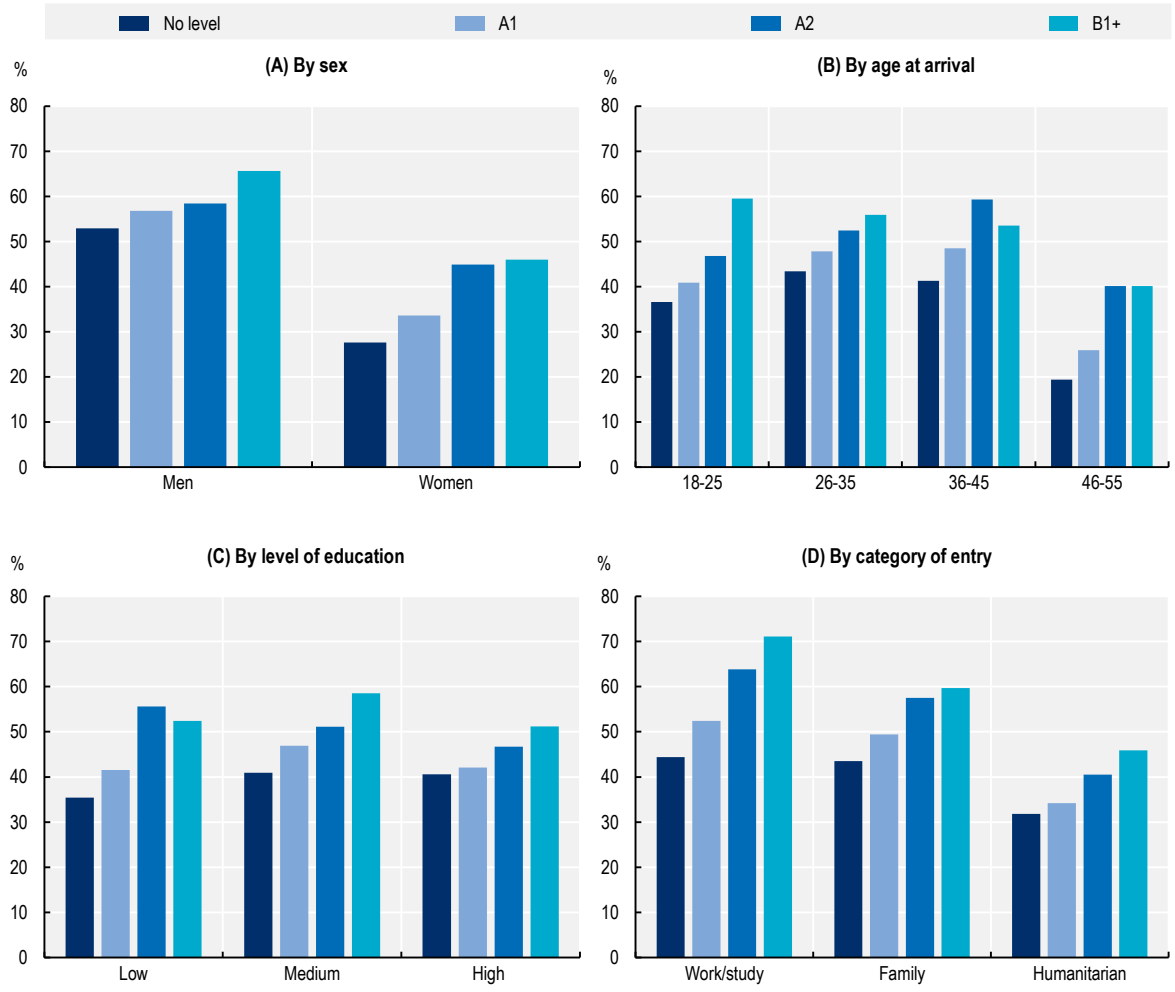
Despite the limited employment premium of participation in language training, according to the empirical literature, mastery of the host-country language is a critical precondition for immigrants to participate and succeed in the host-country labour market (Chiswick and Miller, 2015[32]; Dustmann and Fabbri, 2003[33]; Yao and van Ours, 2015[34]; Liebig and Huddleston, 2014[26]). There are reasons to believe that language skills are especially important in the Flemish labour market, as indicated by the fact that the proportion of migrants who identified a lack of host-country language as the principal barrier to finding suitable employment is among the highest in the EU (see Chapter 2 for further discussion).

Data analysis shows that better formal Dutch language skills three years after arrival positively correlate with employment five years later. The predicted employment probability increases proportionally from 41% for migrants without formal language certifications to 44% for A1-holders to 50% for A2-holders to 56% for those with formally certified language skills at B1 and higher. However, in line with a previous study for Flanders by De Cuyper, Vandermeerschen and Kuppens (2017[35]), the data shows that the effect of language skills on employment differs significantly across migrant groups (see Figure 4.8). Migrant women experienced a stronger employment return when moving from A1 to A2, whereas moving from A2 to B1+ brought about a higher return for men. Achieving higher Dutch language skills also was more beneficial for migrants who were younger at arrival. Obtaining language skills at B1 level or higher did not increase the likelihood of being employed for low-educated migrants, while it did for migrants with higher levels of education. The estimated return to language skills was also higher for those who migrated to Flanders for work or study reasons than for those who migrated for family or humanitarian reasons. Finally, moving from A2 to B1 was not associated with a higher employment probability for migrants who already had a job by the time they registered with an integration agency (not shown).

The results of this analysis are particularly relevant in the context of the revised Flemish Integration Act. From March 2022 onwards, immigrants who are obliged to take part in the civic integration track will need to prove that they have independently attained Dutch oral skills at level B1 two years after receiving their integration certificate. However, as is shown in Figure 4.8, obtaining a B1 level of Dutch is not always associated with a higher employment rate and the effects differ across migrant groups.

Figure 4.8. The employment premium of higher formal language skills differs across migrant groups

Estimated employment probabilities five years after settlement by formal Dutch language proficiency three years after settlement, by (A) sex, (B) age at arrival, (C) level of education at arrival and (D) category of entry, 2005-16, Flanders



Note: Permanent migrants (aged 20 to 55 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2005 and 2011 and signed an integration contract. Average predicted probabilities are based on a logistic regression model, with employment five years after settlement as the dependent variable. The independent variables are years elapsed since settlement, formal Dutch language proficiency three years after settlement, sex, age at arrival, marital status, presence of young children (<6y) at arrival, category of entry, level of education at arrival, employment status at the intake with the integration agencies and year of observation. The model includes interactions between Dutch language proficiency and the other variables.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the MIA panel (newpop) (see Box 4.1).

Finding a job: Activation measures for unemployed migrant jobseekers

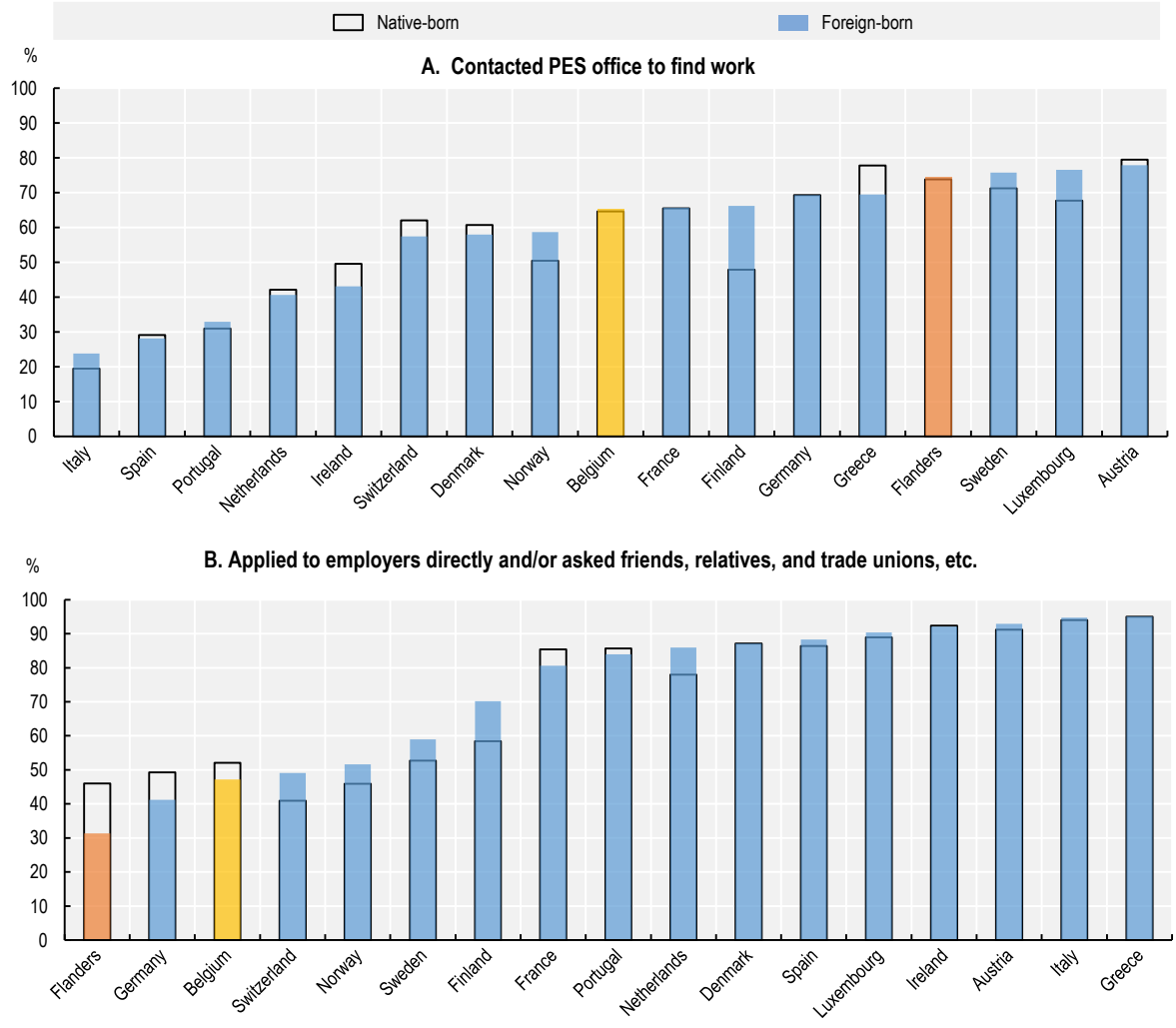
Several factors limit the rapid labour market integration of newly arrived migrants, such as limited language abilities, lack of social networks, and lack of host-country labour market experience. Therefore, OECD countries provide a range of activation measures that help migrant jobseekers overcome employment barriers and expand their job opportunities. Compared to other OECD countries, Belgium spends a relatively large share of its GDP on active labour market policies, and spending is even higher in Flanders (OECD, 2022[36]; Federal Planning Bureau, 2020[37]). To what extent these activation measures benefit immigrants is discussed in the following.

The PES plays a key role during immigrants' job search

In most OECD countries, job brokerage – the process of matching jobseekers with employers who are seeking to fill vacancies – is a central function of the PES. The PES also plays an important role in Flanders. Contrary to many other European OECD countries, including the Netherlands and France, contact with the PES is the most important job search method among the unemployed in Flanders. The job brokerage role of the PES is particularly important for immigrants who have only limited access to informal recruitment channels in Flanders. When compared to the native-born, immigrants are equally represented among those relying on the PES as their primary source of job search support. In contrast, the foreign-born in Flanders tend to make relatively limited use of direct contact with employers or social networks in their job search (see Figure 4.9).[2]

Figure 4.9. Migrants in Flanders rely on the PES to find jobs and less so on informal networks

Share of the unemployed who (A) contacted a PES office to find work and (B) applied to employers directly and/or asked friends, relatives, and trade unions etc., by place of birth, 2020, Flanders and selected OECD countries



Note: Population aged 15 to 64.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on EU-LFS data; Flanders: national LFS.

The evaluation of activation and integration measures in Flanders (Wood and Neels, 2020[2]) confirms the key role played by the PES for both migrant and native-born unemployed jobseekers. Of those who became unemployed during the 2005-16 period, more than nine out of ten registered with the PES in the same month that they entered an unemployment spell. Differences in registration rates between foreign-born and native-born jobseekers were also relatively small (below 5 percentage points).

Of the various training measures offered by the PES, workplace training is most effective in the activation of jobseekers…

Next to its role as a link between jobseekers and employers, the PES offers a wide range of training programmes that help the unemployed gain a foothold in the labour market. The main programmes are outlined in Box 4.4. Generally, PES trainings can be divided into two categories. Classroom training facilitates jobseekers' knowledge and skill acquisition in a classroom. Workplace training, on the other hand, similarly stimulates the development of skills but additionally aims at developing the competences of the jobseekers "on the job" by providing workplace experience. While the former mainly aims to tackle the supply-side barriers to employment by remedying jobseekers' skill deficits, the latter additionally tries to overcome demand-side barriers through workplace-specific human and social capital accumulation and direct employer involvement (Wood and Neels, 2020[2]; Vandermeerschen et al., 2017[38]).

Box 4.4. PES activation measures in Flanders

The Flemish PES (VDAB) runs several training measures that are also available to foreign-born jobseekers, each with a different duration, set of admission prerequisites and targets. In line with previous evaluation research, (Wood and Neels, 2020[2]) distinguish between four types of training:

- **General classroom training** (*Oriënterende opleiding*) is geared towards jobseekers' motivation and job search skills. It can consist of the following modules: setting a realistic job target, resume writing and preparing applications and interviews, job seeking and workplace attitudes training, general labour market competencies training (e.g. digital skills), and Dutch L2 courses.
- **Occupation-specific classroom training** (*Beroepsopleiding*) provides jobseekers with sets of certified skills and knowledge required to perform a specific occupation. The most popular study fields are in healthcare (especially nursing), education and accounting. During the course of the training, jobseekers retain their regular unemployment benefits. The PES pays the training registration fees and an allowance for travel and childcare expenses and possibly provides extra language support.
- **Non-contractual workplace training** (*Beroepsstage*) combines certified human capital acquisition with the opportunity for jobseekers to develop specific skills in a workplace context. It includes longer programmes (max. 6 months) allowing jobseekers to fully develop workplace-specific skills, but also shorter programmes (1 to 35 days) with less emphasis on acquiring the full set of skills required to perform an occupation. Most programmes are open to all jobseekers, but a select number of them target specific groups (e.g. low-educated youth or jobseekers with an occupational disability). PES caseworkers assign jobseekers to a non-contractual workplace training programmes that have been created in collaboration with employers. The jobseekers retain their regular unemployment benefits, receive an extra internship premium, an allowance for travel and childcare expenses, and possibly language support.

- **Contractual workplace training** (*Individuele beroepsopleiding, IBO*) offers workplace experience and training to jobseekers. It additionally includes a temporary wage subsidy to incentivise employer's participation. A contractual workplace training typically lasts between one and six months. After completion, the participant is entitled to a temporary employment contract that lasts at least as long as the training duration. Generally, employers directly recruit jobseekers for contractual workplace training programmes, but PES counsellors actively encourage jobseekers to approach employers. While employers take care of the training programme and the jobseeker's mentorship, the PES remains in charge of the jobseeker's guidance, the required insurance, a monthly allowance to top up the unemployment benefit, travel and childcare reimbursement, and possibly language support.

Alongside training measures, PES caseworkers additionally provide **job search assistance**. Although some elements are standardised, the type of assistance depends highly on the interaction between jobseeker and caseworker. Furthermore, jobseekers can receive vacancy notifications (through an algorithm that matches vacancies to jobseekers automatically or through caseworkers) or be selected for a mandatory job interview (followed by an evaluation). In case a jobseeker is unresponsive, file transmission implies that the unemployment benefits agency assesses whether a withdrawal or limitation of unemployment benefits is warranted.

Source: Wood and Neels (2020[2]), "Wegwijs naar werk: longitudinale analyse en evaluatie van inburgerings-en activeringstrajecten in Vlaanderen, 2005-2016", https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/wegwijs-naar-werk-longitudinale-analyse-en-evaluatie-van-inburgerings-en-activeringstrajecten-in-vlaanderen-2005-2016-eindrapport-van-de-viona-leerstoel-migratie-integratie-arbeidsmarkt.

Which active labour market policy is most effective has been studied recently, both internationally (Card, Kluve and Weber, 2018[39]; Kluve, 2010[40]; Butschek and Walter, 2014[41]; Nekby, 2008[42]) and in Flanders (Vandermeerschen et al., 2017[38]; Wood and Neels, 2020[2]). A common finding of these studies is that workplace training, which has the strongest and most direct link to the labour market, generates the highest return in terms of entering (stable) employment for jobseekers.

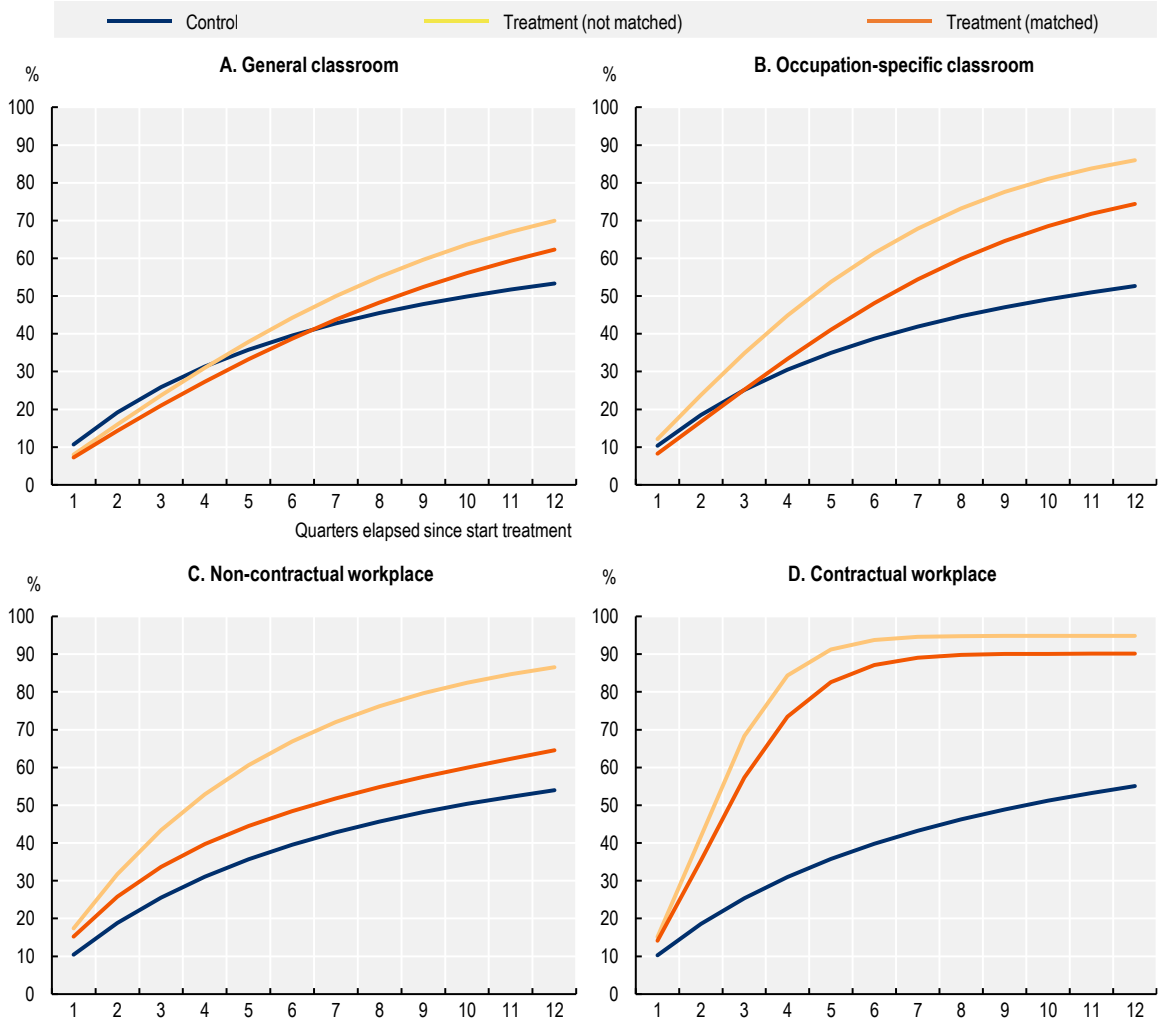
Based on a sample of working-age (native-born and foreign-born) unemployed jobseekers in Flanders for the 2005-16 period, Wood and Neels (2020[2]) show that the short-term employment premium is higher for contractual workplace training than for non-contractual workplace training. One year after the start of contractual workplace training, participants had a transition rate into employment which was 23 percentage points higher compared to similar (matched) jobseekers who did not participate (see Annex Figure 4.A.1). The corresponding premium for non-contractual workplace training stood at 17 percentage points However, the positive returns to both training measures converge with more time spent in unemployment. While the return to contractual workplace training declined towards 10 percentage points after 3 years, the return to non-contractual workplace learning exhibits a slower initial rise remaining more persistent in the long run (13 percentage points after 3 years). Compared to workplace learning, classroom learning generates a more limited return in terms of entering stable employment for jobseekers. Due to lock-in effects, general classroom training exhibited mostly insignificant returns in the short term, with lower transition rates into employment among participants compared to similar non-participants up until the seventh quarter since the start of participation. In the longer term, the positive effect of participation in general classroom training gradually converges towards 5 percentage points The effect of participation in occupation-specific classroom training similarly showed a lock-in effect up until the fifth quarter since start of participation, but also a slightly stronger positive effect in the long run, with a 7 percentage points higher transition rate into employment for participants compared to similar non-participants 12 quarters since participation started (see Annex Figure 4.A.1).[3]

In their study, Wood and Neels (2020[2]) repeated the evaluation exercise for a subpopulation of non-employed newly arrived migrants who settled in Flanders between 2005 and 2015.[4] For recent migrants, contractual workplace training generated the strongest positive result. In fact, one year after the start of participation, participants had a transition rate that was up to 45 percentage points higher than comparable jobseekers who

did not engage in that training (see Figure 4.10). However, the return to general and occupation-specific classroom training was higher for newcomers than for the residential population. In fact, the return to occupation-specific training outpaced the return to non-contractual workplace training for this group (see also (Vandermeerschen et al., 2017[38])). For newcomers, investing in upskilling through classroom training thus seems particularly beneficial to increase their chances of getting a foothold in the Flemish labour market.

Figure 4.10. Workplace training and occupation-specific classroom training are most effective

The effect of participation in training programmes on the transition to stable employment amongst non-working newly arrived migrant jobseekers, 2006-16, Flanders



Note: Permanent migrants (aged 18 to 64) who settled in Flanders between 2005 and 2015. The unit of analysis is all non-employment spells (pooled) that start within the 2005-16 period. The cumulative incidence curves compare between participants ("treatment") and non-participants ("control") of the training measure in question on a quarterly basis the share of unemployed/inactive jobseekers who have ever transitioned into an employment spell of four consecutive quarters. Estimated cumulative incidence curves are based on discrete-time hazard models, with time until entry into stable employment as the dependent variable. Dynamic matching (based on demographic and human capital characteristics, (prior) unemployment and activation characteristics, job aspirations and civic integration trajectory characteristics) is used to control for selective inflow into the measure and compares participants of the measure with non-participants who are identical in terms of observable characteristics (so-called "statistical twins").
Source: OECD Secretariat adapted from Wood and Neels (2020[2]), "Wegwijs naar werk: longitudinale analyse en evaluatie van inburgerings- en activeringstrajecten in Vlaanderen, 2005-2016", https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/wegwijs-naar-werk-longitudinale-analyse-en-evaluatie-van-inburgerings-en-activeringstrajecten-in-vlaanderen-2005-2016-eindrapport-van-de-viona-leerstoel-migratie-integratie-arbeidsmarkt, based on the MIA panel (newpop) (see Box 4.1).

…however, immigrant jobseekers are less likely to participate in the training programmes that are most effective for them

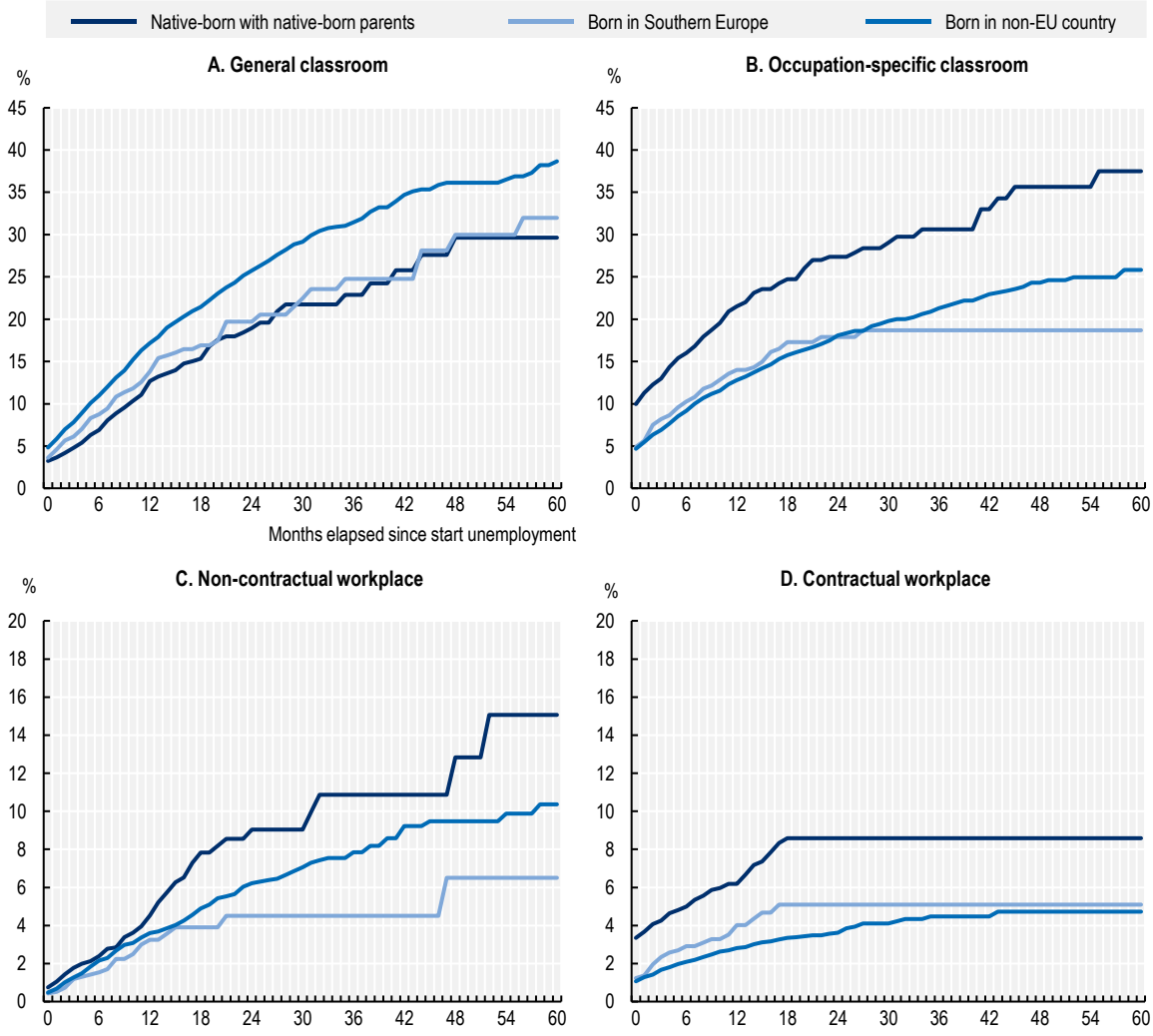
The PES training measures discussed above do not target immigrants and are generally open to all jobseekers. Participating in such training and other PES activities designed to increase one's employment prospects is often a requirement for receiving unemployment benefits. Research for Flanders shows that, since jobseekers are usually not familiar with the different training options, PES caseworkers hold most decision-making power in assigning unemployed jobseekers to different measures (Elloukmani and Raeymaeckers, 2020[43]).

Wood and Neels (2020[2]) show that migrant jobseekers are less likely to participate in the training programmes that are most effective in terms of employment entry.[5] The cumulative incidence of enrolment in training shows that uptake of occupation-specific and workplace training is generally higher among native-born jobseekers of native-born parents than among foreign-born jobseekers. In contrast, migrant jobseekers – particularly those born outside the EU – are more likely to participate in general classroom training (see Figure 4.11). These findings also hold for the subpopulation of newly arrived migrants who settled in Flanders between 2005 and 2015. Among the population of newcomers, migrants who came for family or humanitarian reasons have higher training uptake than migrants who came for work reasons, which is at least partly due to the fact that having participated in the civic integration programme strongly increases the likelihood of newcomers to register with the PES and engage in different training measures (see Annex Figure 4.A.2) (Wood and Neels, 2020[2]).

Migrant jobseekers face several obstacles to participate in training measures that are more closely linked to the labour market. Migrants may not have the necessary Dutch language skills to be admitted to more intensive training measures. Lower levels of schooling and domestic working experience, a lack of digital skills, as well as more challenges in orientating themselves on the Flemish labour market and formulating realistic and well-defined job ambitions, are additional impediments (Elloukmani and Raeymaeckers, 2020[43]). Furthermore, household composition and particularly the presence of young children has also been shown to exert a stronger effect on training uptake among migrant women than among native-born women (Kasztan Flechner et al., 2022[44]). Finally, newly arrived migrants may only have the option – often due to financial constraints – to choose short-term training programmes with a focus on direct access to the (lower segments) of the labour market, sometimes regardless of their skills and capacities. For contractual workplace training, an additional factor is that employers initiate the training and therefore select jobseekers with the strongest labour market profiles (often referred to in the literature as "cream-skimming" or "cherry picking") (Wood and Neels, 2020[2]).

Figure 4.11. Immigrants are underrepresented in workplace and occupation-specific classroom training

Cumulative incidence of participating in PES training measures, by place of birth, 2005-16, Flanders



Note: Population aged 18 to 64. The unit of analysis is all unemployment spells (pooled) that start within the 2005-16 period. The cumulative incidence, or failure function, is computed as 1-S_t from the life table using the Kaplan-Meier approach.
Source: OECD Secretariat adapted from Wood and Neels (2020[2]), "Wegwijs naar werk: longitudinale analyse en evaluatie van inburgerings- en activeringstrajecten in Vlaanderen, 2005-2016", https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/wegwijs-naar-werk-longitudinale-analyse-en-evaluatie-van-inburgerings-en-activeringstrajecten-in-vlaanderen-2005-2016-eindrapport-van-de-viona-leerstoel-migratie-integratie-arbeidsmarkt, based on the MIA panel (respop) (see Box 4.1).

International comparison reveals relatively low uptake of training measures in the first years after arrival

Cross-national comparison of activation measure uptake is difficult because of differences in how countries classify those measures. Nonetheless, evidence from a comparative review of integrating policies for refugees and family migrants reunited with refugees in Nordic countries (Hernes et al., 2019[24]) helps to benchmark Flanders' outcomes. While the proportion of refugees participating in general and occupation-specific classroom training in Flanders is comparable to that in Denmark and Norway (around 40%), the proportion of participants in workplace training in Flanders remains significantly lower.

Table 4.1. Uptake of PES training measures among newly arrived refugees and family migrants is lower in Flanders than in the Nordic countries

Participation in different types of training measures within the first three years after settlement, refugees and family immigrants reunified with refugees, 2008-16 settlement cohort, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Flanders

	Denmark	Norway	Sweden	Flanders
Contractual workplace training	14	11	29	2
Non-contractual workplace training	62	22	85	5
Classroom training	40	39		43

Note: Permanent migrants (aged 20 to 55 at arrival) who settled in the host country between 2008 and 2016 (2008-15 for Flanders) and who participated in the civic integration/introduction programme. We compare "contractual workplace training" in Flanders to "subsidised employment" in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden; "non-contractual workplace training" in Flanders to "internship" in Denmark and "work practice' in Norway; and "classroom and occupation-specific training" in Flanders to "other labour market programmes" in Denmark and "other measures" in Norway. For Sweden, "labour market programmes" capture preparatory education, labour market training and work practice.
Source: Nordic countries: OECD Secretariat adapted from Hernes et al. (2019[24]), *Nordic Integration and Settlement Policies for Refugees: A Comparative Analysis of Labour Market Integration Outcomes*, https://www.doi.org/10.6027/TN2019-529; Flanders: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the MIA panel (newpop) (see Box 4.1).

As discussed above, since March 2022, all non-working integration participants in Flanders must register with the PES within two months of signing an integration contract. This reform is expected to increase and accelerate migrants' uptake of PES training, so helping to narrow the gap with the native-born. Another possible accelerator is the Flemish PES's gradual shift towards a more blended approach, offering classroom and workplace training with language training in parallel, as discussed in the following section.

Vocational language training is a promising tool to build work-related language skills…

Many classroom language courses are not adapted to the realities of the labour market. Migrants often balance competing demands on their time, such as providing for themselves and their family financially, discovering their new living environment, while often remaining in contact with family and friends back home. They can therefore lose motivation when the immediate benefit of learning is not apparent. At the same time, language classes might prevent immigrants from actively seeking or gathering work experience, which, in turn, sends negative signals to employers who prefer job applicants without long absences from the labour market (Clausen et al., 2009[28]).

One effective tool to improve labour market integration is vocation-specific language training (Delander et al., 2005[45]; Liebig and Huddleston, 2014[26]; OECD, 2021[46]). Vocation-specific language training allows migrants to build work-related language skills, and – when provided on the job – to apply these new skills to real-life situations whilst gathering work experience (OECD, 2021[46]). To date, relatively few vocational language courses exist in OECD countries, as such training tends to be costly and difficult to organise (OECD, 2021[46]). However, together with countries like Sweden, Denmark, Germany and Portugal, Flanders has built relatively extensive experience in providing such training. In fact, work-related language training and coaching is increasingly an area of focus for the Flemish PES (Van Hoof, Nyssen and Kanobana, 2020[22]; VDAB, 2021[47]).

The Flemish PES offers a variety of language modules, including preparatory classroom language training tailored to specific sectors, individualised language support in connection with occupation-specific training, and individualised language support in connection with workplace training (see Box 4.5 for an overview). PES language training is primarily targeted at immigrant jobseekers who have already completed basic language training at the adult education centres, frequently in the framework of the civic integration track (see Chapter 3 for further discussion) (Meeus and De Cuyper, 2015[48]).

Box 4.5. Vocational language training in Flanders

The vocational language modules organised or tendered by the Flemish PES (VDAB) can be divided into three categories:

- **Bridging courses** (*schakelopleidingen*) offer classroom-based language modules to prepare jobseekers with limited Dutch language proficiency for a job or an occupation-specific training in a specific sector. The PES offers bridging courses for technical, administrative, social care, and sales occupations, as well as a separate vocational language module for highly educated jobseekers.
- **Language support in connection with occupation-specific training** (*Nederlands op de opleidingsvloer, NODO*): Jobseekers who participate in occupation-specific training receive integrated language support: a professional instructor and a language instructor are both present on the training floor for at least two half days a week.
- **Language support in connection with workplace training** (*Individuele beroepsopleiding met taalondersteuning, IBOT*): Jobseekers with limited Dutch language skills receive integrated language support and guidance from the PES at least twice a week as part of their workplace training.

Some examples of language support provided by language instructors include supporting jobseekers to ask work-related questions to Dutch-speaking colleagues, mentors and supervisors; to master and use the technical language required on the work floor; to report a technical problem on the work floor; and to understand safety and other instructions.

Source: VDAB (2021[47]), *Vijf voor taal*, https://www.vdab.be/sites/web/files/pers/vijfvoortaal.pdf ; De Cuyper and Jacobs (2011[49]), *Het NT2-aanbod in Vlaanderen: passend voor werkenden en werkzoekenden?*.

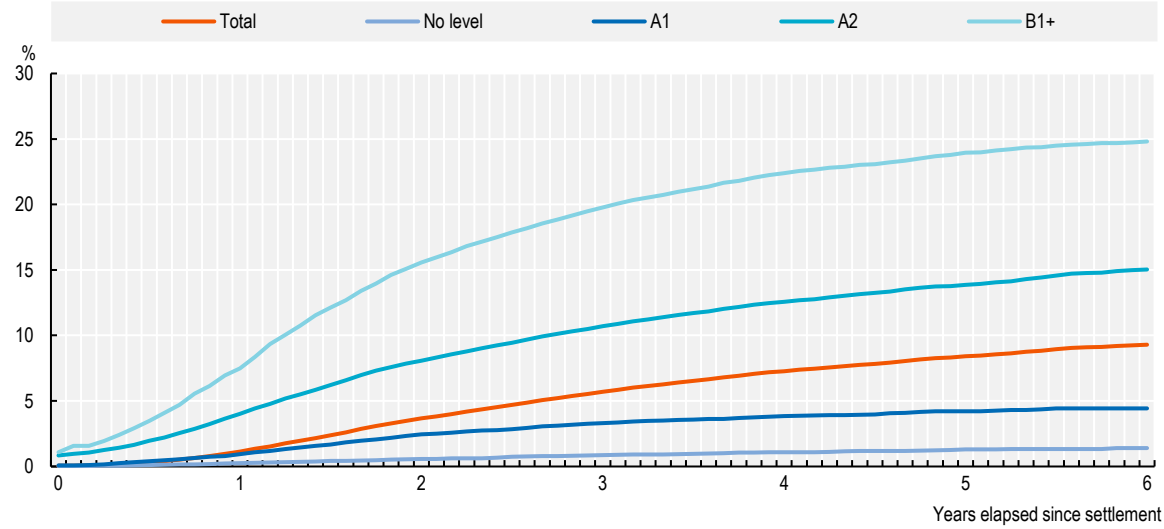
…yet, the number of immigrants benefiting from such courses is still limited

Figure 4.12 shows the cumulative share of (former) integration participants who have enrolled in vocational language modules over time. Overall, six years after arrival, close to 10% of the (former) integration participants had taken up some form of vocational language support. More than half of the participants took bridging courses to prepare for a job or a training in a specific sector; one-third received language support whilst engaging in occupation-specific training; 5% received language support during their workplace training, and 7% participated in multiple training types.

Participation rates differed significantly by immigrants' formal Dutch language skills: while only 4% of the A1-holders took up vocational training, this share increased to 15% for A2-holders and to 25% for those with formal language skills at the level B1 or higher.

Figure 4.12. Relatively few immigrants in Flanders benefit from vocational language support

Cumulative incidence of enrolling in vocational language support at the Flemish PES, by time since settlement and formal Dutch language proficiency, 2016-21, Flanders



Note: Permanent migrants (aged 18 to 59 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2015 and 2019 and signed an integration contract. The cumulative incidence, or failure function, is computed as $1-S_t$ from the life table using the Kaplan-Meier approach.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on linked data from the Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration and the Flemish PES (see Box 4.1).

Some groups have a higher likelihood to enrol in vocational language support programmes. Among migrants with at least formal A2 Dutch language skills, estimated effects from a Cox regression[6] show that, adjusted for other variables, the propensity of enrolling in vocational language training was higher among humanitarian and family migrants compared to other groups, males compared to females, migrants who were younger at arrival instead of older and low-educated migrants instead of higher educated ones (see Annex Table 4.A.1).

Once employed, migrants face difficulties in accessing further labour market training

Early engagement with the labour market is crucial for facilitating a positive integration pathway for new arrivals. In line with this objective, Flemish integration policy is increasingly focused on swiftly integrating newcomers into the workforce. However, there is a potential trade-off between rapid and sustainable labour market integration, particularly in a skilled labour market like Flanders. As mentioned earlier, established migrant groups in Flanders often face challenges in integrating and have become distanced from the labour force. Notably, the employment rates of long-term settled refugees and female family migrants remain low. What is more, the stabilisation of employment outcomes among refugees and their families in Flanders is more significant than in Norway and Sweden, indicating concerns about the sustainability of employment in Flanders.

To ensure that early contact with the labour market does not hinder qualified migrants from securing employment that matches their skills and qualifications, on-the-job training can be a valuable tool. However, while unemployed individuals can benefit from various work-based learning programmes in Flanders, employed individuals do not have the same opportunities. Vocational training is often no longer provided free of charge for this group. The PES primarily offers digital information and tools, personalised career and training suggestions, and online training modules. Unfortunately, many migrants face difficulties in navigating these online services due to language barriers and limited digital literacy. Moreover, migrants

who encounter career obstacles and aspire to advance into higher-skilled positions often require more comprehensive and long-term career support. Therefore, the PES and other stakeholders, including employers and sectoral training providers, should expand the opportunities for modular training courses to be undertaken alongside labour market experience. These models can also incorporate recognition of prior learning and bridging for those with existing skills and experience (see below for further discussion). Such a career-oriented approach would empower migrants to proactively prepare for career advancement and transitions without having to wait until they become unemployed to take necessary steps.

The career pathway approach developed in the United States provides a relevant example. It encompasses a series of interconnected education and training programmes, along with support services, designed for migrants who may not have access to traditional education-to-employment routes. These pathways allow individuals to combine work in a specific industry or occupation with relevant vocational education, enabling them to progress to higher levels of education and employment within that sector over time. Each step on a career pathway is tailored to prepare participants for the next level of employment, involving modular educational courses that lead to industry-recognised qualifications. The involvement of employers is crucial to the success of these pathway programmes.

In Germany, a programme called “Early Intervention” has been introduced to assist refugees and asylum seekers in identifying their skills, understanding their relevance to different occupations, and applying them in sectors with labour shortages. This approach is similar to the alternative careers model implemented in Canada. It allows migrants to initially work in positions that require lower qualifications than their formal qualifications (e.g. working as a nursing assistant instead of a nurse) with the intention of eventually transitioning to more qualified roles after achieving fluency in German and gaining experience in the German nursing sector. Importantly, migrants are given the opportunity to study the language alongside their initial position to ensure progress towards their goals and prevent them from being stuck in overqualified positions (OECD, 2017[50]).

Finding the right job: Assessment and recognition of foreign qualifications and skills

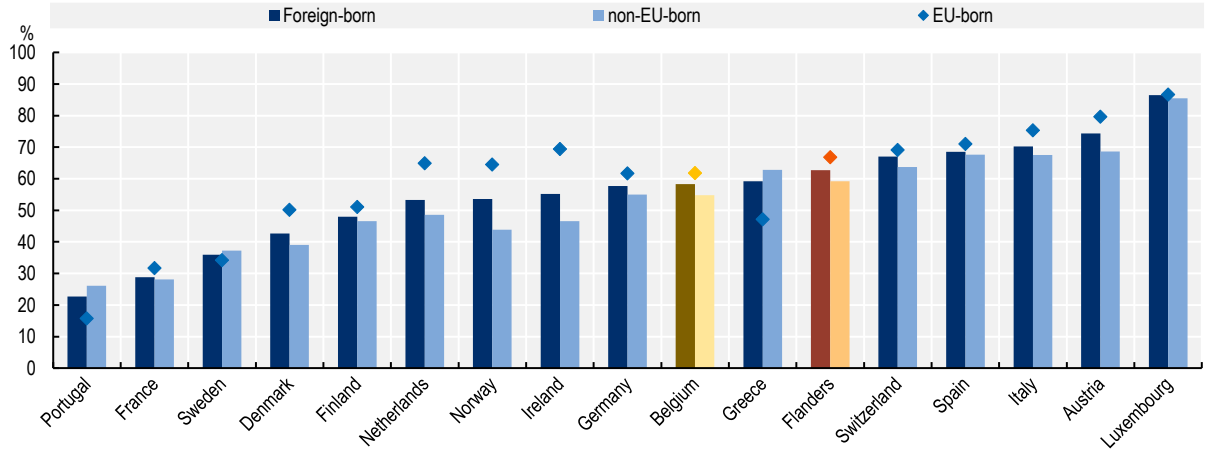
This section examines the hurdles facing and support available for those seeking to find a job that utilises their existing skills and experience. This entails assessment and recognition of foreign qualifications and skills to find the right job. Formally assessing foreign qualifications, prior learning and work experience allows immigrants to highlight their skills, increase transparency over their qualifications and make them easier to interpret by local employers (OECD, 2017[50]).

Immigrants with foreign qualifications face significant barriers to using their skills

In Flanders, a relatively high share of upper-secondary and tertiary educated immigrants has obtained their education and work experience abroad; a full 63% in 2021 (see Figure 4.13). This proportion is higher than the EU average (57%) and significantly higher compared to countries like France (29%), Sweden (36%), Denmark (43%) and the Netherlands (53%).

Figure 4.13. A large share of the immigrants obtained their qualifications abroad

Share of medium- and highly educated immigrants who obtained their education outside the host country, 2021, Flanders and selected OECD countries



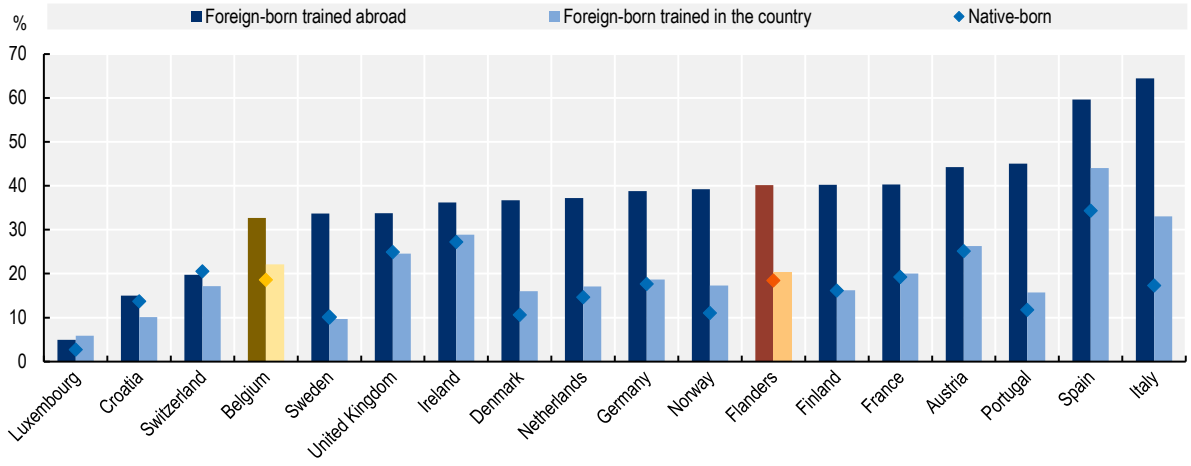
Note: Foreign-born population aged 15 to 74 who are upper-secondary (ISCED 3-4), or tertiary (ISCED 5-6) educated.
Source: EU-LFS ad hoc module 2021 (Eurostat); Flanders: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the 2021 ad hoc module of the national LFS.

Across the OECD, education acquired outside the host country – and particularly that acquired outside the OECD – is strongly discounted on the host country labour market (Damas de Matos and Liebig, 2014[13]). Employers who are unsure of the value of foreign qualifications are often unwilling to offer employment at a commensurate level, leading to a high prevalence of formal over-qualification among foreign-born workers (i.e. to have a higher level of education than that required for the job). In international comparison, Flanders has a relatively large disparity in the over-qualification rate between native- and foreign-born workers (12 percentage points in 2021, see Chapter 2 for further discussion).

In most OECD countries, the country where a person obtained their highest qualification is a strong determinant of the probability of being over-qualified. This pattern is also relatively stark in Flanders. Where two in five highly educated immigrants with foreign qualifications were formally overqualified for their job in 2021, the same is true for only one in five highly educated immigrants with Flemish qualifications. In fact, the over-qualification gap between native- and foreign-born employees is almost entirely driven by over-qualification among immigrants who were trained abroad. Of the countries considered in Figure 4.14, only Italy, Portugal and the Nordic countries see foreign qualifications more heavily penalised, whereas in Germany, the Netherlands and France, the disadvantage is similar to Flanders.

Figure 4.14. In Flanders mostly those with foreign qualifications have a high over-qualification rate

Over-qualification rate by place of birth and country of qualification, 2021, Flanders and selected OECD countries



Note: Population not in education aged 15 to 64 who are in employment and highly educated, not including those employed in armed forces. The over-qualification rate is the share of persons who are highly educated (ISCED 5-8) who work in a low- or medium-skilled jobs (ISCO 4-9).
Source: OECD/European Commission (2023[51]), *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In*, https://doi.org/10.1787/1d5020a6-en; Flanders: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the national LFS.

In 2021, the employment gap in Flanders between highly educated non-EU immigrants and highly educated native-born was 15 percentage points This is among the largest in international comparison, as discussed in Chapter 2. To support highly qualified newcomers to find jobs that match their education and skills, the PES (VDAB and Actiris), the integration agencies and higher education institutions together launched the @Level2work project (De Cuyper et al., 2018[52]). The @level2work project targets newly arrived unemployed non-EU-born migrants with a foreign bachelor's degree or higher. The project starts with a labour market screening and career counselling. A central element is the use of a "one-stop-shop", bringing all key integration actors together behind one desk. The project further emphasises migrants' competency building, by facilitating migrants' uptake of language training, workplace training and domestic higher education, as much as possible in an integrated format (instead of sequential). Finally, the project involves employers, for example via a digital platform for direct exchange and via two sector-specific trajectories, for professions in healthcare and ICT. During pilot projects which ran between September 2016 and April 2018, 1 246 highly educated newcomers participated in @Level2work. One year after the start of the programme, around 42% of the migrants had found employment though evidence on the quality of employment is lacking (De Cuyper et al., 2018[52]). Due to a mixed evaluation, only a small number of the participating cities and municipalities chose to structurally integrate one-stop-shops for highly educated immigrants after the pilot projects came to an end.

Flanders has a relatively advanced recognition framework…

Recognition of foreign qualifications and competences can take several forms, dependent on the purpose of the recognition (employment or further education) and on the nature of the skills (formal or informal) (OECD, 2017[50]). First, having foreign qualifications assessed is generally required to pursue further studies in the host country. Among recognition procedures for employment purposes, regulated and non-regulated occupations exist. Regulated professions generally require a specific licence, awarded by the relevant professional licencing body, often to protect public health and safety. Immigrants with a qualification from outside the European Economic Area (EEA) are not eligible to work in regulated professions unless they obtain a formal assessment and recognition of their qualification from the relevant

licencing body. In Flanders, recognition of foreign credentials is important to access public sector employment where, in addition to citizenship and language requirements, recognised diplomas are frequently a condition (for further discussion, see Chapter 5). For occupations that are not regulated, immigrants with foreign qualifications are formally eligible to apply. However, employer uncertainty over the value of foreign qualifications may present a barrier to employment. Due to employers' lack of familiarity with foreign education and training systems, foreign credentials may not convey the same signals as domestic qualifications and immigrants often lack domestic references or work experience, which adds to employers' uncertainty. To improve their chances of being hired for a non-regulated job, immigrants can also seek formal assessment of their qualifications.

In Belgium, recognising foreign qualifications is the responsibility of the Language Communities, each of which has its own system for doing so. Table 4.2 lists how authority is divided among the relevant bodies in the Flemish community. The exact pathway depends on the purpose of the recognition (work or education), and in regulated or non-regulated professions. The legal framework for the recognition of study certificates in Flanders consists of the translation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention into two *Recognition Acts* of the Flemish Government in 2013.[7]

Table 4.2. The responsible authorities for recognition of foreign qualifications in Flanders

Purpose	Labour market entry				Further education		
	Regulated professions		Non-regulated professions		For upper secondary education	For post-secondary vocational education	For tertiary education
	Qualification from EEA country or Switzerland	Qualification from other country	Qualification from EEA country or Switzerland	Qualification from other country			
Role of NARIC Flanders	Not involved	-Accept applications for academic recognition -Assess purpose, content and level of education and decide on equivalence -Issue certificate of equivalence			Not involved	Not involved	Not involved
Responsible authority	Specific regulatory authority: - Assess practical competencies and issue licence/ID once application has received professional recognition				Secondary education providers: - Assess prior learning and decide about eligibility	Vocational education providers: - Assess prior learning and decide about eligibility	University/university college: - Asses prior learning and decide about eligibility

Note: EEA refers to European Economic Area.
Source: OECD Secretariat based on Flemish legislation and regulations, https://www.naricvlaanderen.be/.

Applications for recognition for further studies are treated by the competent education institution (see below). The assessment and recognition of foreign secondary, adult, and higher (vocational) education for labour market purposes is undertaken by the National Academic Recognition Information Centre (NARIC). NARIC Flanders is also responsible for providing information on the recognition procedures and on Flemish and foreign education systems. NARIC Flanders is run by the Agency for Higher Education, Adult Education, Qualifications and Study Grants (*AHOVOKS*) and counts 24 employees, 15 of whom manage applications in three "regional teams" (European/American/Oceanian, Asian and African qualifications). For occupations regulated by law, NARIC Flanders is only responsible for the assessment of academic recognition. Professional recognition is given by the regulatory authority for the respective profession.

More than 20 bodies are in charge of recognising qualifications for regulated professions, including amongst others the Agency for Care and Health which recognises the qualifications of doctors, nurses,

dentists, and the Agency for Educational Services which recognises teaching qualifications.[8] Immigrants seeking to enter a regulated profession with a certificate from an EEA country or Switzerland should directly apply for a professional recognition to the designated authority for their respective profession, as their qualifications are automatically academically recognised. If immigrants have a certificate from another country, NARIC Flanders should first give an academic recognition before an application for a professional recognition can be made.

NARIC Flanders has two recognition procedures: level recognition and specific recognition. A level recognition approves the level of the certificate in Flanders. A specific recognition specifies, in addition to the level, the field of study of the certificate. A specific recognition application is necessary if immigrants seek to enter a regulated profession, which come with strict diploma requirements. Level applications are preferred over specific applications if the applicant cannot provide all necessary documents for a specific recognition or when the corresponding education programme does not exist in Flanders.[9] A level application ensures a decision within 60 days, a specific application within 120 days.

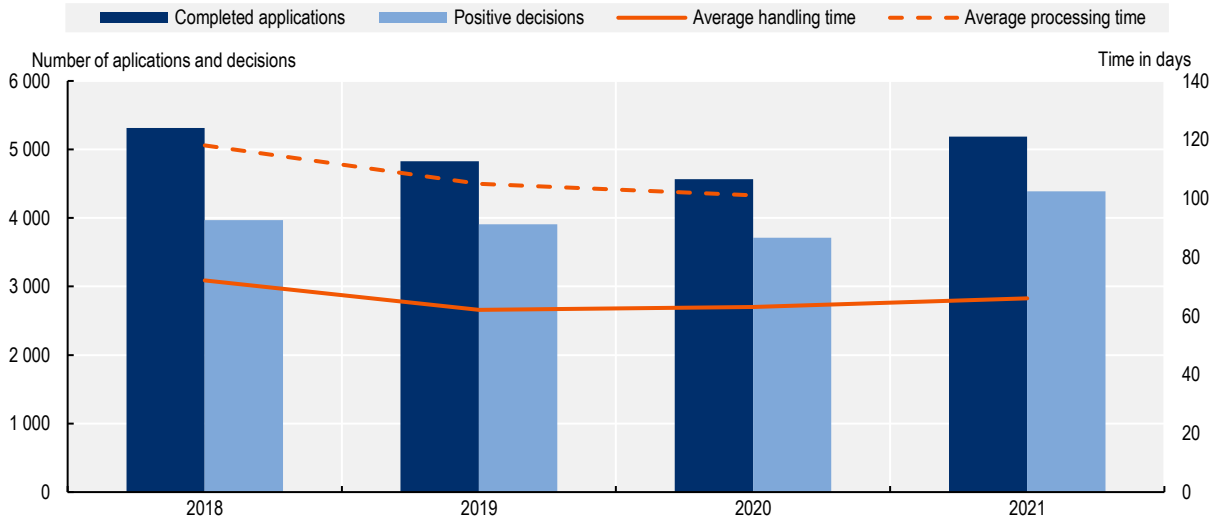
AHOVOKS provides basic statistics about academic recognition applications and subsequent decisions in yearly reports. In 2021, NARIC Flanders received 5 700 applications from 5 271 persons, which were record numbers for the organisation (see Figure 4.15). Specific and level applications for higher education were the most prevalent (35% and 34%, respectively), followed by level applications for secondary education (21%), referrals to other recognition bodies (6%), specific applications for secondary education (3%) and automatic recognitions (0.4%).[10]

In most OECD countries, recognition of academic qualifications is subject to fees. With EUR 90 for a level recognition, EUR 180 for a specific recognition of a bachelor or master's degree, and EUR 300 for a specific recognition of a PhD, recognition fees are relatively low in Flanders compared to other European countries (OECD, 2017[50]). What is more, due to numerous exemptions, in 2021 only about a fourth of the applicants actually paid the recognition fee in Flanders. More specifically, the following applicants are free of charge: asylum-seekers, refugees, subsidiary protected, temporary protected, social assistance beneficiaries, supplementary medical coverage beneficiaries, civic integration participants (within 3 years before the application), and jobseekers who are guided by the PES (within 2 years before the application). However, there are other expenses, such as translation fees, which can make applying costly for newcomers. NARIC Flanders requires certified translations of the diploma, ID-card, and diploma supplements if these documents are not drafted in either Dutch, English, French or German.[11]

All immigrants with a valid residence permit can apply to have their foreign qualifications assessed and recognised at NARIC Flanders. Asylum seekers already in the country can apply for recognition while their asylum request is pending. Of the 5 271 applicants in 2021, 63% were women. The applicants' average age was 35. Applications from individuals with Asian qualification are largely overrepresented, equalling 36% of all applications. Asian certificates are followed by, respectively, African (21%), Eastern European (17%), Western European (16%), Latin American (6%) North American (4%) and Oceanian (0.4%) certificates. The five most represented countries of foreign certificates are Türkiye (7%), Morocco (7%), Lebanon (6%), the Netherlands (5%) and India (3%). Finally, the share of humanitarian migrants (asylum-seekers, refugees or subsidiary protected) in the total group of applicants at NARIC has decreased considerably over recent years: from 22% in 2018 to 12% in 2021. This declining trend is likely due to the drop in asylum inflows after 2015 (for further information, see Chapter 2).

Figure 4.15. The average processing time slightly decreased in recent years

Total numbers of applications and positive decisions (left axis) and case handling and processing time for applications (right axis), 2018-21, Flanders



Source: OECD Secretariate based on data from the yearly NARIC Flanders reports, AHOVOKS, (2021[53]), *De erkenning van buitenlandse diploma's. Jaarverslag 2021*, https://www.naricvlaanderen.be/nl/publicaties.

NARIC Flanders offers a variety of assessment types, depending on the type of qualification and the purpose of the assessment. An assessment generally involves a review of a foreign qualification against a range of criteria laid down in the *Lisbon Recognition Convention*. These include the level and type of learning implied by the qualification, duration of a training or study programme, status of the issuing institution (or system), and authenticity of supporting documents and equivalence with comparable domestic courses of training or study. The term recognition generally refers to the formal acknowledgement that a foreign qualification is equal to a domestic study or vocational training diploma (OECD, 2017[50]). As the recognition process in Flanders is regulated by law, applicants who have their qualifications recognised for labour market purposes receive a legally binding certificate of equivalence.

Overall, in 2021, about 85% of the completed applications resulted in a recognition (note however, that these include cases where equivalence to a lower degree was awarded) (see Figure 4.15). The specific outcome of the recognition procedure depends strongly on the level of qualification and the purpose for which recognition is sought. NARIC Flanders can generally take four decisions: a specific recognition, a level recognition, a negative decision, and "no decision possible". A negative decision means all necessary information was provided, but no recognition could be given because no comparable level exists in Flanders. "No decision possible" comes down to the same result as a negative decision, but here, NARIC abstains from a decision if not enough documents are provided or if the applicant did not pay in time. For level applications, only level recognitions or negative/no decisions can be given. For specific applications, both a level recognition and a specific recognition may be granted, as NARIC Flanders automatically checks whether the certificate is eligible for a level recognition in case a specific recognition is not granted.

Applicants may obtain a lower recognition than what they originally applied for, for example an acknowledgment of a bachelor's degree when applying for recognition of a master's degree. In such cases, NARIC Flanders may also advise the applicant to pass an examination or participate in a bridging course to acquire the missing skills. However, there are currently no streamlined bridging courses in Flanders, nor is there a standard procedure to access education institutions. Within six months following NARIC's decision, applicants can request a review if they have additional documentation. If applicants do not agree

with the motivation of the decision, they can lodge an appeal with the Council for Disputes concerning Study Progress Decisions (for higher education diplomas) or the Council of State (for secondary education diplomas). However, these bodies will only verify if NARIC has respected the formalities; they can only annul but not amend NARIC's decision.

Of all decisions made by NARIC-Flanders in 2021, decisions taken on specific applications for higher education, and among them specific bachelor recognitions are the most prevalent ones (30%). These are followed by specific master recognitions (27%) and level bachelor recognitions (13%). The specific recognitions thus include 65% of the decisions, the level recognitions 20%, and the negative/no decisions 15%. Medicine is by far the most frequently specified study area of the specific decisions (17%), followed by healthcare (8%), commercial studies and business administration (8%), education (7%) and sciences (5%). Concerning level applications for higher education, bachelor recognitions make up the bulk of the decisions (57%), followed by master recognitions (20%) and higher vocational education recognitions (8%). Just as among specific applications, positive decisions account for 85% of the total number of level applications (AHOVOKS, 2021[53]).

…but the recognition process can be long and difficult…

Surprisingly, there is hardly any empirical research on recognition procedures in Flanders, but several qualitative studies based on interviews with highly-educated immigrants highlight some of the associated challenges (De Cuyper et al., 2018[52]; Chakkar and De Cuyper, 2019[54]; Caritas International, 2014[55]). The most important obstacles to seeking formal recognition of foreign qualifications include the cost of the application (including translation costs), the lack of transparency surrounding recognition assessments, long recognition procedures, the heavy administrative burden, and the fact that applicants sometimes lack formal documentation and could not ask for copies from their country of origin.

Recent policy developments for qualification recognition in Flanders have focused on speeding up the process, streamlining the recognition system and raising awareness of recognition procedures. The earlier immigrants get their foreign qualifications assessed and recognised, the earlier they can put their skills to use. Fast recognition procedures are also important for employers, many of which need to fill shortages quickly. However, the procedure for requesting recognition in Flanders can still be long and arduous. In 2021, NARIC Flanders required on average 66 working days to finalise an application, provided all documents were submitted, compared to 72 days in 2018 (see Figure 4.15). Note that the average processing time, which includes waiting times due to missing documents of applicants, was considerably longer, at 101 working days in 2020 (down from 118 days in 2018). The average handling time has thus decreased over recent years, despite the organisation receiving higher numbers of applications. However, handling times differ significantly across level of qualifications and the purpose for which recognition is sought. Specific recognitions for secondary and higher education typically take 75 and 122 days, respectively. Level recognitions for secondary and higher education, in comparison, take 28 and 39 days, respectively. In 2021, eight out of ten decisions were taken within the maximum admissible handling time for recognition of foreign qualifications in legislation (61% and 83% for specific and level higher education recognitions, respectively) (AHOVOKS, 2021[53]). These waiting times only consider the academic recognition of foreign qualifications.

Recognition of qualifications in regulated professions is much more time-consuming because it requires applicants with degrees from outside the EEA to additionally apply for professional recognition, after having obtained academic recognition. Although the process for obtaining professional certification varies from one recognition authority to another, it is arduous as it typically entails competence tests, additional training periods and Dutch L2 language requirements. Unfortunately, statistics on the applications for professional recognition are not systematically available, as data gathering is at the discretion of the individual recognition authorities.

When compared internationally, it appears that the average duration of an assessment procedure – starting from submission of a complete application – takes longer in Flanders than in Austria (21 and 60 days for

non-regulated and regulated occupations, respectively), Denmark (29 days for non-regulated), Germany (59 days) and France (90% take less than 30 days). On the other hand, in Sweden (50, 100, and 150 days for secondary, higher vocational, and tertiary education, respectively; 360 days for qualifications in the health sector) recognition procedures take longer than in Flanders (OECD, 2017[50]). Comparing durations internationally across different types of education and recognition is challenging though, and results must be interpreted carefully.

NARIC Flanders has recently developed a digital application system to shorten lead times and meet the increased demand for recognition of foreign qualifications. By the start of 2023, immigrants should be able to submit and follow-up their entire application digitally. In addition, NARIC Flanders now provides options to have foreign qualifications assessed prior to arrival, provided a concrete job offer in Flanders. However, like in most OECD countries, the proportion of applicants who use this option remains relatively modest in Flanders, accounting for 12% of all applicants in 2021 (AHOVOKS, 2021[53]). An innovative approach to assess qualifications prior to arrival is provided by Norway. The country launched a “turbo evaluation” in 2014 to help employers evaluate job applicants with foreign higher education credentials in non-regulated professions (see Box 4.6).

The recognition procedure involves a range of actors and authorities and can be opaque and difficult to navigate for newly arrived migrants. In Flanders, targeted counselling services are provided to tackle lack of awareness about recognition procedures. Counsellors from the integration agencies, PES or PCSW systematically assist newcomers by providing accessible information on the procedure, offering support regarding the completion of an application file and by acting as intermediaries between the immigrants and the diploma recognition services. Since 2014, NARIC provides training courses for these counsellors and, as of 2021, a basic training at NARIC became obligatory for them. Of all applications received by NARIC Flanders in 2021, 53% were submitted accompanied (AHOVOKS, 2021[53]). Surprisingly, the proportion of accompanying applications has decreased considerably, coming from 83% in 2018. Given NARIC’s increased efforts in recent years, it is unclear why this has occurred, but a partial explanation may be the declining proportion of applicants who are humanitarian migrants. Still, the share of applications by humanitarian migrants that were accompanied has also decreased from 83% in 2018 to 75% in 2021.

To facilitate information NARIC Flanders launched a guiding tool in March 2022. It consists of a one-stop-shop online information portal (available in Dutch, English and French) explaining recognition requirements and procedures step by step and referring immigrants to the relevant recognition bodies. Still, recognition processes for regulated professions remain complex and fragmented. There is a clear lack of transparency between NARIC and the professional recognition authorities on the criteria and procedures used. A more comprehensive one-stop-shop which accepts initial applications for the assessment of different types of qualifications and automatically transfers recognised study certificates and submitted documents internally to the competent recognition bodies could be beneficial. Sweden, for example, has developed a fast-track scheme in 2016-19 to accelerate the entry of skilled immigrants into shortage occupations, including several regulated professions (see Box 4.6).

… and barriers remain for those who lack formal documentation

Recognition of foreign qualifications can be difficult for persons who lack proof of their degrees, or have not graduated before migrating, as often is the case for humanitarian migrants. Given the circumstances for humanitarian migrants, many OECD countries have worked on developing recognition systems that do not require such formal documentation (OECD, 2017[50]).

Under the Lisbon recognition convention, NARIC Flanders established an assessment procedure for humanitarian migrants lacking full documentation of their foreign degrees. Unlike other migrants, they can start the recognition procedure as soon as they have one piece of supporting documentation (e.g. a diploma, a provisional diploma, or a list of points from the last study year). However, humanitarian migrants must still provide at least one document and NARIC Flanders does not treat an application without any

document. If NARIC finds that the information in the file is insufficient, they set up an exploratory interview during which the applicant fills out an additional form, and a self-declaration on their study and professional career. These conversations can take place in Dutch, English or French, or with an interpreter if necessary (at the cost of the applicant).

A promising international tool to encourage the recognition of refugees' qualifications and skills is the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR).[12] The EQPR, developed by the Council of Europe, is a standardised document that explains the qualifications a refugee is likely to have based on the available evidence. While not a formal recognition act, it summarises and presents available information on the applicant's educational level, work experience and language proficiency based on a structured interview and an examination of the available documentation. The applicant also receives career advice. In 2016, the EQPR was piloted by the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT). After a positive evaluation (the cost of a passport was found to be 90% cheaper than that of a regular recognition process), the EQPR was structurally integrated into Norway's recognition system (OECD, 2022[21]). Even though Flanders participates in the EQPR project and has even contributed to its development in 2016, few refugees have thus far used the EQPR in their recognition procedure with NARIC Flanders.

Box 4.6. Good practices on recognition in the OECD

The Swedish fast-track scheme

A novel approach to speed up recognition procedures is the Swedish fast-track scheme (*Snabbspår*) aimed at newly arrived immigrants (within 3 years of residency) who have experience or education in a profession where there is a labour shortage in the Swedish labour market. The fast-track programme is managed by the Swedish Public Employment Service (which is the responsible unit for introduction programmes in Sweden). Migrants must be registered as jobseekers and have participated recently in the Establishment Programme (*etableringsprogrammet*). Participants review past experience with a counsellor who helps find the suitable fast track and translate any degrees or certificates. The aim of the fast-track programme is to combine validation of previous education/skills, internships, language training, and tailor-made bridging education to quickly find a job where the participant's previous education and experience will be used. Participants may receive social benefits (often an introduction benefit) while participating in the programme. The selected professions and content of the programme have been chosen and developed in co-operation with relevant employers and trade unions. Over 40 fast-track programmes for different professions/careers have been developed, such as electrician, chef, doctor, nurse, dentist, pharmacist, teacher, butcher, baker, civil engineer, architect, social scientist (economist, lawyer), veterinary nurse, carpenter, and machine operator.

The Norwegian "turbo evaluation"

A prime example of an innovative approach to assess qualifications prior to arrival is provided by Norway which, in 2014, launched a "turbo evaluation" to help employers evaluate job applicants with foreign higher education credentials in non-regulated professions. Interested employers fill in an online application form containing the applicant's education credentials, his or her CV and written authorisation. The online-based procedure is free of charge and verifies within five working days the discipline of the applicant's qualification, whether the education is accredited in the country in question and whether the qualification is equivalent to a Norwegian degree. The evaluation is not legally binding and only for the respective job. Between 2017 and 2019, NOKUT completed around 250 to 300 turbo evaluations per year.

Source: OECD (2016[56]), *Working Together: Skills and Labour Market Integration of Immigrants and their Children in Sweden*, https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264257382-en; OECD (2022[21]), *Skills and Labour Market Integration of Immigrants and their Children in Norway*, https://doi.org/10.1787/6109d927-en.

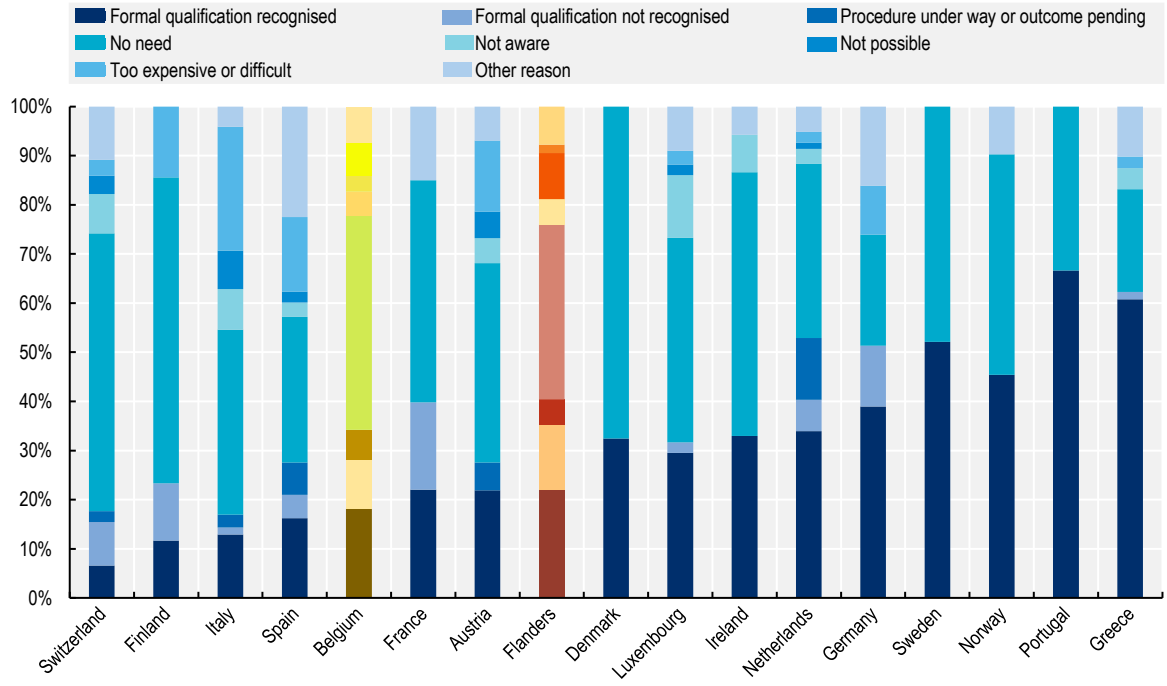
Few highly educated immigrants obtain recognition of foreign qualifications…

According to the 2021 ad hoc module of the European Labour Force Survey, Flanders performs above average when it comes to the share of migrants with a qualification from outside the EU that seek recognition of their foreign credentials. Close to four in ten highly educated immigrants with a non-EU degree applied for recognition in Flanders, which is only topped by the Netherland (53%), Germany (47%), Portugal (52%) and Greece (62%) (see Figure 4.16). However, the picture changes if only migrants who obtained recognition are considered. With one in five, this share is below the EU average and well below countries like the Netherlands (34%), Germany (36%), Sweden (41%) and Norway (42%).

Like in other EU countries, the largest share of highly educated immigrants in Flanders who did not apply stated that they thought recognition was not needed. However, about two in five claimed that they did not seek recognition because it was too expensive or complicated, they were unaware that it existed, or it was impossible for other reasons (e.g. no recognition agreement existed with the country where they obtained the qualification).

Figure 4.16. Few migrants with a non-EU degree obtained recognition in Flanders

Application for formal recognition of the education in the host country among high-educated immigrants who obtained their education in a non-EU country, by outcome and reason for applying, 2021, Flanders and selected OECD countries



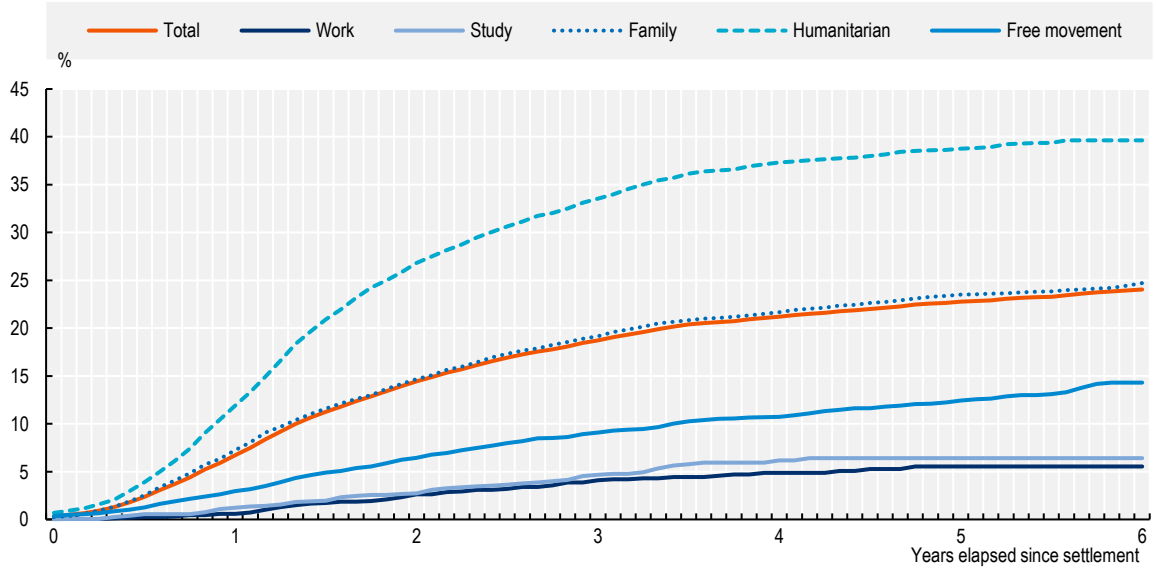
Note: Foreign-born population aged 15 to 74 who are tertiary (ISCED 5-6) educated, and who obtained their education in a non-EU country. Data are ordered according to "formal qualification recognised".
Source: OECD/European Commission (2023[51]), *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In*, https://doi.org/10.1787/1d5020a6-en; Flanders: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the national LFS.

To further explore the importance of diploma recognition in Flanders, the analysis that follows builds on linked data from the Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration and the Flemish PES (VDAB) (see Box 4.1).

Among participants in the civic integration programme with tertiary education at arrival, humanitarian migrants more often have their foreign qualifications recognised than other groups. Figure 4.17 shows that close to one in four (former) integration participants had their foreign credentials recognised within six years after first arrival. Immigrants who migrated for humanitarian reasons most often had their foreign qualifications recognised (40%), followed by those who migrated for family reasons (25%) and those who arrived via free mobility (14%). Shares among non-EU migrants who came for work or study reasons were much lower, at 6% after six years of residence.

Figure 4.17. Humanitarian migrants more often have their foreign qualifications recognised than other groups

Cumulative incidence of having a recognised foreign degree, by time since settlement and category of entry, 2015-21, Flanders



Note: Permanent migrants (aged 18 to 59 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2015 and 2019 and signed an integration contract. Only migrants who had foreign tertiary education at arrival are included. The cumulative incidence, or failure function, is computed as $1\text{-}S_t$ from the life table using the Kaplan-Meier approach.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on linked data from the Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration and the Flemish PES (see Box 4.1).

A Cox regression details the variation in the likelihood to have recognised foreign qualifications among different subpopulations of highly educated migrants (see Annex Table 4.A.2). Adjusted for other variables, the propensity of having a recognised degree of obtaining recognition is positively associated with being female, having young children at arrival, being younger at the time of settlement (below the age of 40), and having higher formal Dutch language skills. Particularly language skills are strongly correlated with the likelihood of having a recognised degree. Finally, the propensity of recognition was significantly higher among more recent settlement cohorts (in line with the rising number of applications and recognitions at NARIC Flanders, as mentioned above).

…despite a small positive effect of recognition in terms of labour market entry

The international literature on the employment effects of diploma recognition is still quite thin, yet research from selected European OECD countries suggest that immigrants who obtained formal recognition are more often employed and work in better jobs than their peers whose applications were not successful, or the large majority of migrants who never underwent an assessment process (Brücker et al., 2021[57];

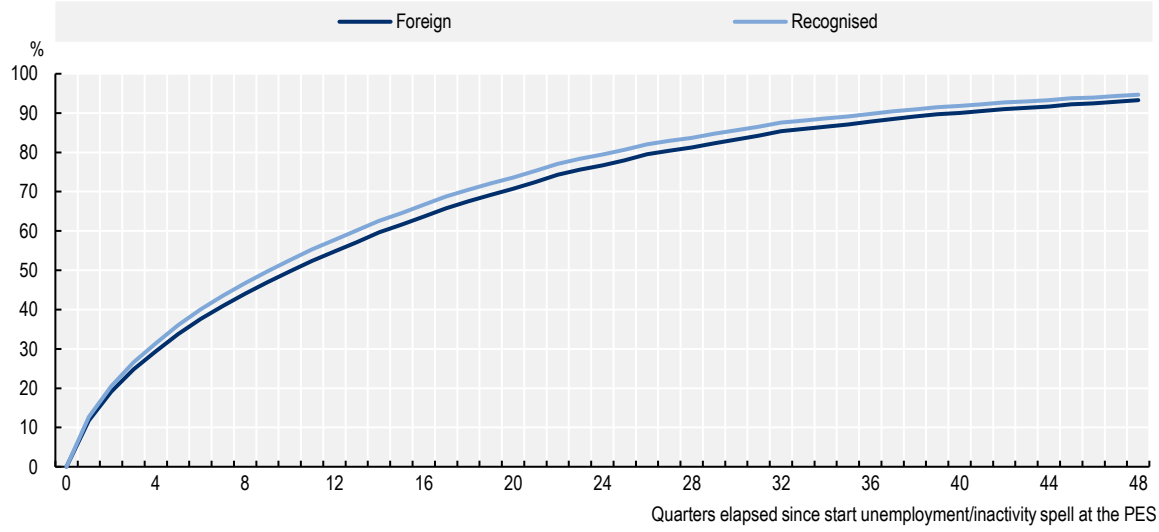
Damas de Matos and Liebig, 2014[13]; Tibajev and Hellgren, 2019[58]). For Germany, Damelang et al. (2020[59]) show that having recognised foreign credentials considerably narrows but does not completely close the gap in the hiring chances between foreign- and native-trained applicants.

The linked data from the Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration and the PES (see Box 4.1) allow for an analysis on the effect of recognition on the propensity to enter employment for non-working newly arrived migrants who registered with the Flemish PES. Note that only (former) integration participants who settled in Flanders between 2015 and 2019 with foreign higher qualifications are included in the sample.

Figure 4.18 shows that there is a small but significant effect of recognition on the propensity for highly educated non-working migrant jobseekers to enter employment. Adjusted for other variables, one year after the start of the non-employment spell, integration participants with a recognised degree had a transition rate into employment which was 3 percentage points higher compared to integration participants with a foreign degree.[13]

Figure 4.18. Recognised foreign credentials accelerate employment entry for highly educated migrant jobseekers, but only by a small margin

The effect of recognition on the transition to employment amongst non-working newly arrived migrant jobseekers, 2015-21, Flanders



Note: Permanent migrants (aged 18 to 59 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2015 and 2019. The unit of analysis is all non-employment spells (pooled) registered with the PES that start within the 2015-21 period. The cumulative incidence curves compare between migrants with foreign higher education and migrants with recognised higher education on a monthly basis the share of unemployed/inactive jobseekers who have ever transitioned into employment. Estimated cumulative incidence curves are based on a Cox proportional hazards model, with time until entry into employment as the dependent variable. The independent variables are recognition, sex, presence of young children at arrival, age, category of entry, Dutch language proficiency, level of education, years elapsed since settlement, number of the non-employment spell, year of observation, and province of residence.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on linked data from the Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration and the Flemish PES (see Box 4.1).

The data does not have a measure of occupations, so it is not possible to estimate the effect of recognition on job quality. This is unfortunate, as from the perspectives of highly educated immigrants and policy makers alike, the intent of recognition is not only to ease transition into the labour market in general, but also to facilitate attainment of more qualified occupations. However, if the analysis considers time until entry into *non-interim* employment as an alternative dependent variable (to proxy the quality of

employment), the estimated effect of recognition on employment entry increases slightly, at 4 percentage points one year after the start of the non-employment spell.

Further analysis shows that the effect of recognition on entry into employment varies with different subcategories (see Table 4.3). The effect is significantly larger among immigrants with a higher vocational education, professional bachelor or master's degree compared to those with an academic bachelor's degree, study and humanitarian migrants compared other categories of entry, and migrants with (very) good Dutch language proficiency compared to those with none or little proficiency. Differences in the effect between men and women are not significant.

Table 4.3. The effect of recognition on entry into employment varies across migrant groups

Effects (hazard ratios) of recognition on entry into employment for different subcategories

	Employment entry	Employment entry (excluding interim)
Recognition (overall effect)	1.08	1.11
Level of education		
Higher vocational education	1.15	1.17
Professional bachelor	1.07	1.09
Academic bachelor	0.93	0.98
Master	1.20	1.26
Category of entry		
Work	0.97	1.22
Study	1.47	1.30
Family	1.03	1.02
Humanitarian	1.16	1.21
Free movement	0.98	1.00
Dutch language proficiency		
None	0.61	0.71
Little	1.00	1.04
Good	1.15	1.17
Very good	1.06	1.17

Note: Permanent migrants (aged 18 to 59 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2015 and 2019. The unit of analysis is all non-employment spells (pooled) registered with the PES that start within the 2015-21 period. Estimated effects are based on a Cox proportional hazards model, with time until entry into employment as the dependent variable. The independent variables are recognition, sex, presence of young children at arrival, age, category of entry, Dutch language proficiency, level of education, years elapsed since settlement, number of the non-employment spell, year of observation, and province of residence. The model includes interactions between recognition and level of education, category of entry, and Dutch language proficiency.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on linked data from the Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration and the Flemish PES (see Box 4.1).

Beyond formal qualifications: Recognition of prior learning certifies non-formal competences…

In addition to the recognition of formal qualifications, recognition of prior learning (RPL) gives immigrants a chance to have their competencies systematically assessed and certified. The focus of RPL is on informal and non-formal competences, often acquired during short courses, work experience, leisure activities and volunteering. RPL is a complement to the assessment of formal qualifications and helps recent immigrants, who acquired their job-related skills in a very different context as well as degree-holding humanitarian migrants who lack documentary proof (OECD, 2016[60]; Andersson, 2021[61]).

Flanders established the validation of informal and non-formal learning, known as the EVC (*Erkennen van Verworven Competenties*), gradually in the mid-2000s as part of a life-long learning strategy. Different

stakeholders – the Departments for Work and Social Economy, Education and Training, and Culture – each developed a unique vision on validation and implemented distinct validation tools, which caused RPL to grow into a fragmented policy field (Geets, Wets and Timmerman, 2008[62]).

The *Validation Act* of 2019 streamlined the RPL policy in Flanders, by establishing stronger linkages between skills certificates and the education system, and by enhancing flexibility. The higher education and adult education sector continue to work with validation procedures, which give exemptions to academic degrees or a course or training section. For labour market actors on the other hand, validation of professional qualifications and competencies are now evaluated based on a formal frame of reference – the Flemish Qualification Framework. The Flemish Qualification framework provides standard descriptions of the required knowledge and skills for a given occupation or to pursue further education, which simplified the validation system for employers. The reform also increased flexibility by allowing the validation of partial qualifications or competencies. Before individuals who pursued an RPL were only given validation for skills which added up to a full qualification.[14]

AHOVOKS is the co-ordinating body that monitors, mediates, and improves validation standards of professional qualifications, if these are anchored in the adult education system or the labour market institutions. Professional qualifications can only be issued by validation bodies. To become a validation body, recognised educational providers, public organisations and private organisations have to obtain a quality label at the organisational level, accept a regularly quality control, and offer a recognised validation instrument. The validation bodies are also responsible for the information and guidance of the candidates. Currently, there are 24 validation bodies, including 20 adult education centres, the Flemish PES (VDAB), and three private organisations (HIVSET, Logis and ConnAct). A validation instrument typically entails a general mapping of competencies and a skills assessment at the workplace or a simulated environment. Only after a successful completion of such a practical test and – if necessary – a practical knowledge test – do candidates receive a formal proof of their professional qualification recognised by the Flemish Government. There is a validation instrument recognition procedure at the Department for Work and Social Economy for public and private organisations, and at AHOVOKS for educational partners.

Currently, recognised validation standards and instruments are in place for 10 professional qualifications, mainly at the lower levels of the Flemish Qualification Framework (FQF 2, 3, 4).[15] Both jobseekers and workers can acquire a professional qualification through a validation programme. The financial contribution of the validation candidate, as defined in the Act, is the same across all providers and amounts to EUR 130 and EUR 65 for target groups (which include migrants and jobseekers).

…yet the scope of recognition of prior learning for labour market purposes remains limited

Although validation (RPL) trajectories are offered by a wide range of actors, including the Flemish PES, adult education providers, and private organisations, they remain small-scale. In 2022 (Jan-Oct), the different validation bodies together organised validation trajectories for 639 unique individuals. Notably, the share of foreign-born candidates differs strongly between the bodies, with 45% of the PES candidates that were foreign-born, compared to 17% of the adult education centre candidates.

Table 4.4. The scale of RPL measures remains very small in Flanders

Number of RPL trajectories for labour market purposes, by place of birth, 2019-22, Flanders

Validation body		2020	2021	2022 (Jan-Oct)
Flemish PES (VDAB)	Total	449	487	472
	Native-born	300 (67%)	326 (67%)	261 (55%)
	Foreign-born	149 (33%)	161 (33%)	211 (45%)
Centres of Adult Education	Total	78	118	141
	Native-born	65 (83%)	92 (78%)	117 (83%)
	Foreign-born	13 (17%)	26 (22%)	24 (17%)
Department of Work and Social Economy	Total	/	/	26
	Native-born	/	/	/
	Foreign-born	/	/	/

Note: The most frequent professional qualifications are childcarer, forklift driver, reach truck driver, and guide. The figures from the Centres of Adult Education are by school year (2020=2019-20; 2021=2020-21; 2022=2021-22). Figures also include some "certificates of experience" (trainer/supervisor in companies and organisations and fitness trainer).
Source: OECD Secretariat based on ad hoc data requested from the different RPL providers.

It is not entirely clear why RPL measures are not used more often. The lack of familiarity with RPL among employers and jobseekers seem to offer some explanation (Social and Economic Council of Flanders, 2018[63]). Additionally, anecdotal evidence points to long and arduous validation procedures. RPL is frequently the only way for immigrants with little or no formal schooling to ascertain their professional skills. Professional qualifications could be a particularly effective route into the labour market for immigrant jobseekers (Andersson, 2021[61]).

More efforts should be taken to increase the awareness among all stakeholders, including employers and migrants, about the existing provisions and their benefits. A well-targeted publicity can maximise the integration potential of the programme. One option is to use the RPL during the early stages of the civic integration programme training as part of the initial skills mapping. Validation bodies should intensify their co-operation with integration agencies and other third parties such as immigrant self-organisations. Efforts to disentangle the assessment of professional competencies from an assessment of the individual's general language proficiency could also be instrumental in making the EVC framework a more valuable programme for the foreign-born. If necessary, and if the qualification requirements permit it, special arrangements may include oral demonstrations in place of the written sections of the competence demonstration, additional time allocated during competence tests for the planning of tasks and written modules, and support materials, such as plain language texts, pictures, drawings, models and aids (OECD, 2017[50]).

Employers have little role in assessing formal and informal skills

Migrants trained abroad and with foreign qualifications are at a disadvantage when it comes to demonstrating their suitability for a job opening to employers. As the final hiring decision rests with employers, their involvement in recognition procedures is critical to the success of assessing skills needed on the job. Recognition partnerships should thus aim to include employers in the design and implementation of recognition policies. This is particularly appropriate in Flanders, where the social partners play a strong role in labour market policy and integration (for further discussion, see Chapter 2).

In Flanders, employers (especially in the non-regulated professions) play only a small, if any role in formal assessment and recognition mechanisms. In fact, a study based on semi-structured interviews with 29 Human Resources professionals in the private and public sector in Flanders shows that employers have little understanding of the recognition procedure at NARIC Flanders (Chakkar and De Cuyper, 2019[54]).

For instance, most interviewees are unfamiliar with the distinction between a level and a specific recognition process. For non-regulated professions, the survey shows that many Human Resources professionals do not ask about the recognition of foreign qualifications in their selection procedures and indicate that they value local work experience more than a diploma when assessing prospective employees. Therefore, Flanders could learn from countries like Australia, Germany, Lithuania and the United Kingdom, where employers are more actively involved in the formal assessment and recognition of foreign qualifications in non-regulated professions (OECD, 2017[50]).

To ensure that employers can understand the value of qualifications obtained abroad, some OECD countries provide employers with databases about international education systems and courses. NARIC Flanders generates a rich pool of information during their assessment and evaluation of qualifications. Making this information available and sharing it with employers would facilitate the informal assessment undertaken by employers in a cost-effective manner (Social and Economic Council of Flanders, 2020[64]). Such information would enable employers to consult the database independently when in doubt about the value of a foreign qualification rather than steering clear of the uncertainty such qualifications would otherwise entail. OECD countries that have taken steps towards supporting employers in this manner include Australia, Germany and Denmark (OECD, 2017[50]). At the same time, employers themselves can provide valuable feedback about their workers with foreign qualifications.

Employers can also play an active role in the recognition of prior learning. According to the Socio-Economic Council of Flanders, there is still much room to increase awareness of the validation system among employers and individuals and to win the support of important stakeholders. Employers are still not sufficiently familiar with EVC, the council notes (Social and Economic Council of Flanders, 2018[63]).

Upskilling of migrants: The acquisition of domestic education and participation in lifelong learning

Education in the host country is also an institutionalised chance for immigrants to catch up with the native-born (Zwysen, 2019[4]; Kanas and van Tubergen, 2009[65]; Adamuti-Trache, 2016[66]). As discussed, the share of adult immigrants in Flanders that is low-educated is high in international comparison. A considerable number of humanitarian migrants arrive in Flanders with little or no previous education, and thus struggle to integrate. Specific support is needed to ensure that illiterate and low-educated immigrants can acquire the knowledge and skills needed for any prospect of long-term employability. Investment in education to improve immigrants' long-term labour market integration is key in the relatively high-skilled Flemish labour market (see Chapter 2 for further discussion). Moreover, upskilling can facilitate the transition from low-demand to high-demand occupations, thereby supporting migrants' integration.

At the other end of the skills spectrum, conveying highly educated immigrants of the benefit of further education is also an essential component of the integration process. Most highly educated migrants require a faster paced integration track which equips them rapidly with the advanced language and vocational skills required for higher-skilled employment. However, for immigrants whose foreign degree is never recognised or does not hold the same value in the host country, getting another degree in the host country can improve job prospects and reduce the risk of over-qualification (OECD, 2016[60]). Partial recognition and bridging courses are cost-effective options allowing immigrants to demonstrate their skills without meeting all the host-country's job qualification requirements (OECD, 2017[50]).

Despite a wide range of opportunities, participation in adult education is low in international comparison

There is a good range of adult education options at different levels in Flanders (OECD, 2019[67]). Formal adult education occurs in a structured environment and results in a formal qualification, whereas non-

formal adult education also takes place in a structured environment but may only produce a diploma or certificate that is recognised by a sector or professional body.

Most adults in formal education attend Centres for Adult Education (CAE), which provide modular and flexible courses (e.g. evening courses) in a wide range of skills. The CAEs also give adults the opportunity to obtain a secondary education degree through "second chance education" (for further discussion, see Chapter 6). Centres for Adult Basic Education (CABE) provide courses in basic skills (e.g. numeracy, digital skills). Under the 2018 *Financing Act for Adult Education*, additional resources are allocated to centres based on participation of vulnerable target groups, including those without a secondary education certificate and non-working jobseekers. Furthermore, registration is free for adults who enrol in courses in the CABE and second chance education, and fees are waived for some vulnerable learners (e.g. immigrants, jobseekers in a PES trajectory) and for those without a secondary diploma who enrol in courses in the CAE. Universities and university colleges (*hogescholen*) offer advanced bachelor and advanced master's degrees, post-secondary vocational education, and postgraduate certificates (which allow adults with work experience to continue professional education).

In terms of non-formal adult learning, the main training providers are employers, through the financing of sectoral covenants. In addition, Syntra offers non-formal education, such as entrepreneurial training, sectoral training, and additional specialised training, as well as apprenticeships programmes (*leertijd*) for 15- to 25-year-olds that lead to a professional qualification or a diploma of secondary education. Finally, the Flemish PES (VDAB) organises vocational training for jobseekers (see above), but also a specific education qualifying training programme for target groups (*Onderwijskwalificerend opleidingstraject, OKOT*) (see Box 4.7).

Box 4.7. Flanders' Education Qualification Pathway for jobseekers (OKOT) is underused by immigrants

The Education Qualification Pathway (*Onderwijskwalificerende trajecten met VDAB opleidingscontract, OKOT*) is a training programme for jobseekers launched by the Flemish PES in 2011. The programme aims to increase the chances of jobseekers finding sustainable employment by training them in the qualifications needed to enter shortage occupations. The programme is offered by different adult education providers and higher educational institutions and allows jobseekers to obtain a diploma (European Qualification Framework 4, 5 or 6) through different training programmes that have a duration of 1 to 3 years. Each provincial PES office decides the training offer based on a provincial labour market analysis. The list of top shortage occupations in Flanders has long been dominated by professions in healthcare, the construction sector and cleaning. Eight out of ten OKOT trajectories are in the healthcare sector. Under the training contract, adult learners keep their unemployment benefits, provided that the training is in a field for which there is strong labour-market demand. They may also receive a relocation allowance and a childcare allowance. From the second year onwards, they are encouraged to combine training with part-time work, and in subsequent years a greater focus is put on workplace learning to avoid prolonged absences from the labour market.

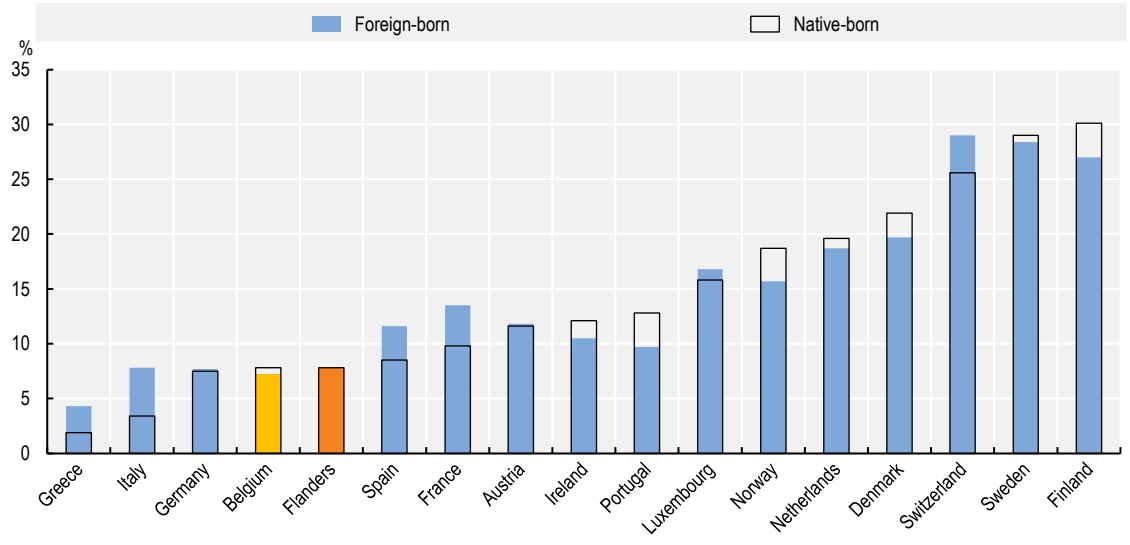
In 2021, close to 6 400 jobseekers started an OKOT programme. Three months after completing the training programme, 76% of students had found work. Between 2019 and 2021, the share of non-EU-born OKOT participants remained stable at 15%, indicating that this group is underrepresented compared to their share in the total non-working jobseeker population (32% in 2021).

Source: OECD Secretariat based on ad hoc data request with the Flemish PES (VDAB) and Arvastat, https://arvastat.vdab.be/.

Despite this wide range of opportunities, the share of adults participating in different forms of adult education is low in international comparison (OECD, 2019[67]; Penders, Vansteenkiste and Sourbron, 2021[68]). Notably, the participation gap in formal and non-formal education between the foreign-born and the native-born in Flanders depends strongly on the indicator that is used. Using 2020 Labour Force Survey data, Figure 4.19 shows that participation in formal and non-formal education is similar between foreign-born and native-born individuals when measured in the four weeks prior to the survey. In contrast, the native-born have an advantage (of around 5 percentage points) over the foreign-born when participation is measured in the 12 weeks prior to the survey (Penders, Vansteenkiste and Sourbron, 2021[68]).

Figure 4.19. Participation in adult education is low among foreign-born and native-born

Participation in formal and non-formal adult education, by place of birth, 2020, Flanders and selected OECD countries



Note: Population aged 25 to 64. Participation in formal and non-formal education is measured in the reference period of four weeks prior to the survey interview.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on EU-LFS and national LFS for Flanders.

Few newly arrived migrants pursue formal domestic qualifications in the first years after arrival

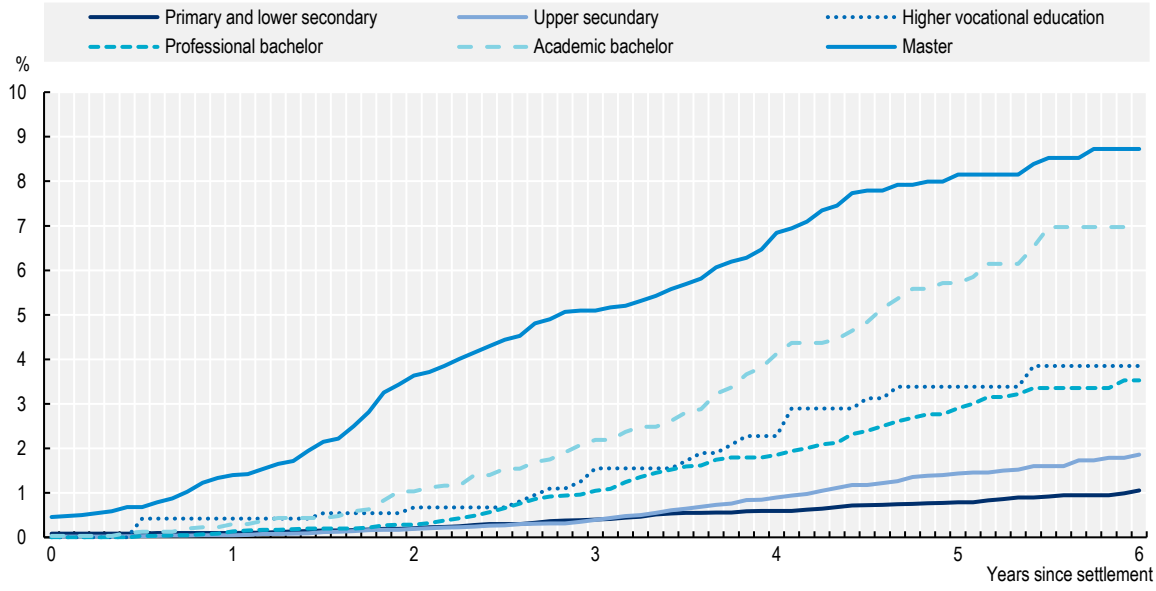
Within this context, few newly arrived adult immigrants enrol in formal post-secondary and adult education programmes in Flanders. An analysis based on linked data from the Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration and the Flemish PES shows that, six years after arrival, only 2.5% of the (former) integration participants obtained a formal domestic qualification (see Figure 4.20). Especially migrants who arrive in Flanders with primary or lower secondary levels of education hardly pursue domestic education after arrival. Indeed, among migrants with a foreign academic bachelor or master's degree, the share that obtains Flemish credentials after six years of residence was significantly higher, at 7% and 9%, respectively.

The limited attention for upskilling of new arrivals in Flanders stands in stark contrast with the policy in several other OECD countries, particularly the Nordic countries. Immigrants who arrive with low levels of education are frequently encouraged and, in some cases, even required to pursue domestic formal education during their civic integration/introduction programme in Denmark, but especially in Sweden and Norway (see Box 4.3). According to Hernes et al. (2022[25]), among the refugees who settled between 2015 and 2017, the proportion that participated in formal primary education (ISCED<3) within the first

three years after settlement varied from 23% in Denmark to 29% in Norway to 9% in Sweden. Amongst the same group, that participated in formal upper secondary and tertiary education (ISCED>2) ranged from 2% in Denmark to 12% in Norway to 35% in Sweden. In terms of encouraging and enabling both low- and higher-educated new arrivals to invest in host country education, Flanders clearly lags a long way behind: only 3% of the refugees who settled in Flanders between 2015 and 2017 obtained a formal domestic qualification in the first five years after settlement.

Figure 4.20. Few immigrants pursue formal education in the first years after arrival, especially among those with low foreign qualifications

Cumulative incidence of obtaining domestic qualifications, by time since settlement and level of foreign education, 2014-21, Flanders



Note: Permanent migrants (aged 18 to 59 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2014 and 2019. Only migrants who signed an integration contract and registered with the Flemish PES are included. The cumulative incidence, or failure function, is computed as $1\text{-}S_t$ from the life table using the Kaplan-Meier approach.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on linked data from the Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration and the Flemish PES (see Box 4.1).

The results of a Cox regression (see Annex Table 4.A.3) show that having migrated for work and especially study reasons, being younger at arrival and having very good Dutch language skills are the most meaningful correlates of the propensity to have obtained Flemish credentials.

Many practical obstacles arise for newly arrived migrants wishing to follow formal education

Many practical obstacles arise for newly arrived migrants wishing to follow formal education in Flanders (Flemish Inter-university Council, 2019[69]; MAXIPAC, 2020[70]). One of the most important obstacles is that the educational institutions have large autonomy in determining what level of Dutch or what certificates are required to be eligible to follow a specific educational programme. Institutions take these decisions independently from one another, often leading to untransparent admission procedures for newcomers. Ambiguity regarding the newcomer's residency status and associated rights further hinder interactions between newcomers and higher education institutions.

In addition, the various counsellors (integration counsellors, PES counsellors, PCWS social workers) that newly arrived migrants interact with during the first period after arrival frequently lack a thorough understanding of the educational options available to newcomers in Flanders. In the absence of tailored guidance, new arrivals often must contact the educational institutions themselves or consult general websites such as onderwijskiezer.be (available in Dutch) and studyinflanders.be (available in Dutch and English). Furthermore, as was also evidenced by the OECD field mission, for highly educated migrants who receive social assistance benefits (for further information, see Chapter 3), PCWS frequently prefer "quick" activation strategies over encouraging enrolment in formal schooling.

The language barrier is also a major obstacle. Newcomers with an educational perspective can take up Dutch language training at the CAE or University Language Centres. With the first provider, language courses come at a low cost (EUR 180 for course and test from 2023 onwards), but they are often spread over longer periods and do not always prepare for higher education. The University Language Centres do offer intensive language courses that prepare for higher education, but often at a high cost because they are not or only to a limited extent subsidised. Within the framework of the civic integration track, only language courses up to and including CEFR level A2 are publicly funded. However, since the required level of Dutch for starting a higher education programme is often situated at CEFR level B2 or C1, there is a gap in the financial support of newly arrived migrants. Only cities like Ghent and Antwerp have scholarships available for the higher language levels.

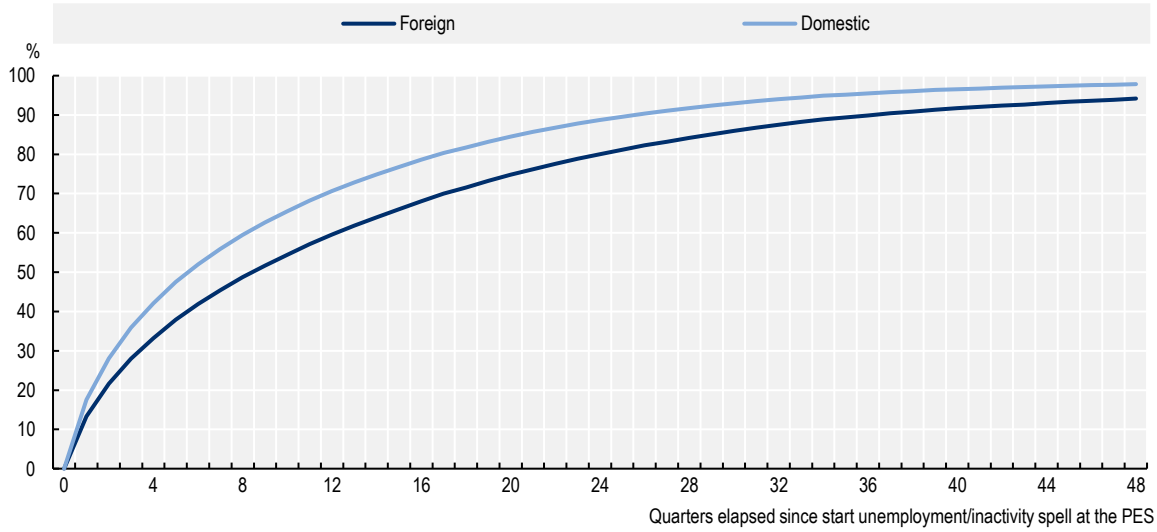
Finally, more streamlined preparatory bridging programmes can remedy shortages of required basic competences for entry into higher education. Likewise basic courses that give prospective students a taste of their desired education can help them adapt to the Flemish university culture. Even if most of the universities and university colleges have established such programmes on their own, adequate funding, streamlined regulation, and an effective distribution of the offer for these kinds of bridging programs are still lacking in Flanders.

Having formal domestic qualifications improves immigrants' chances to enter the labour market

International studies generally find strong effects of host-country schooling on migrants' employment and employment quality across EU and OECD countries (Zwysen, 2019[4]; Kanas and van Tubergen, 2009[65]; Adamuti-Trache, 2016[66]). An analysis based on linked data from the Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration and the Flemish PES confirms that this is also the case for Flanders. One year after the start of their non-employment spell with the PES, (former) integration participants with a domestic degree had a transition rate into employment which was 11 percentage point higher compared to integration participants with a foreign degree (see Figure 4.21). Similar to the outcomes on recognition (see above), the effect of domestic education increases significantly (to 15 percentage points) when only entry into non-interim employment is considered.

Figure 4.21. Formal domestic credentials accelerate employment entry for highly educated migrant jobseekers

The effect of domestic credentials on the transition to employment amongst non-working newly arrived migrant jobseekers, 2015-21, Flanders



Note: Permanent migrants (aged 18 to 59 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2015 and 2019. The unit of analysis is all non-employment spells (pooled) registered with the PES that start within the 2015-21 period. The cumulative incidence curves compare between migrants with a domestic degree and migrants with a foreign degree on a monthly basis the share of unemployed/inactive jobseekers who have ever transitioned into employment. Estimated cumulative incidence curves are based on a Cox proportional hazards model, with time until entry into employment as the dependent variable. The independent variables are domestic degree, sex, presence of young children at arrival, age, category of entry, Dutch language proficiency, level of education, years elapsed since settlement, number of the non-employment spell, year of observation, and province of residence.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on linked data from the Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration and the Flemish PES (see Box 4.1).

Further analysis shows that the effect of domestic qualifications on entry into employment varies across migrant groups, with the effect being larger among immigrants with a higher vocational education or professional bachelor, migrant women, and immigrants who migrated for study, family or humanitarian reasons (see Table 4.5).

Table 4.5. The effect of domestic education on entry into employment varies across migrant groups

Effects (hazard ratios) of domestic education on entry into employment for different subcategories

	Employment entry	Employment entry (excluding interim)
Domestic education (overall effect)	1.35	1.55
Sex		
Men	1.19	1.31
Women	1.71	1.99
Level of education		
Primary and lower secondary	1.08	1.13
Upper secondary	1.45	1.60
Higher vocational education	1.51	2.01
Professional bachelor	1.72	2.25
Academic bachelor	/	/
Master	1.36	1.54
Category of entry		
Work	0.98	1.12
Study	1.49	1.66
Family	1.24	1.62
Humanitarian	1.50	1.60
Free movement	0.98	1.10

Note: Permanent migrants (aged 18 to 59 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2015 and 2019. The unit of analysis is all non-employment spells (pooled) registered with the PES that start within the 2015-21 period. Estimated effects are based on a Cox proportional hazards model, with time until entry into employment as the dependent variable. The independent variables are recognition, sex, presence of young children at arrival, age, category of entry, Dutch language proficiency, level of education, years elapsed since settlement, number of the non-employment spell, year of observation, and province of residence.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on linked data from the Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration and the Flemish PES (see Box 4.1).

Financial incentives to encourage lifelong learning differ in the extent to which they reach immigrant employees

Not only jobseekers, but also employees can take part in formal and non-formal adult education. In fact, to stimulate training and lifelong learning among employees, Flanders designed several financial incentives (OECD, 2019[67]; Department of Work and Social Economy, 2020[71]). Notably, the representation of immigrant employees in these incentive measures differs significantly by type.

Flemish training leave (*Vlaams opleidingsverlof*) entitles employees in the private sector (who are employed for a minimum of 50%) to take up to 125 hours of paid leave per year to participate in adult education. The government compensates employers the wage cost to a maximum of EUR 21.30 per hour. In 2018, approximately 46 000 employees followed a training in the framework of the paid educational leave, of which 81% were native-born and 19% were foreign-born.

Training vouchers (*Opleidingscheques*) are a popular scheme among so-called “disadvantaged groups”. Flemish employees (including part-time and contract workers) can pay for recognised training or education programmes with training vouchers, which they purchase from the Flemish PES. The Flemish Government covers 50% of the cost, with a maximum subsidy of EUR 125 per year. Employees from all sectors are eligible for the training voucher if they do not yet have a tertiary degree. Training vouchers can also be used for trajectories of recognition of prior learning. In school year 2019-20, 47% of the 18 000 training voucher requests came from employees who belong to “disadvantaged groups”, as defined by the PES (i.e. be either non-EU-born, low-educated, aged above 55, or have a work disability).

Finally, career guidance vouchers (*Loopbaancheques*) do not seem to reach immigrants. Employed and self-employed workers with at least seven years of domestic work experience can apply to the PES for career guidance vouchers, which offer 4 hours of subsidised career counselling with a mandated career counselling centre of their choice. Career counselling is only offered in Dutch. Of the 18 000 persons that started career counselling with a voucher in 2021, only 1 300 (7%) were foreign-born. The immigrant share has also remained stable since 2013. Other small-scale options such as training credit (*Opleidingskrediet*) with 300 beneficiaries per year exist, but there are no data available on participants' parentage.

Box 4.8. Promoting employment and employability of Ukrainian refugees in Flanders

The labour market integration of Ukrainian refugees is a matter of growing importance in Flanders. Some of the characteristics of Ukrainian refugees are likely to improve their integration prospects and employability, including their educational profile and immediate labour market access, while others on the contrary may hinder them, namely that most arrivals are women with young children and other dependents.

At the time of writing, there were no official statistics on how many of the Ukrainian refugees had found a job in Flanders since the onset of the war of aggression. While the Flemish PES collects such data, it does so only for the (selective) subpopulation of Ukrainian refugees who have at some point registered with the PES. This Box takes stock of the existing evidence from the Flemish PES to provide an indication of the skill potential and labour market inclusion prospects of Ukrainian refugees in Flanders.

Job search and matching

In Flanders, as in most EU countries, Ukrainian refugees with a temporary protection status are granted the immediate right to work (as indicated on their Annex 15 and on electronic A card). Access to the labour market, however, is not sufficient to guarantee employment. The Flemish public employment service VDAB is responsible for integrating Ukrainian refugees into the labour market. At the onset of the crisis, it was agreed for the integration agencies and the PCSW to refer Ukrainian refugees who are capable and willing to work to the PES. To better meet the needs of new arrivals from Ukraine, the PES translated its most essential web pages in Russian and Ukrainian and set up video presentations and brochures specifically targeted at Ukrainian jobseekers. To help connect Ukrainian refugees with potential employers and available jobs in Flanders, the PES additionally launched an online portal called "#Werkplekvrij" (Workplace available) on the 16th of March 2022. Since its conception, close to 10 300 vacancies have appeared on that online portal, out of which 3 600 were still vacant by 7 November. Notably, 82% of the total number of posted vacancies concerned domestic cleaning (for more information on the service voucher scheme, see Chapter 5). As this sector struggles with persistent labour shortages, it expressed a strong interest to be matched with the new arrivals.

Between 1 March and 7 November 2022, 5 795 Ukrainians had registered with the PES, out of which 70% were women. While this represents only a small portion of the population of Ukrainian refugees living in Flanders (see Chapter 2), the number of registrations with the PES has been rising steadily at a rate of 200 to 300 every two weeks. One possible reason for relatively low initial registration rates is that in Flanders, arrivals from Ukraine receive financial support (see Chapter 3 for a discussion on social assistance) and enjoy the right to work without prior registration at the PES. Among the almost 6 000 Ukrainian refugees registered at the PES as of November, 52% have been recorded as being tertiary educated, 27% as upper-secondary educated, and 21% as primary and lower-secondary educated. Although international comparison is strongly hampered by data limitations, refugees' level of education seems to be lower than that in other European OECD countries (OECD, 2023[72]). At the time of registering with the PES, refugees' proficiency in the Dutch language was still very limited: only 1.8% reported to possess "good" or "very good" Dutch language skills and three out of four refugees had no previous experience with the language. In contrast, English language proficiency is relatively widespread: around 30% rated their English skills as "good" or "very good".

Of the close to 6 000 Ukrainian refugees who registered with the PES between March and November, 33% worked at some point, and 21% were still working on the 7th of November. While the Flemish public employment service reports growing shares of refugees in employment, early evidence also suggests that skill mismatches are widespread. Indeed, a high proportion of refugees in Flanders expects to work in a job that would require lower levels of formal qualifications than they actually possess.

The top five of refugees' aspired occupations (see note) are cleaning and maintenance (12%), production (9%), sales (7%), construction (6%) and hotel and catering (6%). Simultaneously, at least initially, temporary agency work and subsidised employment in the domestic cleaning sector have been widespread among the refugees employed, together accounting for more than half of the jobs that were filled. Finally, the PES also provides training measures and job search assistance to Ukrainian jobseekers. However, by October 2022, only 114 Ukrainian refugees had participated in contractual workplace training and 184 had taken part in occupation-specific training, representing 5% of the total.

In principle, a swift labour market entry is welcome, as it allows refugees to rebuild their livelihoods and potentially provides a space where they interact with the host society. However, there is a risk that refugees will be trapped in low-skilled positions due to foregone training opportunities, skill depreciations, reduced job search efforts or other reasons. Against this backdrop, policy makers need to closely monitor the current situation and ensure that the risk of underemployment and skills mismatch skill mismatches does not perpetuate.

Skills assessment and recognition

Recognising foreign qualifications and educational credentials plays a key role in improving the chances of refugees to find a job commensurate with their skill profile. Like other receiving OECD countries, and based on a procedure that was developed in 2015 in the context of high refugee inflows, Flanders has used alternative measures to speed up recognition processes for Ukrainian diplomas. For level applications up to the bachelor level, NARIC Flanders works with precedents, meaning that the procedure is limited to assessing the authenticity of the institution and determining the level. For specific applications, NARIC provides a decision on level equivalence within ten working days to enable a quick labour market entry without having to wait on specific recognition.

In line with the recommendations of the European Commission (5 April 2022), temporary protection holders are not required to pay for recognition and, like asylum seekers and refugees, may use the alternative assessment procedure if they lack full documentation of their foreign degree. Furthermore, in consultation with the competent services of the education administration, a regulation was worked out whereby holders of Ukrainian diplomas gain access to teaching professions and administrative professions in the Flemish education sector, if they have applied for recognition of their diploma. To support employers in hiring Ukrainian refugees, NARIC has created an information sheet on the Ukrainian educational system and how it compares with the Flemish system. Finally, NARIC Flanders obtained additional funds in the form of three additional FTEs to facilitate a quick recognition procedure for Ukrainian refugees.

Despite these measures and the fact that the information currently available on the educational levels of Ukrainian refugees suggests a higher share of them are tertiary educated compared to most other refugee groups, relatively few have applied for recognition of their foreign qualifications so far. Between February 2022 and April 2023, NARIC Flanders has awarded 354 equivalences for diplomas from Ukraine, out of which 158 were recognised within 10 working days.

Note: When a person (re)registers as a job seeker, the PES maps her career choices or aspirations and supports the job seeker in making her career choice through professional records, an interest test, and a competency test. In subsequent contacts, these choices are confirmed or changed.
Source: Ad-hoc data request on the profile, mediation and employment of Ukrainian refugees at the Flemish PES (VDAB) (state of affairs on 7 November 2022); Flemish Government (2022[73]), Vlaanderen helpt Oekraïne. Eerste uitvoeringsrapportering september 2022, https://www.vlaanderen.be/vlaanderen-helpt-oekraine/taskforce-oekraine; https://www.naricvlaanderen.be/.

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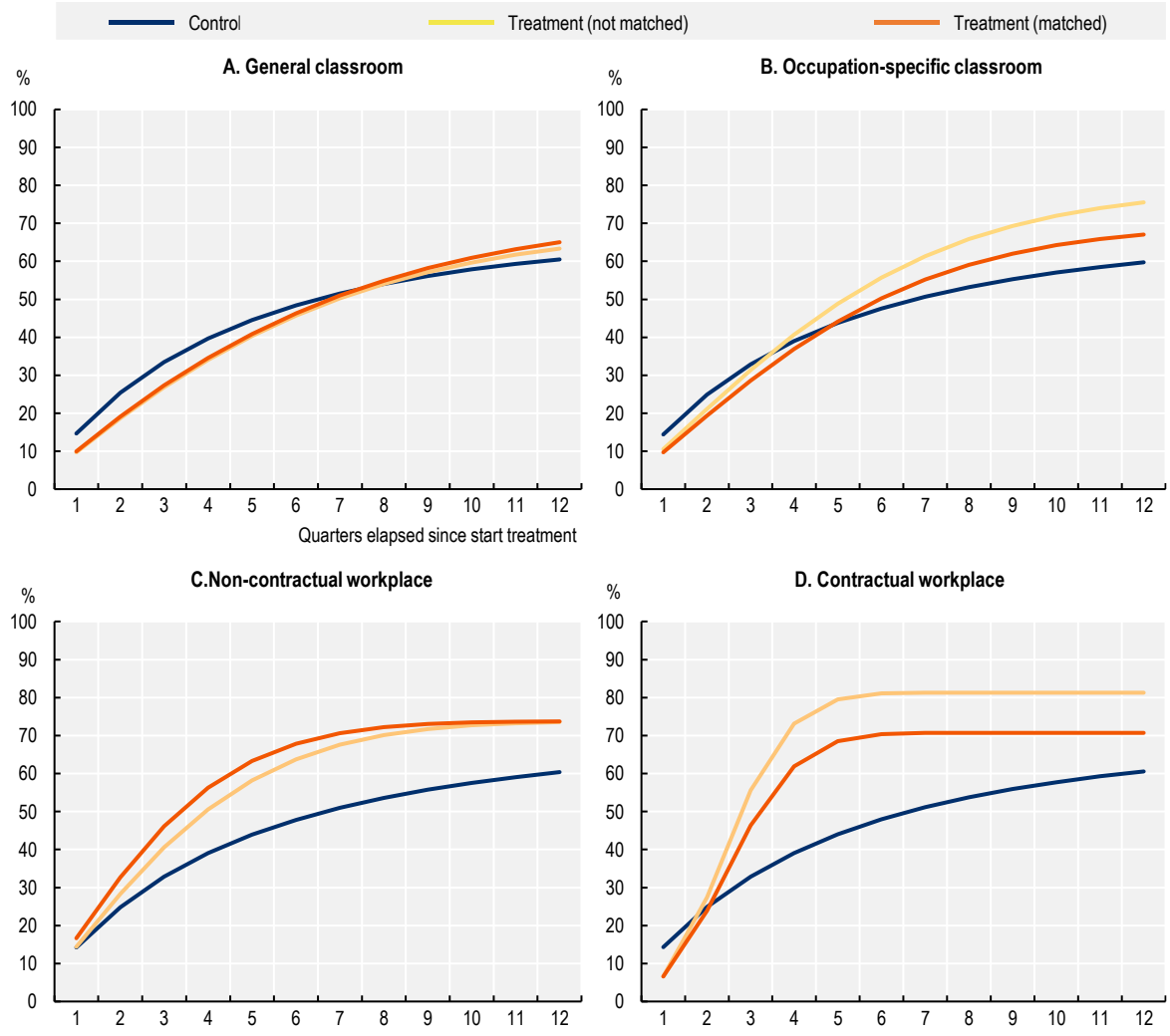
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Annex 4.A. Additional figures and tables

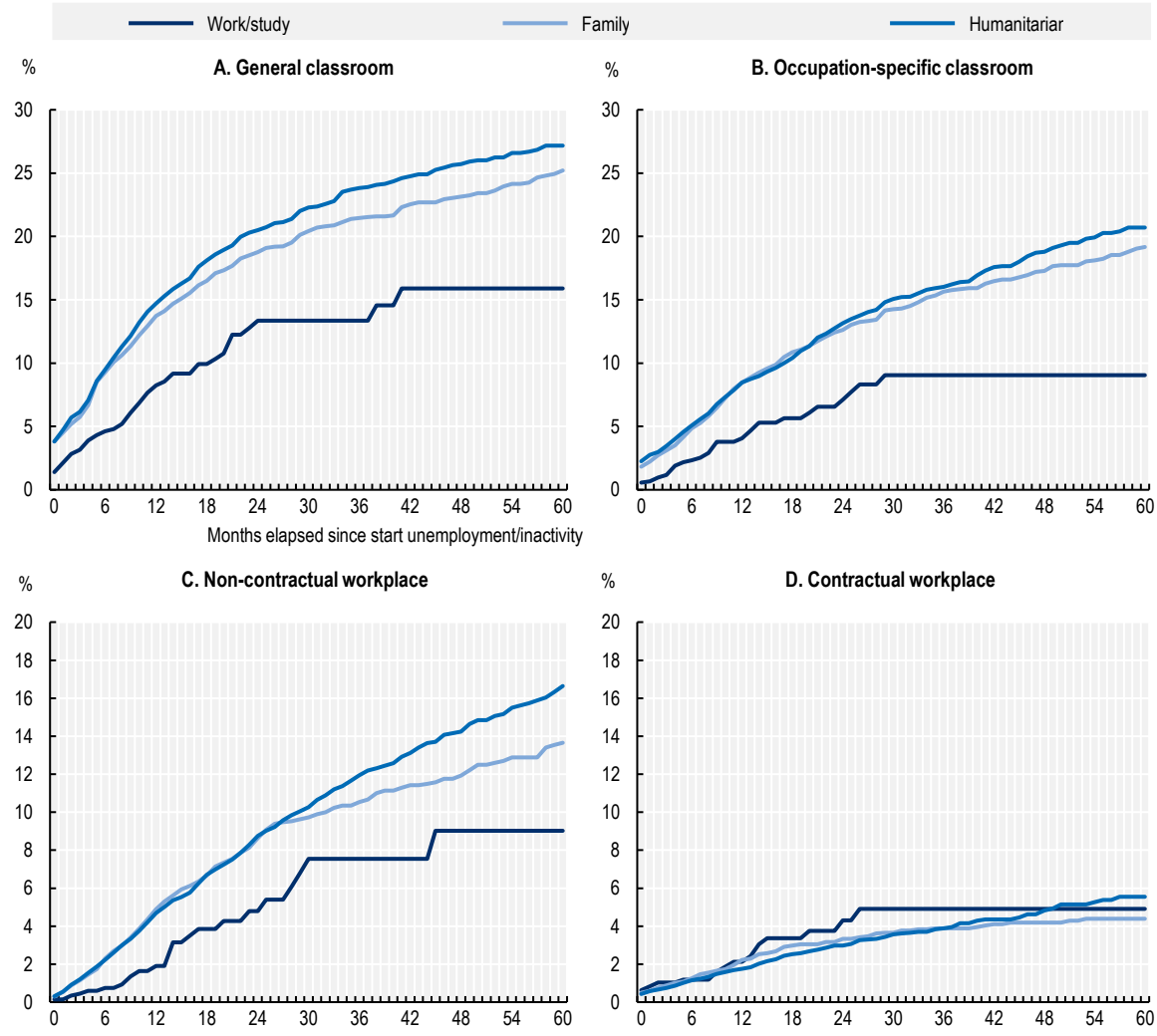
Annex Figure 4.A.1. The effect of participation in training programmes on the transition to stable employment amongst unemployed jobseekers, 2006-16, Flanders



Note: Population aged 18 to 64. The unit of analysis is all unemployment spells (pooled) that start within the 2005-16 period. The cumulative incidence curves compare between participants ("treatment") and non-participants ("control") of the training measure in question on a quarterly basis the share of unemployed jobseekers who have ever transitioned into an employment spell of four consecutive quarters. Estimated cumulative incidence curves are based on discrete-time hazard models, with time until entry into stable employment as the dependent variable. Dynamic matching (based on demographic and human capital characteristics, (prior) unemployment and activation characteristics, and job aspirations) is used to control for selective inflow into the measure and compares participants of the measure with non-participants who are identical in terms of observable characteristics (so-called "statistical twins").

Source: OECD Secretariat adapted from Wood and Neels (2020[2]), "Wegwijs naar werk: longitudinale analyse en evaluatie van inburgerings- en activeringstrajecten in Vlaanderen, 2005-2016", https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/wegwijs-naar-werk-longitudinale-analyse-en-evaluatie-van-inburgerings-en-activeringstrajecten-in-vlaanderen-2005-2016-eindrapport-van-de-viona-leerstoel-migratie-integratie-arbeidsmarkt, based on the MIA panel (respop) (see Box 4.1).

Annex Figure 4.A.2. Cumulative incidence of entering a PES training measure, by duration since start non-employment and category of entry, newly arrived immigrants, 2006-16, Flanders



Note: Permanent migrants (aged 18 to 64) who settled in Flanders between 2005 and 2015. The unit of analysis is all non-employment spells (pooled) that start within the 2005-16 period. In contrast to the previous Chapters, where we identified "Free movement" as a separate category, EU nationals are included in the categories "Work/study" and "Family". The cumulative incidence, or failure function, is computed as 1-St from the life table using the Kaplan-Meier approach.

Source: OECD Secretariat adapted from Wood and Neels (2020[2]), "Wegwijs naar werk: longitudinale analyse en evaluatie van inburgerings- en activeringstrajecten in Vlaanderen, 2005-2016", https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/wegwijs-naar-werk-longitudinale-analyse-en-evaluatie-van-inburgerings-en-activeringstrajecten-in-vlaanderen-2005-2016-eindrapport-van-de-viona-leerstoel-migratie-integratie-arbeidsmarkt, based on the MIA panel (newpop) (see Box 4.1).

Annex Table 4.A.1. Propensity of participating in vocational language training using a Cox regression

	(1) Vocational language training (total)	(2) Bridging courses	(3) Language support occupation-specific training	(4) Language support workplace training
Category of entry *(Free movement)*				
-Work	0,24***	0,18**	0,30**	0,31
-Study	0,45**	0,77	0,12**	0,43
-Family	1,50***	1,69***	1,42***	1,18
-Humanitarian	3,30***	3,86***	2,86***	2,28***
-Other	1,63***	2,06***	1,49**	1,32
Sex *(Men)*				
-Women	0,82***	0,92*	0,78***	0,53***
Children *(No)*				
-Yes	1,07	1,05	1,02	0,95
Age at arrival *(18-29)*				
-30-39	1,01	1,01	0,98	1,19
-40-49	1,02	0,99	1,04	1,52*
-50-59	0,54***	0,62**	0,45***	0,64
Level of education *(Low)*				
-Medium	0,85***	0,91*	0,81***	0,86
-High	0,73***	0,73***	0,69***	1,11
Formal Dutch language skills *(A2)*				
-B1 or higher	1,97***	1,76***	2,17***	2,44***
				Cohort of settlement *(2015)*
-2016	0,95	0,89*	0,95	0,94
-2017	0,82***	0,75***	0,77***	0,86
-2018	0,69***	0,62***	0,66***	0,73
-2019	0,58***	0,48***	0,47***	0,96

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001 based on robust standard errors. Exponentiated coefficients (hazard ratios) greater than 1 indicate a positive association with the propensity to enrol in vocational language training and coefficients smaller than 1 indicate a negative association.
Note: Permanent migrants (aged 18 to 59 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2015 and 2019 and signed an integration contract. Only migrants with formally certified Dutch language skills at the level A2 or higher are included in the sample. Time until the start of vocational language training is the dependent variable. All independent variables are time constant, except formal Dutch language skills which is time varying. The presence of young children, and level of education are measured during the intake with the integration agency.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on linked data from the Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration and the Flemish PES (see Box 4.1).

Annex Table 4.A.2. Propensity of having a recognised foreign qualification using a Cox regression

Category of entry (*Free movement*)	
-Work	1,33*
-Study	0,97
-Family	1,86***
-Humanitarian	3,02***
-Other	2,10***
Sex *(Men)*	
-Women	1,16***
Children *(No)*	
-Yes	1,22***
Age at arrival *(18-29)*	
-30-39	0,99
-40-49	0,88**
-50-59	0,68***
Formal Dutch language skills (*No level*)	
-A1	2,88***
-A2	6,72***
-B1+	9,84***
Cohort of settlement *(2015)*	
-2016	1,07
-2017	1,27***
-2018	1,35***
-2019	1,49***

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001 based on robust standard errors. Exponentiated coefficients (hazard ratios) greater than 1 indicate a positive association with the propensity to have recognised foreign qualifications and coefficients smaller than 1 indicate a negative association.
Note: Permanent migrants (aged 18 to 59 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2015 and 2019 and signed an integration contract. Only migrants with foreign tertiary education at arrival are included in the sample. Time until having a recognised foreign qualification is the dependent variable. All independent variables are time constant, except formal Dutch language skills which is time varying. The presence of young children, and level of education are measured during the intake with the integration agency.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on linked data from the Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration and the Flemish PES (see Box 4.1).

Annex Table 4.A.3. Propensity of having a domestic qualification using a Cox regression

Category of entry (*Free movement*)	
-Work	5,87***
-Study	25,40***
-Family	1,72***
-Humanitarian	1,56*
-Other	2,97**
Sex *(Men)*	
-Women	0,99
Children *(No)*	
-Yes	0,65**
Age at arrival *(18-29)*	
-30-39	0,53***
-40-49	0,32***
-50-59	-
Level of education (*Professional bachelor*)	
-Academic bachelor	1,64***
-Master	2,61***
Dutch language skills (*None*)	
-Little	1,23
-Good	1,44
-Very good	2,58***
Cohort of settlement *(2015)*	
-2016	0,96
-2017	0,97
-2018	1,02
-2019	0,80

*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001 based on robust standard errors. Exponentiated coefficients (hazard ratios) greater than 1 indicate a positive association with the propensity to have a domestic qualification and coefficients smaller than 1 indicate a negative association.
Note: Permanent migrants (aged 18 to 59 at arrival) who settled in Flanders between 2015 and 2019. Only migrants who signed an integration contract and who have registered with the Flemish PES are included in the sample. Time until having a formal domestic qualification is the dependent variable. All independent variables are time constant, except level of education which is time varying. The presence of young children is measured during the intake with the integration agency. Level of education and Dutch language skills come from PES data.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on linked data from the Crossroads Bank for Civic Integration and the Flemish PES (see Box 4.1).

Notes

[1] Note that from an OECD perspective, an employment rate of 60% for labour immigrants is relatively low. Part of the explanation lies in the fact that a considerable number of labour immigrants in Flanders are working for supra-national organisations (mostly located in Brussels: e.g. EU officials) and are thus "unknown" to the Belgian Crossroads Bank for Social Security (see (FPS Employment and Unia, 2019[74]) for further discussion). As a result, the employment rate of labour immigrants based on administrative data is underestimated (and much lower compared to the employment rate based on Labour Force Survey data, see Chapter 2).

[2] Note however, that the importance of informal networks may be underestimated, especially for immigrants, as they frequently play a vital role in gaining access to informal jobs, which are not always captured by the Labour Force Survey.

[3] For all training measures, controlling for selection by means of dynamic propensity score matching had a clear influence on the estimated return (Wood and Neels, 2020[2]). For contractual workplace training and occupation-specific classroom training, the return after matching was significantly lower, showing that unemployed jobseekers who participate in this type of training have more favourable labour market profiles than those who do not. For general classroom training and non-contractual workplace training, on the other hand, the return after matching was higher, because of negative (self-)selection into these measures.

[4] In contrast to their analyses for the residential population, the analyses for newcomers does not only focus on unemployment spells, but on all "non-employment" spell (i.e. both unemployment and inactivity) (Wood and Neels, 2020[2]).

[5] Wood and Neels (2020[2]) additionally analyse difference by subpopulation groups in the amount of time spent in different training measures, which leads to a similar conclusion: migrant jobseekers spent less time in occupation-specific classroom and workplace training than native-born jobseekers of native-born parents.

[6] The multivariate analyses of this chapter use Cox proportional hazards regression models. The advantage of the event history approach is that it allows to take right-censored cases into account and avoid bias caused by cases who were at risk for less than the maximum observation period. The Cox proportional hazards regression has the additional benefit of making no assumption about the baseline transition rate. It is a so-called semiparametric event-history analysis model in that it is fully flexible regarding the underlying distribution of, here, the transition into vocational language training, but the ratio of the probability of transition between individuals with different values of included variables is constant over the entire process. As our main interest is the direction and strength of the covariate effects on the event occurrence (not the duration), the Cox regression is appropriate.

[7] The Lisbon Recognition Convention establishes a right to an assessment of higher education that was obtained in one of the signatory countries or is held by refugees. In reverse, it generally does not cover non-tertiary education qualifications and does not apply to migrants with qualifications from non-signatory countries who migrated for other than humanitarian reasons. The Convention applies to recognition of qualifications required for admission to higher education and to recognition of part of (units or courses constituting part of) higher education study programmes.

[8] See https://www.naricvlaanderen.be/nl/erkenningen/erkenning-buitenlands-diploma/erkenning-aanvragen-bij-naric-of-een-andere-instantie/lijst-met-professionele-erkenningen.

[9] All applicants for recognition of a higher education certificate need to provide the following documents: a copy of their identity card, a copy of their qualification, a copy of the overview of all subjects with results and study periods and a copy of their dissertation. In case of a specific application, a copy of the official study programme with a description of the contents of the subjects should be added. Medicinal doctors should, and others are recommended, provide a curriculum vitae. People seeking to enter medicinal and healthcare professions should, and others are recommended, provide a copy of certificates of work placements and a copy of documents supporting relevant professional experience. Lastly, artists and architects should provide a copy of their portfolio. Applicants should do different applications for all certificates they seek to recognise. If an application concerns a master's degree, all documents of the bachelor's degree should as well be provided, however, only the master's degree can be recognised. If the applicant also wants his/her bachelor's degree to be explicitly recognised, he/she should do a separate application for this certificate.

[10] For certificates that are Dutch, Luxembourgian or from a special international institution, the level of the certificate is automatically recognised.

[11] While the Agency for Integration and Civic Integration does not pay for translation expenses, VDAB does. As a result, applications for recognition of foreign qualifications are sometimes delayed until one is accompanied by VDAB.

[12] See https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/recognition-of-refugees'-qualifications.

[13] Note that the data includes recognition for both regulated and unregulated professions (with no possibility to differentiate the two). Therefore, a shift in the tendency to work in regulated professions also contributes to the estimated effect.

[14] Partial qualifications are coherent sets of competences from the same professional qualification that offer opportunities in a narrower section of the labour market than the full professional qualification.

[15] These include guide, forklift driver, reach truck driver, childcarer for babies and toddlers, children carer for school-aged children, car mechanic, meat processor, fast food employee, green and garden construction employee, and machine woodworker. In addition to the 10 professional qualifications listed above, there are validation standards in place for 16 other professional qualifications. However, validation instruments and validation bodies for these 16 qualifications are still lacking and are planned to be in place by 2023.

5 Strengthening the demand for migrant skills in Flanders

This chapter investigates constraints on the demand for migrant skills as well as the policy responses that attempt to tackle them. It starts with policy measures that encourage employers to hire people who are far from the labour market, including wage subsidies and, notably, service vouchers. Next, the focus shifts to policy tools that aim at strengthening migrants' social networks and role modelling. Finally, anti-discrimination and diversity policies are discussed.

Engaging with employers: Giving migrants the chance to demonstrate their skills

There are many reasons why immigrants encounter additional hurdles on the Flemish labour market. Some of these, as outlined in Chapter 4, have to do with the skills that immigrants bring to the local labour market. Therefore, policy efforts must make sure that there is a follow-up after the completion of the civic integration programme that is centred on developing, activating, and using migrant skills.

However, there remain other hurdles that do not directly depend on the skills of immigrants but, nonetheless, impact upon their returns to these skills. These hurdles are connected to the *demand* for migrant skills in the labour market. Indeed, employers may be hesitant to hire migrant workers because they are unsure of how to assess their qualifications or experience acquired abroad; they may prefer to avoid the risk of hiring migrants because they are worried that the cost of hiring could exceed their productivity; or they may simply decide not to hire migrants on the basis of discriminatory practices – either explicit or implicit. These challenges, as well as the policy responses that attempt to tackle them, are unpacked in this Chapter.

Newly arrived migrants face many obstacles to fully use their skills in a new country, including limited language abilities and lack knowledge of the local labour market functioning. Hence, at least in the short term, their productivity is lower than that of their similarly skilled native-born peers. Employers would normally respond to lower productivity by paying lower wages until productivity rises. However, relatively high collectively bargained wages in Flanders mean that employers are constrained in their ability to do this. As such, employers may be reluctant to hire migrants with low language proficiency and additional training needs.

At the same time, it is essential that migrants can demonstrate their skills through early contact with employers. One way to stimulate employers to take on foreign-born workers with limited host-country language proficiency is to provide hiring support. Indeed, several OECD countries have introduced mechanisms such as wage subsidies and cuts in employer-based social security contributions with the aim of encouraging employers to hire people who are far from the labour market. Flanders has been among the OECD countries making most use of this type of active labour market policies (Godefroid, Stinglhamber and Van Parys, 2021[1]; OECD, 2022[2]; McGowan et al., 2020[3]).

Targeted reductions in social contributions for low-educated youth seem to have little effect on employment chances

Across the OECD, wage subsidies are a long-standing component of active labour market policies aimed at strengthening the employment opportunities of vulnerable groups. Wage subsidies have also proven effective for the foreign-born, sometimes even more so than for the native-born (Butschek and Walter, 2014[4]; Nekby, 2008[5]; Clausen et al., 2009[6]). However, immigrants are rarely explicitly targeted and tend to be underrepresented among the beneficiaries of such schemes, possibly because they themselves or employers do not know about their eligibility (Liebig and Huddleston, 2014[7]).

Flanders has a long tradition of using wage subsidies for the employment of disadvantaged groups (Godefroid, Stinglhamber and Van Parys, 2021[1]). These “target group policies” (*doelgroepenbeleid*), which were formerly in the remit of the federal government, were devolved to the regions in 2014 as part of the sixth state reform. The Department of Work and Social Economy is in charge of overseeing these policies in Flanders. Since 2020, wage subsidies (or a reduction of social security contributions) in Flanders are focused on employers who hire people from three disadvantaged groups: low-educated youth, jobseekers and workers aged 58 and above, and persons with an occupational disability (Department of Work and Social Economy, 2021[8]). Migrants are not specifically targeted.

An evaluation of the target group policies for the period 2016-18 indicates that jobseekers with a foreign nationality and jobseekers with limited Dutch language proficiency were both underrepresented among

those who benefited from these policies (Desiere, Cabus and Cockx, 2020[9]). For instance, only 23% of beneficiaries of the subsidy for low-educated youth had a foreign nationality, compared to 29% of the eligible non-users. Similarly, 35% of the users had no to little Dutch language skills, compared to 46% of the non-users.

At the same time the authors find that the wage subsidy had no significant effect on the likelihood for low-educated jobseekers aged below 25 to be employed six months after having entered unemployment. This outcome is surprising, given that low-educated youngsters are a particularly vulnerable group in the Flemish labour market (Boey and Vansteenkiste, 2022[10]). Part of the explanation lies in the fact that the wage subsidy for low-educated youth frequently did not lead to durable employment, as individuals hired with such a subsidy had mostly brief periods of employment interspersed with non-employment (Desiere, Cabus and Cockx, 2020[9]).

The service voucher scheme is the most subsidised domestic work scheme in the OECD…

A key sector for wage subsidies is the non-care domestic household services sector. Several European OECD countries use a variation of policy designs (service vouchers in Belgium, France, Germany, and Austria; cuts to social security premiums in the Netherlands and Germany; and tax deductions for labour costs in Sweden, Denmark and Finland) to boost the demand for domestic services and create jobs for disadvantaged groups in the labour market (OECD, 2021[11]).

In 2004, Belgium implemented a comprehensive system of social vouchers on the non-care domestic service market, called *dienstencheques*. Since 2016, the regions have jurisdiction for the follow-up and implementation of the service voucher scheme, which in Flanders is managed by the Department of Work and Social Economy. The scheme subsidises a restricted list of household services including cleaning, washing, and ironing, to create low-skilled jobs, reduce informal sector activities and improve the work-life balance of the users (Marx and Vandelannoote, 2014[12]; Raz-Yurovich and Marx, 2018[13]). The Flemish service voucher scheme is the largest subsidised domestic work scheme in the OECD, costing Flanders nearly EUR 1.5 billion each year (Department of Work and Social Economy, 2021[14]).

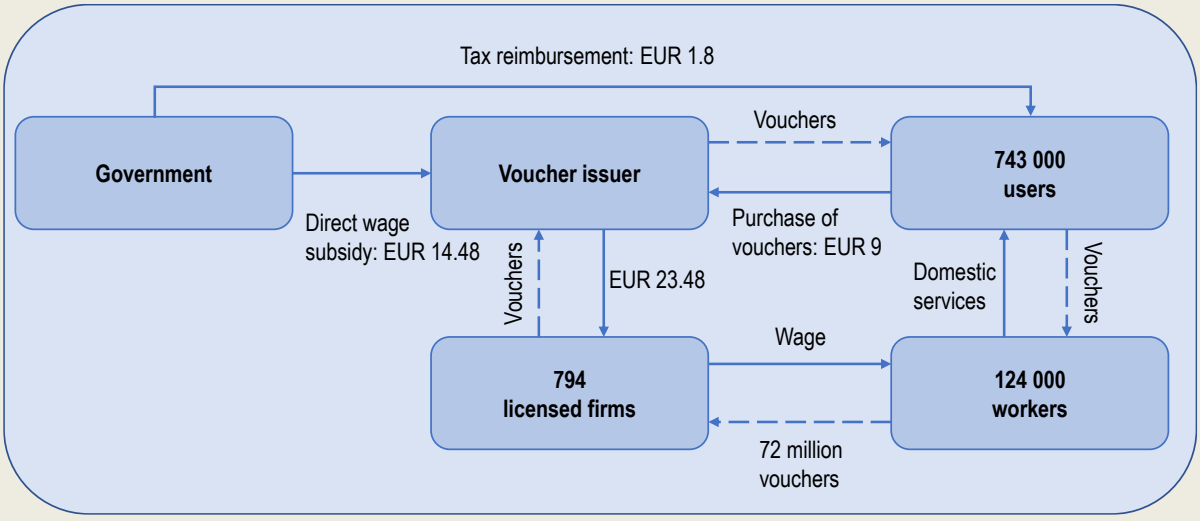
The scheme is organised through licensed service voucher companies that serve as an intermediary between users, employees, and the government (see Box 5.1). Service voucher workers are all formally contracted as regular employees. Wages and working conditions are set in collective agreements that are generally binding and apply to all workers, unionised or not. The level of protection granted to workers in Flanders is by international standards among the highest (Lens et al., 2022[15]).[1] Any worker can be part of the scheme for an indefinite period. Notably, there are no eligibility conditions, no qualification requirements for workers themselves and no time limit. The only formal condition is that regional and sectoral training funds provide regular training. However, the limit of this training is very low: just 12 hours of training per year are compulsory for service voucher workers.[2]

Box 5.1. The service voucher scheme in Flanders

Five actors are involved in the organisation of the service voucher scheme (see Figure 5.1). The voucher issuer is a private company – called Sodexo – that produces the service vouchers. It sells them to the consumer for EUR 9/piece, who can use the vouchers to pay for a clearly defined set of non-care household services, including cleaning, laundry and ironing, cooking, and grocery shopping. Users are entitled to a fiscal deduction of EUR 1.8/piece (20%), so the net cost of each voucher is EUR 7.2/piece. For each hour of domestic service performed, the workers receive one voucher from the users. They then give them to their employer – a licensed service voucher firm – in exchange for their monthly wage. Employers can be either commercial firms (private companies, temporary work agencies, and private individuals), non-commercial firms (non-profit organisations and local employment agencies) or public entities (public social welfare centres and municipalities). The licensed firm can then give all the vouchers from its workers to the voucher issuer in exchange for EUR 23.48/piece, which serves at least in part to pay for the workers' wage. The difference between what the users pay (EUR 9) and what the service voucher firms are reimbursed for (EUR 23.48) is financed through a direct wage subsidy of EUR 14.48/voucher. The subsidy offered by the government is thus composed of a direct wage subsidy paid to the service voucher firm and a tax refund for the users of domestic services. Adding up both elements, the government subsidises EUR 16.28 per voucher or 69% of the total cost of each voucher.

Almost all employees are female (97%). The service voucher scheme has experienced rapid growth over the years and employed more than 120 000 women in 2020 (7% of the female working population in Flanders), up from around 23 000 women in 2005. About 740 000 active users used the scheme in 2020 (on a total population of 2.9 million households). In total, this amounted to 72 million service vouchers. Users are predominantly two-earner households in full-time work, although a second group – which is expanding – includes individuals above the age of 65. Most users are highly educated and are relatively high up in the income distribution (Raz-Yurovich and Marx, 2019[16]).

Figure 5.1. Set-up of the service voucher scheme



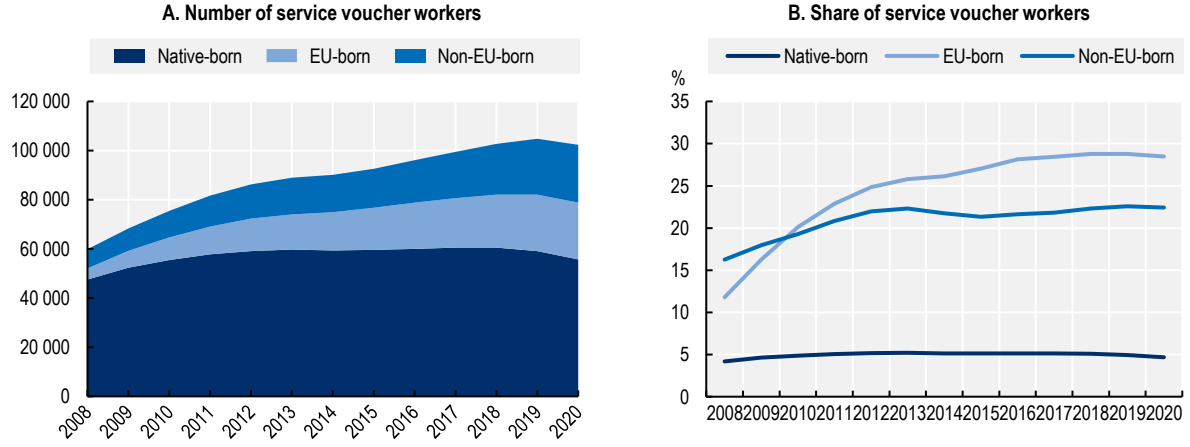
Note: The number of users, workers, firms, and vouchers is for 2020. Note that the wage subsidy is subject to indexation; the numbers cited refer to 2020.
Source: OECD Secretariat based on Department of Work and Social Economy (2021[14]), *Kerncijfers van het Vlaamse dienstenchequestelsel. Jaarrapport,* https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/kerncijfers-van-het-vlaamse-dienstenchequestelsel-jaarrapport.

…and gradually became an important employer of migrant women

Although the scheme does not have a specific focus on migrants, it gradually became an important employer of migrant women. Between 2008 and 2020, the share of non-EU-born working women working in the scheme climbed from 16% to 22% (see Figure 5.2). Even more pronounced is the increase among EU immigrants, which went from 12% in 2008 to 28% in 2020. This increase was entirely driven by women born in countries that joined the EU after 2004. In 2020, close to 50% of working women from this group were employed by service voucher companies. In contrast, the proportion of native-born women working in the scheme remained constant at 5%. As a result, foreign-born women made up 46% of all employees who were working through service voucher companies in 2020, up from 21% in 2008.

Figure 5.2. The service voucher scheme is increasingly dominated by migrant women

Evolution in (A) the number of service voucher workers, by place of birth and (B) the share of service voucher workers in the population of working women, by place of birth, 2008-20, Flanders



Note: Female population aged 18 to 64 who are employed. Ninety-seven percent of employees in the scheme are women. In the Crossroads Bank for Social Security data, a service voucher worker is identified as a person who has been paid once with service vouchers during the course of a year (and is thus connected to their employer through a service voucher agreement) and has their place of residence in the Flemish Region.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on Crossroads Bank for Social Security data.

The service voucher scheme is thus essential for migrant women's integration into the Flemish labour market. It will likely become even more important going forward, as migrant women continuously show higher inflow rates into the scheme compared to native-born women. In 2019, approximately 6 900 non-EU born women entered the scheme, accounting for 22% of the total number of non-EU-born scheme workers that same year (see Figure 5.3). The entry rate of both EU-born and native-born women in 2019 was lower, at 16% and 14%, respectively. Notably, the scheme is increasingly made up by recently arrived migrants. Close to half of the migrant women who entered the scheme in 2019 had been in Flanders for fewer than five years, and three in ten had a duration of residence of less than two years. This trend also shows in the distribution of the labour market position from which migrant women entered the scheme, with more than half coming from inactivity without social benefits (see Figure 5.3).

Unfortunately, data from the Crossroads Bank for Social Security on the educational attainment of foreign-born scheme workers suffer from very low coverage rates (for EU migrants, the coverage rate is only 14%, while for non-EU migrants it is 33%). However, Lens and colleagues (2022[15]) conducted an analysis using linked data from the Labour Force Survey and the Crossroads Bank for Social Security, and their findings show that among women who have worked in the scheme between 2004 and 2017, approximately 16% of

non-EU born women had a tertiary level of education, compared to 13% of EU-born women and 5% of native-born women.

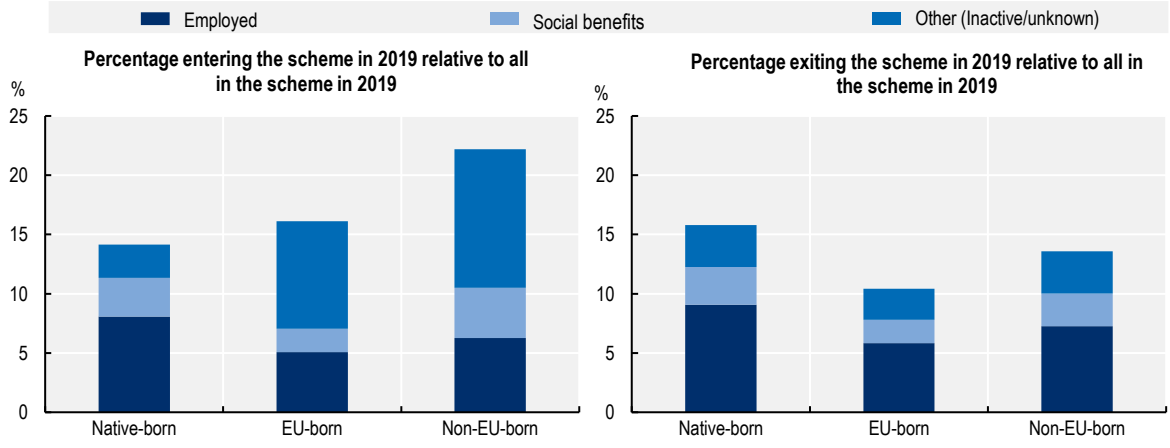
The scheme traps many migrant women in low-skilled jobs

Although the initial aim of the service voucher scheme was to create low-skilled jobs that could provide a leverage to other jobs, the system largely fails to offer passage to non-subsidised work, despite many of the migrant women working in this system being overqualified. A recent study by Leduc and Toweroj (2020[17]) shows that the service voucher system was effective in reducing unemployment and inactivity, but only by increasing employment within the subsidised domestic service sector. There was little if any transition to other sectors and to other type of contracts (see also Lens et al. (2022[15])).

Recent data from the Crossroads Bank for Social Security confirms that exit rates towards regular employment are low, and even lower among migrant women than among native-born women. Of all non-EU-born women who were working in the scheme in 2019, only 7% exited to regular employment the next year (compared to 6% of EU-born women and 9% of native-born women) (see Figure 5.3). And even though it is hard to draw firm conclusions from the Crossroads Bank for Social Security data, further analysis indicates that exit rates out of the service vouchers scheme to regular employment are not much higher for highly educated foreign-born women (8%). This seems to suggest that many migrant women with high levels of education get trapped in the scheme and in domestic work for which they are overqualified.

Figure 5.3. Migrants are more likely to enter the service voucher scheme and less likely to leave it

Share entering (left) and exiting (right) the scheme in 2019 relative to all in the scheme in 2019. Position in the labour market the year before entering (left, so 2018) and after exiting (right, so 2020), Flanders



Note: In the Department of Work and Social Economy data, a service voucher worker is identified as a person who is employed using Flemish service vouchers, meaning she is employed by a service voucher user residing in Flanders. Some of the workers may hence reside in Wallonia or Brussels.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on data from the Department of Work and Social Economy enriched with Crossroads Bank for Social Security data.

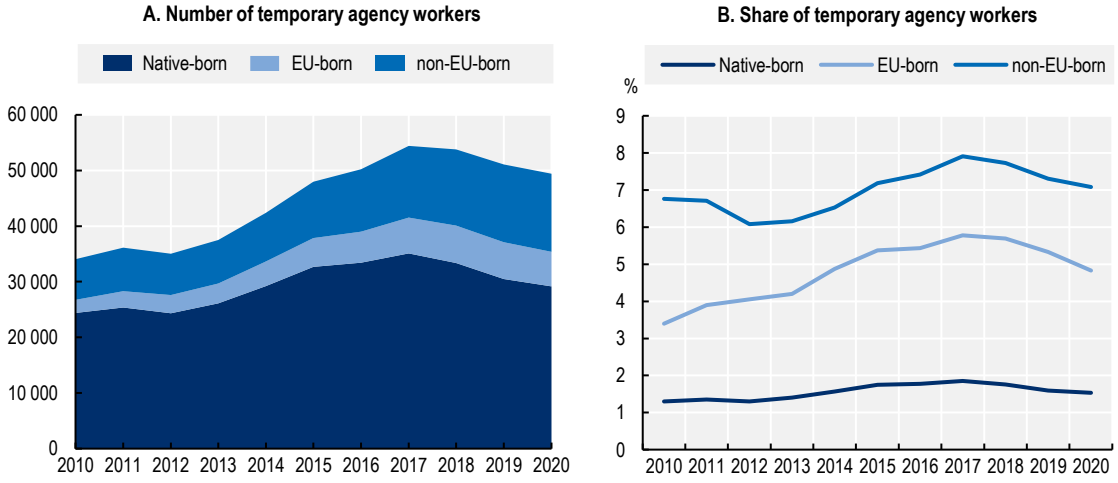
Temporary agency work can help migrants to prove their skills

Alongside wage subsidies, temporary agency work might also open an opportunity for employers to "test" the skills of migrants at a low cost and can be an important tool for integration. According to data from the

Crossroads Bank for Social Security, 7% of employees born in non-EU countries in Flanders were employed through temporary work agencies in 2020, compared to 5% among the EU-born and 1.5% among the native-born. As a result, foreign-born workers comprised 41% of all employees working through such agencies in 2020, up from 28% a decade before (see Figure 5.4).

Figure 5.4. The expansion of temporary staffing over the past decade was primarily driven by foreign-born workers

Evolution in (A) the number of temporary agency workers and (B) the share of temporary agency workers in the population of employees, by place of birth, 2008-20, Flanders

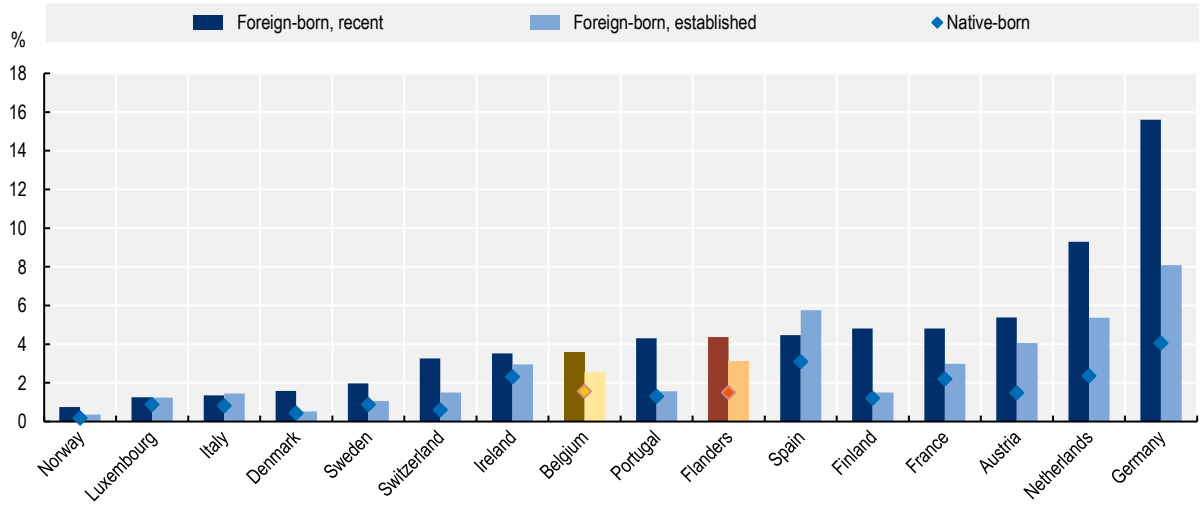


Note: Population aged 18 to 64 who are employed, not including the self-employed.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on Crossroads Bank for Social Security data.

When compared to other European OECD countries, Flanders does not stand out for having a large percentage of foreign-born workers who are employed through temporary job agencies. In fact, migrants – and recent arrivals in particular – are hired on temporary agency contracts less often than in France, and far less often than in the Netherlands and Germany (see Figure 5.5).

Figure 5.5. The share of migrants in temporary agency work remains average in international comparison

Share of employees who have a contract with a temporary employment agency, by place of birth, 2020, Flanders and selected European OECD countries



Note Population aged 15 to 64 who are employed, not including the self-employed or those still in education.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on EU-LFS; Flanders: the national LFS.

Even if Flanders does not stand out with a large temporary agency sector, given the strict employment protection legislation for permanent employment (McGowan et al., 2020[3]), temporary work still represents an important channel to help newly arrived migrants gain a foothold in the labour market. The important question then, is whether temporary agency work functions as a steppingstone towards more stable and better-paid employment, or rather works as a trap, for migrant workers in Flanders. By hiring through temporary staffing agencies, employers – who often have difficulties evaluating the competence and credentials of migrant workers – can screen workers without committing themselves. And, by taking on assignments through agencies, migrant workers can gain domestic work experience and demonstrate their skills, increasing their chances for regular employment (Joona and Wadensjö, 2008[18]). However, temporary staffing may also just be a permanent way for employers of maintaining a hyper-flexible workforce, in which case, it provides few opportunities for advancement (Friberg, 2016[19]).

Past findings on whether temporary agency employment helps or hinders migrants' labour market integration in Europe tend to provide more support for the hypothesis that temporary jobs offer steppingstones to permanent employment for migrants (Hveem, 2013[20]; Andersson and Wadensjo, 2004[21]; Jahn and Rosholm, 2013[22]). Jahn and Rosholm (2013[22]), for example, find evidence of a strong positive impact among immigrants born in non-Western countries in Denmark, even stronger than among the native-born. In Flanders, despite the policy focus on a fast labour market entry for newcomers (see Chapter 4 for further discussion), research on the function of temporary agency employment for migrants' integration pathways has been limited. One of the reasons is the lack of detailed administrative data on contract type.

Working with employers includes supporting migrant entrepreneurs

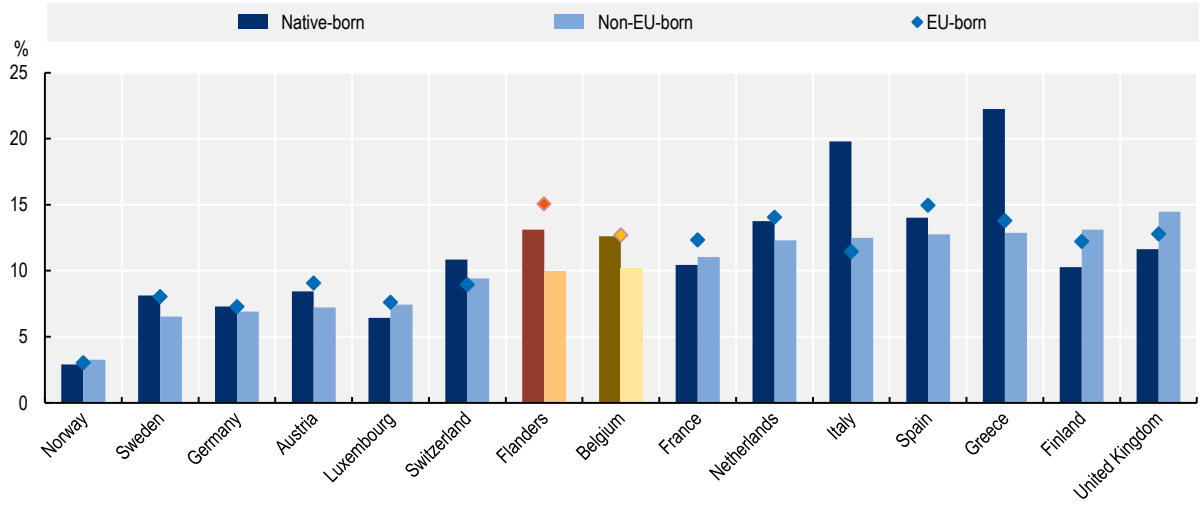
Another channel of activation is to support self-employed immigrants and working with immigrants as employers themselves. In most European OECD countries, the foreign-born are slightly less likely than the

native-born to be self-employed and open new businesses. Compared to other countries, Flanders had a relatively high self-employment rate among the native-born and EU-born migrants in 2020, whereas the proportion of self-employed among non-EU-born migrants was relatively low (see Figure 5.6).

Despite a reduction in the self-employment rate among EU immigrants over the past decade and stability in the self-employment rate among non-EU immigrants, immigrants make up a rising share of the self-employed in Flanders. Between 2010 and 2020, the proportion of immigrants in the working-age self-employed population rose from 10% to 15%, as a result of increased immigration.

Figure 5.6. EU immigrants are more likely to be self-employed than non-EU immigrants in Flanders

Share of self-employed workers, by place of birth, 2020, Flanders and selected European OECD countries



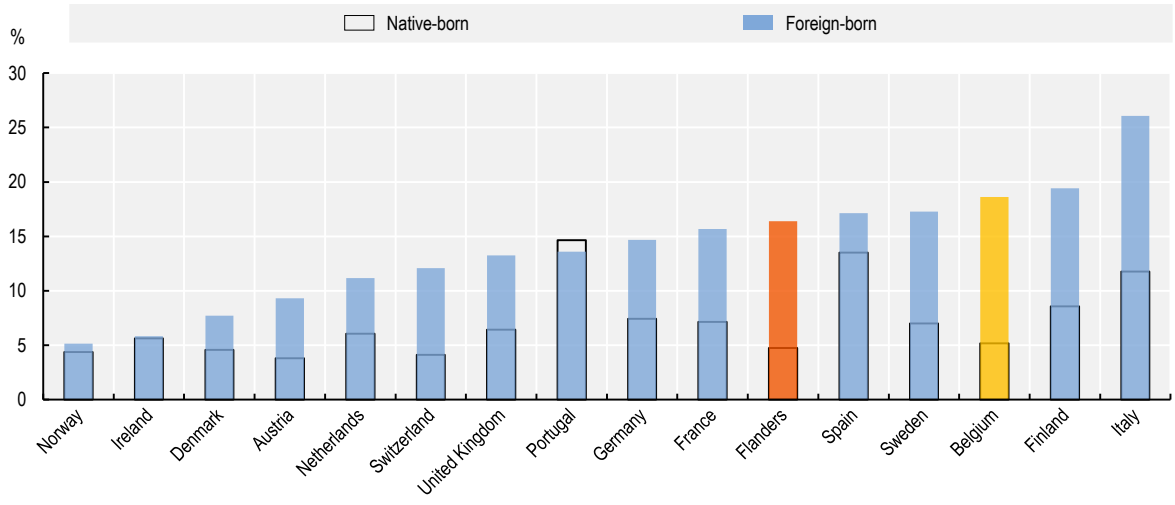
Note: Population aged between 15 and 64 who are in employment, excluding the agricultural sector. The self-employed are people who work in their own firms or create their own businesses, sometimes hiring employees. Self-employment includes entrepreneurs, liberal professions, artisans, traders, and many other freelance activities.
Source: OECD/European Commission (2023[23]), *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In*, https://doi.org/10.1787/1d5020a6-en; Flanders: OECD Secretariat calculations based on national LFS.

There are several positive aspects to immigrants becoming self-employed or setting up their own businesses, such as the significant contribution they make to employment, innovation, and international trade (OECD, 2010[24]; Lofstrom and Wang, 2019[25]). Self-employment can also be a particularly effective pathway into the labour market for migrants who experience difficulties in taking up salaried employment. In addition, migrant business owners can be an important role model and a potential employer for other (often migrant) workers (Hammarstedt and Miao, 2020[26]). In Flanders, self-employed immigrants are less likely as the native-born self-employed to have employees. Approximately 23% of the self-employed immigrants were employers in 2021, compared to 28% of the self-employed native-born.

Still, immigrant self-employment is no panacea for labour market integration. Many of the foreign-born end up in self-employment to escape from marginalisation in the labour market. In other words, self-employment is not always related to entrepreneurial skills. Indeed, Figure 5.7 shows that in most European OECD countries, the foreign-born are more likely than the native-born to have entered into self-employment due to involuntary reasons (i.e. out of necessity or because the employer requested it). The share of involuntary self-employed migrants in Flanders was relatively high in international comparison, at 16% (compared to 5% for the native-born).

Figure 5.7. Immigrants have a higher incidence of involuntary self-employment

Share of involuntary self-employment, by place of birth, 2017, Flanders and selected European OECD countries



Note: Involuntary self-employment includes those who declared "because they could not find a job as an employee" or "because their former employer requested it" as main reason for becoming self-employed.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the 2017 ad hoc module of the EU-LFS.

Self-employment thus seems to represent an important fallback strategy for immigrants to avoid unemployment, blocked mobility, and discrimination in the Flemish labour market. At the same time, research for Belgium shows that immigrants are more likely to exit from self-employment into non-employment than the native-born, and that weaker attachment to the labour market preceding entry into self-employment plays a crucial role in explaining why immigrants suffer more from "bad exits" (Lens, 2022[27]).

Even though migrant entrepreneurship has been on the policy agenda of several OECD countries for a while, schemes that specifically target migrants are still often limited to pilot projects and generally of a small-scale format. In Flanders too, tailored assistance to support immigrants in self-employment is still relatively limited (see Box 5.2).

Box 5.2. Tailored assistance to support immigrants in entrepreneurship in Flanders

Targeted support for immigrant entrepreneurship is primarily offered by non-governmental organisations in Flanders.

Entrepreneurial training and promotion to immigrant groups is supported by civil society initiatives, such as Starterslabo. In 2016, they started a public programme supporting entrepreneurship among refugees and immigrants, which was merged into mainstream "inclusive" support in 2020. Other organisations, for example Stebo and Youthstart, co-operate to provide entrepreneurship training and support for refugees and NEET youth. In addition, ESF projects such as the AZO! Project in Flanders provide further coaching and support to new immigrant entrepreneurs.

Between 2015 and 2021, the Syntra training network, with ESF funding, has been running the "Work towards your own business" project (*Maak werk van je zaak*), which aims to guide the unemployed towards self-employment. Within the project, would-be entrepreneurs receive external training and individual coaching from professionally oriented organisations, creating easier access to a professional support network, not only before becoming self-employed but also afterwards. The recently started follow-up project "Jumpstarters" further increases the focus on vulnerable employees but also aims to target immigrants and refugees.

SheDIDIT is a project on female migrant entrepreneurship. The project started in July 2018 with a campaign starring successful role models, providing a platform for women, and a talent pool in which migrant women can register and talk about their interests, their expertise and what they would like to learn more or grow further into. Through events, coaching sessions, networking opportunities and mentoring, entrepreneurial migrant women get a voice and support.

Finally, the microcredit institute MicroStart has programmes for immigrants and jobseekers and provides information and support in various languages.

Source: OECD (2020[28]), "Inclusive Entrepreneurship Policies, Country Assessment Notes Belgium", https://www.oecd.org/cfe/smes/Inclusive-Entrepreneurship-Policies-Country-Assessment-Note:.htm; https://microstart.be/fr; https://stebo.be/; https://syntra-mvl.be/nl/jumpstarters; https://starterslabo.be/.

Promoting social networks and role modelling

Networks are crucial to finding a first employment. Social contacts often provide the very first link with employers, give information about job opportunities and tacit knowledge about the functioning of the labour market. Social networks thus fulfil an important role in immigrants' labour market integration, both shortly after arrival and in the long term (OECD, 2023[29]). However, networks are not always beneficial to immigrants, especially if they provide only limited, lower-paid job opportunities or if they induce immigrants to stay in their network and not look at other potential jobs, thereby limiting their opportunities and aspirations (Verhaeghe, Van der Bracht and Van de Putte, 2015[30]; Lancee, 2010[31]).

Mentorship is well developed in Flanders

Mentorship programmes are seen as a cost-effective way of promoting integration whilst increasing interaction and strengthening ties between immigrants and the host society. Indeed, mentoring can provide immigrants with essential knowledge which is hard to access through formal channels such as PES courses and trainings (De Cuyper, Vandermeerschen and Purkayastha, 2019[32]).

Most OECD countries have mentorship programmes targeted at migrants. Typically, newly arrived migrants are matched with host-country residents (including established migrants) who act as mentors, providing tacit labour market information and introducing the newcomer to relevant institutions and services. Mentors can also share their personal networks or act as intermediaries with potential employers. In Canada, for example, the Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization links mentees once a week with volunteer mentors who work in a similar or related profession to discuss career objectives, build professional networks, improve job search strategies and techniques, and gain insights into Canadian workplace culture and language. In Australia, the Community Guides Program from Adult Multicultural Education Services trains former refugees as community guides who provide support to resettled migrants in a contact language (OECD, 2016[33]). In Israel, the mentorship programme "Babayit Beyahad" links immigrant families to Israeli family within a shared community based on profession, age, and interests for social integration. The latter provide day-to-day assistance with paperwork and navigating services, including referrals to professional bodies and job-search resources, and language support (OECD, 2017[34]).

Despite the common use of mentorship programmes across the OECD, surprisingly few programmes have been thoroughly evaluated. Research from Sweden on the effect of mentoring unemployed refugees finds a positive short-term effect for males (defined as having an income from work or self-employment that at least exceeds a basic amount) but no effect for females (Månsson and Delander, 2017[35]). An impact assessment of the mentoring non-profit organisation "Start with a Friend" in Germany, finds positive effects on subjective integration such as social connectedness and housing satisfaction but no effects (in the short term) on objective indicators, such as employment (Jaschke et al., 2022[36]).

Mentorship is well developed in Flanders, and some projects have been piloted and upscaled in the past years. Different actors (NGOs, public bodies, companies) usually co-operate in these projects. Some projects focus on a local implementation (TEAM UP in West Flanders, GATAM in Antwerp and MENTORING@WORK in Limburg) or a specific group, such as the RISE SMART mentoring programme for tertiary educated mentees. Two large scale projects are the "DUO for a JOB" programme and the now terminated but long-time running Connect2Work project (see Box 5.3).

Flanders piloted and evaluated several recent initiatives in mentoring. De Cuyper and colleagues (2021[37]; 2018[38]) highlight that it is not only crucial to provide a first meeting and connections between local residents and newcomers, but also key to maintain the quality of a programme and provide guidelines and structured support. Their findings also indicate, amongst other things, that sector- or occupation-specific matching is key to add value for highly educated immigrants. Building a network in their occupational sector improves their labour market integration. Finally, their research shows the key role of the supervisory organisation in ensuring positive outcomes.

Building on this research, Flanders implemented a mandatory mentoring scheme as the fourth pillar of the civic integration programme starting 2023 (see Chapters 2 and 3 for further discussion). In addition to the first three pillars (Dutch as a second language, civic orientation, and registration at the PES), the new pillar assigns 40 hours to strengthen immigrant's social networks, thereby formalising previously existing mentorship programmes. The exact details of the networking programme are up to each municipality to design. In OECD comparison, a mandatory state-led participation scheme is an innovate but also ambitious plan. It puts considerable pressure on (small) municipalities, that need to design and offer such a programme despite in some cases limited expertise and experience. During the OECD field mission, it was mentioned that clear guidelines on what the participation project should entail, including measures to follow-up and clear communication of expected funding for this task would help municipalities in planning.

Box 5.3. Mentoring initiatives in Flanders

DUO for a JOB links young immigrants with senior mentors

"DUO for a JOB" started in Brussels in 2013 and since then, the organisation has spread to six different cities in Belgium. The programme trains seniors over the age of 50 to be mentors for young migrants aged between 18 and 33 years old, and since 2015 also youth with migrant parents, who are seeking career or student guidance. The project thus addresses the high unemployment rate among youth of non-European parentage.

The NGO was the first association in the EU to make use of Social Impact Bonds[1] and since its launch, it has also focused on partnerships with other stakeholders in the sector. Between September 2013 and August 2021, it has reached about 1 500 mentors and 4 000 mentees. About seven in ten mentees found themselves in a job, internship, or further training within 12 months of starting the programme. However, this positive outcome might be in part due to a selection effect as mentees actively choose to take part in the programme. However, an evaluation by the Brussels Employment Observatory on the 300 young migrants who participated in DUO for a JOB between 2014 and 2016 finds a positive short-term effect on employment.

The Connect2Work project supported immigrants' job search

The "Connect2Work" project, was a joint initiative of HIVA, the PES (VDAB) and the integration agencies. The mentoring project was running from 2014-20 and targeted highly skilled people speaking a foreign native language. It matched "mentees" with mentors to facilitate labour market entry based on a "mentoring pathway". Over a minimum of three months and at least six meetings, mentors shared professional expertise and experience with mentees and supported their job search via information and tips on drafting a good CV and cover letter, advice regarding useful websites and documentation and support to expand their professional network. A coach from Connect2work closely followed-up on the mentoring pathway.

1. With Social Impact Bonds, companies are invited to invest in a private fund used to finance the programme in a pilot project. The bond is designed such that investors see a return on their investment if the costs associated with the labour market integration of participants are below those of a comparable group who do not receive the new training. In this manner, it is investors – and not the public sector – who carry the financial risks.
Source: https://www.duoforajob.fr/en/home/; http://www.mentor2work.be/2020/11/02/overzicht-van-mentoring-naar-werk-projecten-in-vlaanderen/.

Involvement of social partners is high

One way to enlarge migrants' networks and to improve their chances on the labour market is to involve social partners. Employers and trade unions often know better than the government and local authorities what work experience and foreign qualifications are needed. They are also well placed to judge what content should go into bridging programmes and to support vocational and language training – as the most effective kind of training is provided directly on the job (for further discussion, see Chapter 4).

Across the OECD, there have been many examples of social partner initiatives often focused on integration of humanitarian migrants. In several Austrian regions, for example, the Chamber of Commerce has put in place language training, skills assessments, mentorship programmes and apprenticeship placements for humanitarian migrants. In Sweden, sector-based talks between employers and unions have led to schemes to fast-track refugees into several shortage occupations. The fast-track schemes include skills assessment in the workplace and publicly funded upskilling. Canada rewards companies which successfully assist refugees in obtaining a first job and finding their place in society with a national Refugee Employment Award (OECD, 2016[33]). UNHCR and OECD also established a 10-point multi-stakeholder action plan to support employers in their efforts to hire refugees (OECD/UNHCR, 2018[39]).

In Flanders, the network organisation JobRoad is jointly operated by the PES (VDAB), the Agency for Home Affairs, the Flanders Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VOKA), the Training Fund for Temporary Employees (TRAVI), the European Social Fund, and the local governments.[3] The organisation's initial goal is to help non-Dutch-speaking immigrants successfully integrate into the Flemish labour market via internships, temporary employment, and work-based learning. The team is working in various regions of Flanders to bring together organisations (companies, intermediaries, temporary employment sector) in a network so candidates are guided in a targeted and personalised manner towards potential employers. Recently, the organisation has increased the range of vulnerable target groups for its activities (youth not in employment, education or training, persons aged 55 and over, and people with a detention history). JobRoad also intends to target asylum applicants in partnership with the federal reception agency Fedasil.

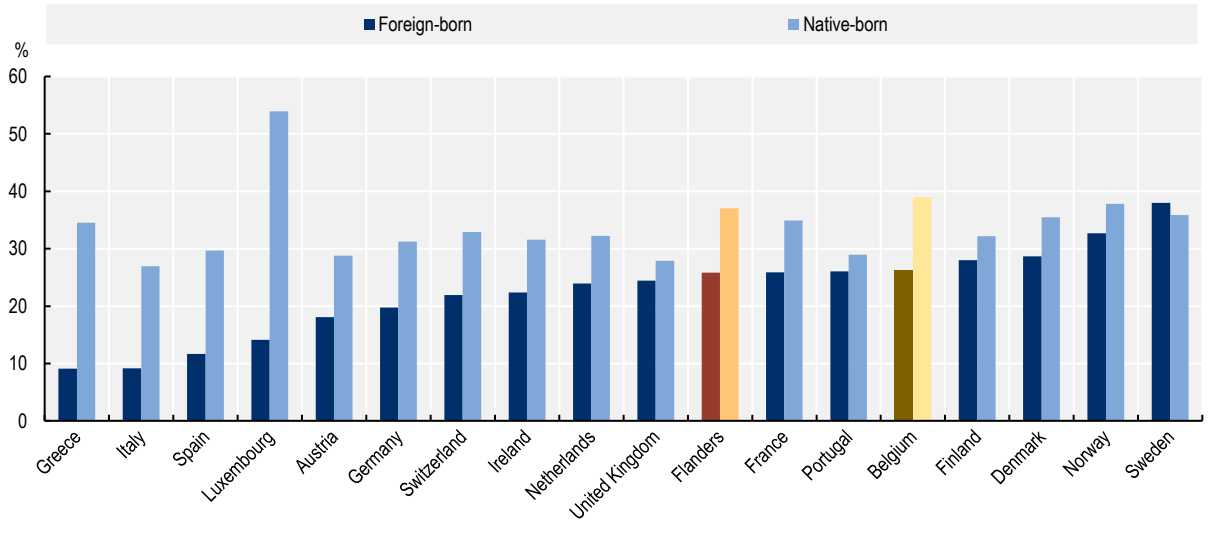
Immigrants in public sector jobs can act as role models

Immigrants benefit from role models with whom they can identify. Role models encourage individuals to fulfil their potential and aspirations, a key challenge for many newcomers in an unfamiliar society. In many OECD countries, foreign-born are successful role models as entrepreneurs and in the sports or entertainment sector. However, in some countries they are less well represented in other role modelling functions. A prime example is the public sector.

In international comparison foreign-born are underrepresented in public sector jobs in Flanders. As depicted in Figure 5.8, despite a large share of native-born (37%) being employed in public sector jobs, the share among immigrants is only 26%. In Flanders individuals need to hold Belgian or European nationality to obtain certain posts in the public administration. This restricted access implies the under-representation of non-EU foreigners. Even for migrants with more than 10 years of residence in Flanders (not shown in the graph) the share working in public sector jobs is only 29%. This suggest that the underrepresentation of immigrants in the public sector remains a challenge for settled immigrants.

Figure 5.8. Immigrants are under-represented in public sector jobs

Share of workers in the public sector, by place of birth, 2020, Flanders and selected OECD countries



Note: Population aged between 15 and 64 who are in employment, excluding the self-employed.
Source: OECD/European Commission (2023[23]), *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In*, https://doi.org/10.1787/1d5020a6-en; Flanders: OECD Secretariat calculations based on national LFS.

The underrepresentation of foreign-born in the public sector has several negative consequences. First, it limits the visibility of immigrants in this key sector of employment in Flanders. Second, it hampers the ability of the public services to benefit from the experiences and skills of foreign-born employees, especially when addressing the needs of other immigrants as general users of public services (Pina, Corluy and Verbist, 2015[40]). Third, it gives away the chance of having successful role models other immigrants can aspire to in the Flemish society. This is particularly a concern for the native-born children of immigrants (see Chapter 6 for further discussion).

Most of the challenges immigrants face to enter public administration are known, but in part remain unaddressed (Flemish Social and Economic Council, 2020[41]). Key among them is the strong focus on recognised diploma and certified formal skills. This focus is somewhat surprising given that the very same public administration has designed good policy solutions such as an extensive framework for recognising informal skills and prior learning. The public sector could take a lead in using these tools, thereby setting an example also to other sectors. Another challenge is the requirement of very high Dutch language skills for most public sector jobs. Here a focus on the actual language competences needed can be a first step to be more inclusive immigrants. Public sector jobs can also value the skills, including specific foreign language skills, foreign-born bring with them.

Tackling discrimination and encouraging diversity

Discrimination also impacts the chances of immigrants to gain employment. Discrimination generally takes one of two forms. The first, known as “statistical discrimination”, occurs when employers lack information about the candidate’s experience or qualifications and examine the statistics on the average performance of the group to which they assume that the candidate belongs to. The second and more pernicious, “taste-based discrimination”, occurs when employers are simply reluctant to hire foreign-born workers, or workers they perceive as “foreign”, based on their name or ethnicity. Whereas the empirical evidence for both mechanisms is generally mixed, experimental research on hiring outcomes yields more evidence of taste-based discrimination vis-à-vis statistical discrimination (Lippens et al., 2022[42]). In practice, it is often difficult to distinguish between these two types of discrimination, as statistical discrimination tends to be based upon prejudices rather than accurate perceptions about immigrants and indeed, the effects on the individual immigrant tend to be the same.

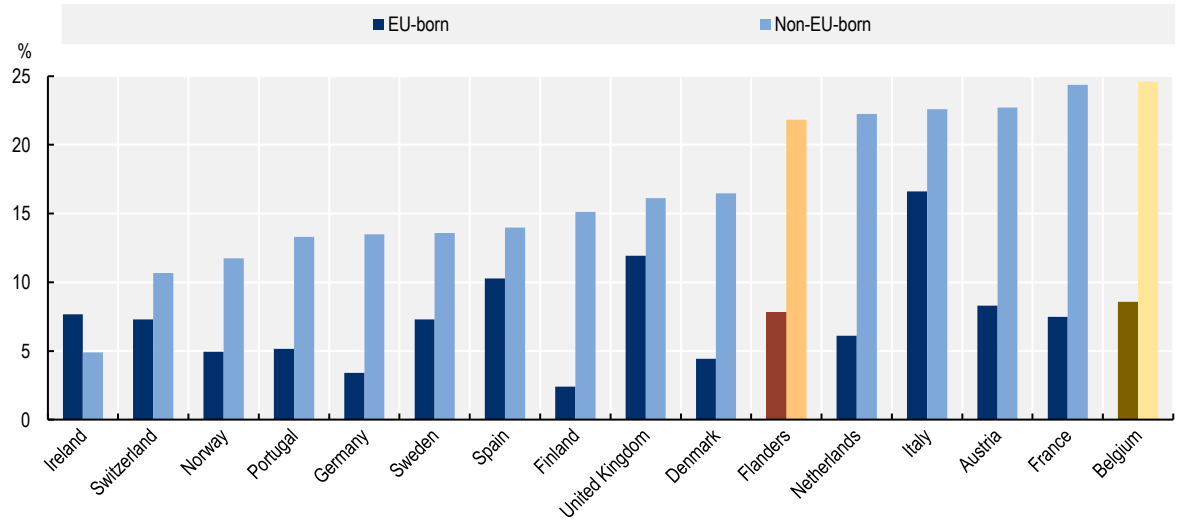
Discrimination can also be indirect. Such indirect discrimination occurs when a person is disadvantaged by a provision that appears neutral but may put certain groups at a particular disadvantage, for example native-level language skills for jobs that do not require this competence. Discrimination can be measured through questionnaires surveying the target population, in which case they refer to perceived and self-reported discrimination, and they can be identified via field experiments such as direct hiring discrimination of individuals with “foreign” perceived names.

Both perceived and direct discrimination are prevalent in the Flemish labour market…

From the perspective of immigrants themselves, the proportion of foreign-born individuals that feel discriminated against in Flanders is high in international comparison. Figure 5.9 illustrates that 22% of non-EU-born and 8% of EU-born migrants in Flanders, aged 15 to 64, consider themselves members of a group that is discriminated against. The finding that self-perceived discrimination is higher for EU than non-EU born also holds for all other countries, except Ireland.

Figure 5.9. Perceived discrimination among immigrants is relatively high in Flanders

Share of immigrants who consider themselves members of a group that is discriminated against on grounds of ethnicity, nationality, or race, 2012-18, Flanders and selected OECD countries



Note: Foreign-born population aged 15 to 64. Perceived discrimination is measured as the sentiment of belonging to a group that is discriminated against on grounds of ethnicity, nationality, or race.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on data from the European Social Survey 2012-2018.

In fact, people born in non-EU countries especially when they are not (yet) citizens experience more daily struggles and are subject to a form of discrimination EU nationals do not face. This includes for example the expensive and burdensome renewal process of their residence permit and their restricted access to certain jobs, as discussed above.

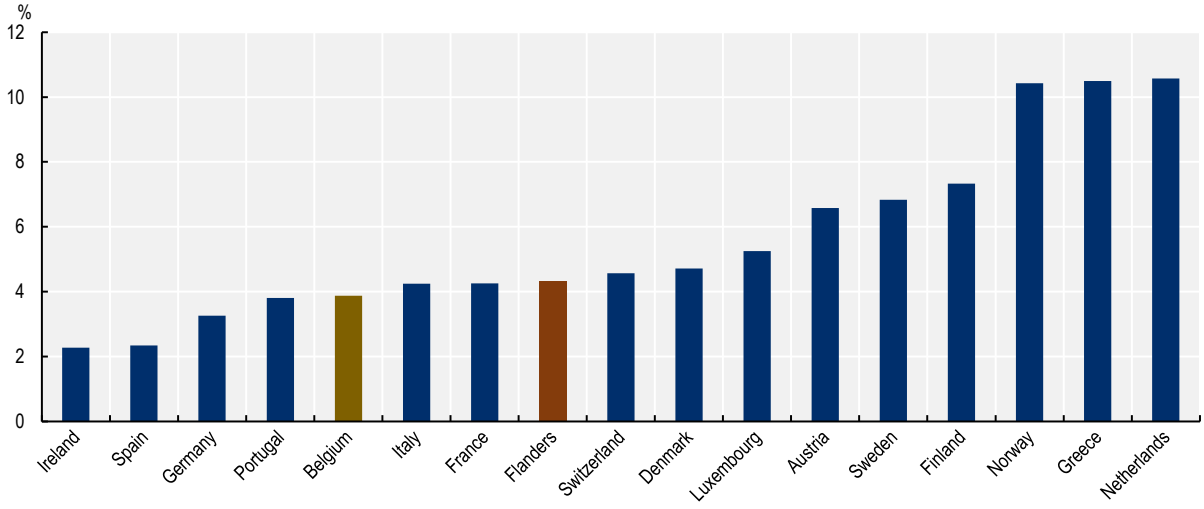
Discrimination particularly manifests itself in the labour market when employers are unwilling to hire foreign workers, or at workplaces in unequal treatment of colleagues of foreign origin. Figure 5.10 shows the proportion of employed people born abroad facing discrimination at work, on the grounds of their foreign origin. Flanders now reports a rather low percentage in international comparison, around 4%.

While these surveys display perceived discrimination, they provide little information on its actual incidence. To capture the incidence of discrimination, field experiments in Flanders have used fictitious applications with foreign-perceived names and otherwise equivalent CVs. A 2012 study captured the contrasting experience of male Turkish and Flemish perceived candidates with comparable education and work experiences. Candidates with Turkish-perceived names needed to send out 44% more job applications to be invited to the same number of job interviews as the Flemish-perceived candidates (Baert et al., 2015[43]). Other studies have shown that discrimination fell sharply when the Turkish-named candidate applied for bottleneck professions or could demonstrate work or volunteering experience (Baert et al., 2017[44]; Baert and Vujić, 2016[45]). Recent experimental research in Antwerp and Ghent demonstrates that discrimination is still widespread, but appears to have decreased recently (Baert et al., 2021[46]; 2021[47]).

Notably, innovative techniques like “open hiring” and anonymisation of CVs in the recruitment process are gaining attention and popularity in Flanders as a means of preventing hiring discrimination (see Box 5.4).

Figure 5.10. Whereas discrimination at work is low

Share of employed immigrants reporting feeling of being discriminated against at work on the grounds of foreign origin, 2021, Flanders and selected OECD countries



Note: Foreign-born population aged 15 to 74.
Source: EU-LFS ad hoc module 2021 (Eurostat); Flanders: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the 2021 ad hoc module of the national LFS.

Box 5.4. Open hiring and anonymous CVs to combat hiring discrimination in Flanders

As more practical answer to hiring discrimination, the Department of Employment and Social Affairs of the City of Mechelen launched in 2021 the project "12 Work". Concretely, employers formally advertise open positions on the 12work website. Employers may provide a maximum of five requirements for their new hire when drafting the vacancy, and only qualifications required for the position (e.g. driver's license, wanting to work irregular hours) are accepted. Job seekers can then apply for a vacancy at a central counter in the city, by putting their name on the corresponding waiting list. It is entirely up to the candidate to determine whether they are qualified for the position and meet the requirements. The order of the waiting list always determines who can be the first to get the job. By February 2023, the project launched 26 vacancies, reaching 350 candidates, of whom 40 found a job.

More recently, Accent, one of the three largest temporary work agencies in Flanders, decided to work entirely with anonymous CVs from February 2023 onwards. The CVs will share all objective data about competencies and experience, yet personal characteristics (including the applicant's name and contact details, gender, nationality, date and place of birth, disability, marital status) are made anonymous. Additionally, any information about professional experience should only indicate the duration of employment spells and not their actual start date or end date. Steps to introduce anonymous CVs have received mixed successes abroad (Sweden, France, the Netherlands and Germany) (Krause, Rinne and Zimmermann, 2012[48]). While anonymous job applications can lead to the desired effect of increasing the interview invitation probabilities of disadvantaged groups, there are also indications for exactly the opposite effect, namely that anonymity prevents employers from favouring applicants from disadvantaged groups. Therefore, effects of anonymous job applications should be closely monitored.

Source: OECD field mission; https://www.12work.info/; https://www.accentjobs.be/nl/werknemers/open-minded-hiring-solliciteren-met-een-anoniem-cv/.

While not a measure of discrimination, prevailing public attitudes towards migrants and immigration in a society can also impact the well-being and daily experiences of migrants. Flanders harbours somewhat more negative views than other EU15 countries regarding immigrants' contribution to the national cultural life and the economic impact of migration (see Table 5.1).

Table 5.1. Immigration opinions are more negative in Flanders than in other EU15 countries

Mean scores on a scale from 0 to 10 for question:

	Is [country] made a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries?	Would you say it is generally bad or good for [country]'s economy that people come to live here from other countries?
Finland	7.0	5.5
Sweden	6.9	5.8
The Netherlands	6.1	C5.3
Germany	6.1	5.9
Ireland	6.0	5.8
Belgium	6.0	5.0
Flanders	**5.8**	**4.9**
United Kingdom	5.8	5.8
France	5.3	4.9
Austria	4.6	4.7

Note: The ESS is a biennial survey of 50 000 respondents in nearly 30 European countries. In Belgium, it is a face-to-face survey of 1 800 respondents, out of which 1 100 live in the Flemish Region.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the European Social Survey 2016.

Nevertheless, Statistics Flanders' survey[1] on the Flemish-speaking population's socio-cultural values, attitudes, and behaviours (*Sociaal-culturele verschuivingen*) does show a positive evolution regarding attitudes towards immigration. In 2018, 58% of the respondents agreed that the presence of different cultures enriches Flemish society, up from 48% in 2011. The proportion that agreed with the statements "migrants cannot be trusted", "migrants come to take advantage of social security", and "migrants pose a threat to Flemish culture and customs" also declined considerably over the 2015-18 period (Statistics Flanders, 2018[49]).

The Flemish Living together in Diversity survey (*Samenleven in Diversiteit*, see Chapter 2 for more information) further shows significant differences by region of origin. In 2017, more than four in five respondents of Turkish, Moroccan and Congolese parentage agreed with the statement that the presence of immigrants enriches Flemish society, which is well above the share among respondents of Romanian (57%) or Polish (44%) parentage, as well as respondents of Belgian parentage (47%). When asked whether there are too many immigrants and children of immigrants living in Belgium, around half of the respondents of Turkish, Polish and Romanian parentage agreed, compared to 44% of those of Belgian parentage and 32-39% of the respondents of Moroccan or Congolese parentage.

…despite long experience in anti-discrimination legislation at the federal, regional and Community level

Belgium is generally considered as having comparatively strong anti-discrimination legislation. At the federal level, the 2007 *Anti-discrimination Act* defines 19 "protected" criteria, including origin, presumed race, or nationality. Several legislative texts also focus specifically on fighting discrimination in the labour market. More recently, the Law of 15 January 2018, which laid down several provisions relating to work, giving labour inspectors the ability to utilise "mystery calls" to combat discrimination in recruitment and to carry out situation checks (using fake CVs) to establish whether employers are in breach of anti-

discrimination legislation. To intensify anti-discrimination efforts, in 2020, the Federal Minister for Equal Opportunities founded the Inter-Ministerial Conference against Racism, which was tasked with drafting the country's first national anti-racism action plan. Additionally, the Federal Human Rights Institute was founded. The action plan and foundation of the Human Rights Institute have been long in the waiting, with national advocacy groups putting significant pressure on past governments to kick-start it.

Unia, an independent public institution that combats discrimination and promotes equal opportunities, is tasked with the fight against discrimination in employment. It provides advice and support to discriminated persons, drafts reports, informs and trains employers on anti-discrimination legislation, provides authorities with recommendations, and consults with the economic sectors, public authorities, and associations. Unia also handles discrimination cases concerning specific criteria in the anti-discrimination legislation. Between 2017 and 2021, the number of cases opened by Unia based on racial criteria for the Flemish region increased from 366 to 486. Despite the anti-discrimination legislation, Unia's diversity barometers continue to indicate significant levels of discrimination in housing, education and the labour market (Unia, 2012[50]; 2014[51]; 2018[52]).

From March 2023 onwards, Unia will no longer be competent as an independent equality body for Flemish competences (i.e. employment services, job placement, housing, education, media, sports). Complaints of unequal treatment and monitoring of discrimination regarding these Flemish competences will fall under the responsibility of the newly established Flemish Human Rights Institute. However, Unia remains competent for the federal competences.

In Belgium, as elsewhere, tackling discrimination through the courts can be a challenge as proving its incidence is difficult. Even if differential treatment on the grounds of a person's origin can be demonstrated, the employer may still demonstrate that substantive reasons, other than discrimination, motivated the alleged discriminatory behaviour. Employers often provide substantive explanations for their actions and, as elsewhere, it is difficult to determine whether discrimination has occurred during the recruitment process. The difficulty is highlighted in low case numbers. In 2021, Unia brought 7 cases based on racial criteria before the civil or criminal courts.[4] Most disputes were hence solved through conciliation procedures.

Flanders is working with all sectors to tackle discrimination more effectively

In accordance with federal anti-discrimination law, Flanders has its own set of non-discrimination legislation. Notably, the Flemish Government developed an Action Plan to Combat Work-Related Discrimination (ABAD), focusing on three pillars: awareness-raising, self-regulation, and reinforced controls. The action plan was established in 2007 and last updated in 2016. The sectoral covenants, by which sectors and sectoral partners commit themselves to implement actions in their sector to support Flemish employment policy, are the primary tool for tackling discrimination in Flanders. A recent evaluation study, however, revealed that while most sectors have developed sectoral codes of conduct on non-discrimination, little actions were taken to address discrimination at the organisational level (Lamberts, Vanderstukken and De Lebeeck, 2020[53]). Most sectors reported a lack of support or incentives to set up such self-regulating and self-monitoring policies. The service and temporary employment sector are notable exceptions. For both sectors, separate agreements on the organisation of practical tests (mystery calls) to combat discrimination were drawn up.

In June 2020, the Flemish Government decided to further strengthen the path of awareness-raising and self-regulation by the sectors. In the framework of the 2021-2022 sectoral covenants, the Flemish Minister of Work provides a budget of EUR 3.2 million in total – EUR 850 000 to each of the 37 sectors – so that each sector could – for the first time – take targeted actions to combat discrimination in the Flemish labour market. In addition to financial support, an inter-sectoral guidance group and inter-sectoral advisor on anti-discrimination and diversity guide the sectors throughout this process.

Sectoral activities are implemented in three phases, following the guidelines of an expert study (Baert, Lamberts and Verhaeghe, 2021[54]). A baseline measurement is done in the first phase and entails two steps. The first step consists of a sector-specific risk analysis; a description of the socio-demographic makeup (sex, age, foreign-born parentage, and work disability) of the workforce and jobseeker population by sector based on administrative data. Based on the risk analysis, in the second-step, sectors monitor the incidence of discrimination on different grounds using field experiments and fictitious applications. During the second phase, sectors should then take targeted actions to combat discrimination, based on the baseline measurement results. Finally, the third phase consists of follow-up measurements. The plan is to communicate the findings of the risk analysis by March 2023 and those of the field experiments by December 2023.

Finally, at the local level, several cities – joined in the European Coalition of Cities against Racism – developed actions plan to combat racism and discrimination, as a pillar of their diversity policies. The cities of Ghent and Antwerp in particular have recently monitored the incidence of discrimination and launched a number of anti-discrimination initiatives as a response (Baert et al., 2021[46]; 2021[47]).

Overly stringent language requirements can discriminate indirectly

Indirect discrimination occurs when certain recruitment methods and job requirements that appear neutral put immigrants and their children at a structural disadvantage.

The most frequent occurrence of indirect discrimination during the recruitment process concerns the language requirements established by employers. Requiring Dutch as mother tongue is generally conceived as direct discrimination. Difficulties emerge however when employers request “a good knowledge of Dutch”. While in many cases this is a reasonable requirement, especially when a good knowledge of Dutch is necessary to accomplish the primary tasks of a job (e.g. if the job requires significant contact with customers), it may nevertheless constitute a neutral criterion that can result in indirect discrimination. Vacancy statistics from the Flemish PES indicate that employers have very high expectations when it comes to candidates’ Dutch language skills. Of the 360 000 vacancies that VDAB received in 2021, 31% requested a good knowledge of Dutch and another 50% requested a very good knowledge of Dutch. These figures suggest that, in many instances, language requirements are above those required for the job in question.

In practice, it can be difficult to identify, let alone to prove, that indirect discrimination has occurred in a recruitment process. Dynamics between employer and jobseeker can be complex. Tackling the issue must often focus on raising awareness and increasing the transparency of recruitment practices and outcomes. To that end, in the context of a broader renewed language policy (see Chapter 3 for further discussion), the Flemish PES is developing a more sophisticated screening instrument to evaluate migrant jobseekers’ language competencies. Based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, the new scale has six language proficiency levels (instead of the current four): no knowledge, beginner (A1), basic (A2), intermediate (A2+/B1), good (B1+), and very good (B2/C2). Additionally, the PES is in the process of forming “language profiles” (*taalprofielen*), which specify the minimal language proficiency needed to enrol in a course or to practice a certain profession using a standardised approach (VDAB, 2021[55]).[5]

The Flemish Equal Employment Policy became less targeted

Another set of measures that have been used by several OECD countries to address implicit discrimination are Equal Employment Policies. Such policies include a range of agreements on quotas and targets, or the use of equality plans or codes of practice explaining what kind of human resource processes should be developed to respect non-discrimination principles and to enhance diversity. While the introduction of hard quotas has been relatively rare in European OECD countries, many countries have instead implemented policies based on flexible targets and experimented with the use of diversity charters, diversity labels and diversity plans.

Over the past two decades, Flanders' approach to employment equity and diversity has developed into an integrated, well-balanced set of policy instruments (van de Voorde and de Bruijn, 2010[56]). Until 2016, Flanders proposed so called "Career and Diversity Plans" (*loopbaan- en diversiteitsplannen*) to employers, in co-operation with social partners and civil society. These plans were comparable to those used in other OECD countries, however with the innovative aspect that they targeted small- and medium-sized companies (SME) specifically rather than focusing on larger companies as elsewhere. Companies that chose to implement a diversity plan had to set targets for the recruitment, internal mobility, training, or retention of migrants or other vulnerable groups, like unqualified youth or disabled people. To achieve these targets, companies received free support from dedicated "diversity consultants" (e.g. on skill development and the management of diversity) and subsidies from the Flemish Department of Work and Social Economy to co-finance plan-related costs (e.g. language courses).

A 2014 evaluation was positive about Flanders' instrument of diversity plans (Idea Consult, 2014[57]). Take-up was not small: in 2013, 4.5% of all companies in Flanders introduced a diversity plan, but the participation share rose with company size, reaching 12% for companies with more than five employees and 30% for those with 200 or more employees. Furthermore, most companies were satisfied with the support provided by diversity consultants, accomplished their targets for hiring members of the most disadvantaged groups, and expressed a desire to strengthen their diversity strategy in the long run. Flanders' diversity plans have also frequently been cited in OECD publications as an example of good practices for other countries. In fact, OECD work of 2015 advised to further expand the diversity plans and link it more with other policy initiatives, such as language training in the workplace, PES training offers and skill validation (OECD, 2015[58]).

However, despite generally successful implementation at the micro-level of organisations, the Flemish Government discontinued all career and diversity projects in 2016 to make way for a new policy known as "Focus on Talent". The policy shift was primarily motivated by the fact that diversity plans' overall influence on vulnerable groups' employment rates remained negligible. While the objective of Focus on Talent is largely the same, the underlying policy vision and the tools to achieve it are not. The new policy emphasises individual competencies (or talents), based on the idea that the previous focus on specific groups was too restrictive. While the new policy vision does provide specific attention for people with a greater distance to the labour market, it intendedly breaks with the previous policy on combating the under-representation of certain socio-demographic groups in the labour market.

Focus on Talent has three parts or "tracks": the activation of the unemployed and inactive population by the Flemish PES, the investment in employee training via the SME portfolio and sectoral covenants, and a bottom-up approach wherein various labour market actors (employer organisations, unions, the Minorities Forum, and Grip) further develop and implement a talent- and competence-based mind switch. Diversity consultants (around 128, spread over different sectors) continue to have an important role within the policy's third track. Their tasks range from intake interviews and prospecting in companies to drawing up plans of approach and aftercare processes to raising awareness by training professional trade union militants.

A recent evaluation of Focus on Talent's third track has revealed several challenges (Idea Consult, 2019[59]). First, with the abolition of diversity plans and regional consultation, established networks largely disappeared and diversity consultants had to take the initiative for co-operation themselves. Additionally, the inclusion of general themes such as competence policy or workable work results in weaker attention to diversity issues. The SME Portfolio (second track) statistics support this trend: of the 465 advice files in 2019, just 13 dealt with diversity-related issues, while 452 dealt with more general Human Resources Management. Companies are also no longer required to report on their goals under the new policy, and the evaluation of the programme now focuses solely on monitoring the labour market outcomes of vulnerable groups in Flanders. Finally, the transient character of diversity projects, the lack of continuity, as well as the potential for employers to reject elaborated action plans, complicate the work of diversity consultants.

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Notes

[1] The legal minimum gross wage for employees without seniority is EUR 11.81/hour. In reality, this wage can be higher, depending on the contract terms as negotiated between employer and employee. A full-time working employee thus earns a wage well above the minimum wage. However, very few workers (approximately 10%) have a full-time contract. Other social-legal protections stipulated in the scheme regulations are that workers automatically receive a contract of unlimited duration after three consecutive months of employment with the same company. Additionally, workers are guaranteed a minimum of 3 subsequent working hours per assignment and 10 hours per week. The wage and working hours must remain stable for the entire duration of the employment contract. Another aspect of the scheme architecture is the workers' full integration into the social security system. Workers accrue social rights for unemployment, pensions, sickness, and disability.

[2] Training is subject to financial incentives, and provider organisations can receive partial reimbursement on the training costs as well as extra subsidies from regional training funds for new workers coming out of unemployment.

[3] See https://jobroad.be/.

[4] See https://www.unia.be/nl/publicaties-statistieken/cijfers-van-unia.

[5] The first language profiles for specific occupations are published on: https://extranet.vdab.be/arbeidsmarktinformatie/arbeidsmarktverkenner.

6 Integration of young people with migrant parents in Flanders

This chapter starts with an overview of the size and composition of young people with migrant parents in Flanders and takes stock of the main challenges that still stand in the way of their long-term integration. In a second part, it focuses on their education integration outcomes in more detail, from pre-school through primary and secondary education. Special attention is then paid to youth born abroad that transit from reception education. The chapter ends by reviewing the school-to-work transition of youth with migrant parents, giving attention to the difficulties they face and evaluating both mainstream and targeted programmes that account for the particular needs of this group.

Youth with migrant parents – a benchmark for integration policy

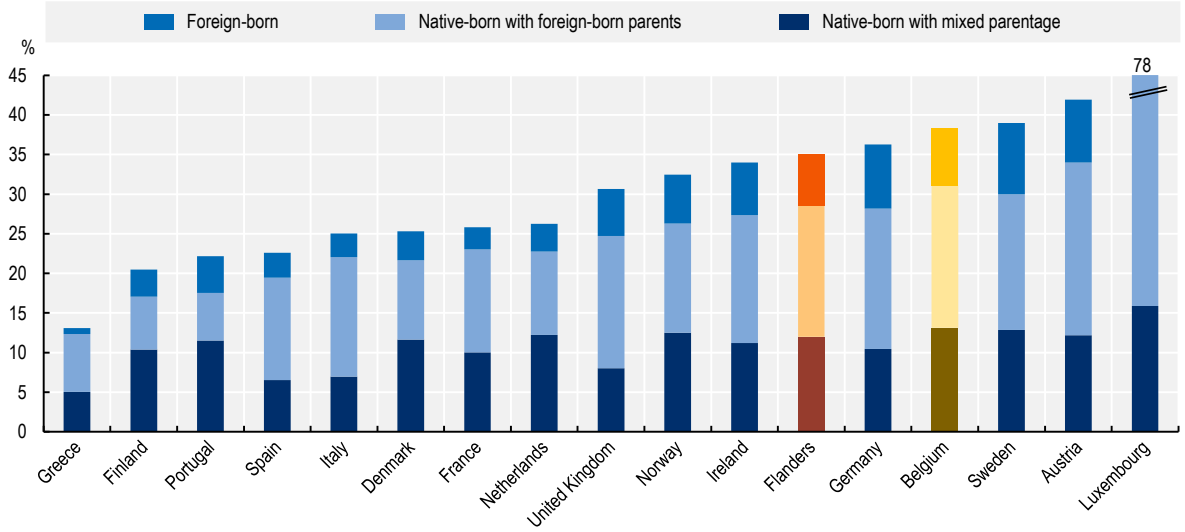
How well youth with migrant parents are integrated into the education system and the labour market is one of the best measures of the long-term success or failure of a country's integration policy.[1] As children of immigrants have been raised and educated in the country, they should not, in theory, encounter the same difficulties as migrant adults who have often obtained their skills in a different context. The outcomes of youth with migrant parents could be expected to be similar to those of native-born children of native-born parents. However, integration failures among immigrants that are left unaddressed risk leaving a lasting impact on the integration outcomes of their children. Indeed, previous OECD work has shown that young people with migrant parents often face persistent disadvantages in the education system and labour market of OECD countries, with long-term consequences for the individuals concerned and for wider society (OECD, 2017[1]; Liebig and Widmaier, 2009[2]).

The population of youth with migrant parents is rapidly increasing and diversifying

Ensuring that youth with migrant parents can reach their full potential in the education system and the labour market is all the more important given their rapidly rising share among the youth population. This is also the case in Flanders. In 2020, 17% of young people aged below 15 had two foreign-born parents, another 12% were of mixed parentage, and 7% were born abroad (see Figure 6.1). In 2010, the same figures for Flanders stood at 10%, 11% and 5%, respectively. The share of young people with migrant parents is relatively high in international comparison, and considerably higher than in France and in the Netherlands. Furthermore, growth in the population of native-born youth with two foreign-born parents over the past decade has been among the fastest in the OECD.

Figure 6.1. Youth with migrant parents account for close to 35% of the population aged below 15

Share of the population aged below 15 with migrant parents, 2020, Flanders and selected European OECD countries



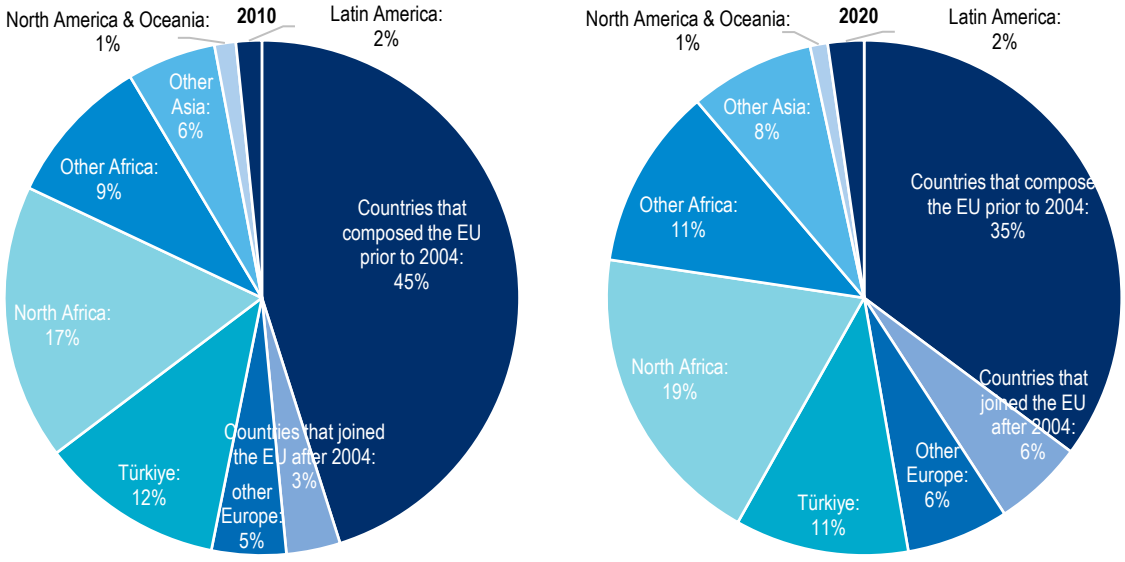
Note: Population aged 0 to 14. Youth with migrant parents are divided into three categories: native-born with two foreign-born parents (also referred to as "immigrant offspring" or native-born with foreign-born parents, native-born with mixed parentage (i.e. one native- and one foreign-born parent), and foreign-born.
Source: OECD/European Commission (2023[3]), *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In*, https://doi.org/10.1787/1d5020a6-en; Flanders and Belgium: OECD Secretariat calculations based on data from the Crossroads Bank for Social Security.

Native-born children with migrant parents living in Flanders are still relatively young. In 2020, one in two children with foreign-born parents were aged under 15, compared to 34% of the children with mixed parentage. Due to their young age distribution, most of the native-born with migrant parents are still in the education system or have recently entered the Flemish labour market.

Concerning the regions of parental origin, in 2020, 65% of native-born children with migrant parents had parents born in Morocco, Türkiye or countries that composed the EU prior to 2004 (see Figure 6.2). However, in line with the characteristics of more recent immigration to Flanders (see Chapter 2 for further discussion), the origin of youngsters is rapidly diversifying, with growing shares of children with parents born in sub-Saharan African and other Asian countries, and in countries that joined the EU after 2004.

Figure 6.2. The population of native-born youth with migrant parents is diversifying

Composition of native-born children with one or two foreign-born parents, by parents' place of birth, 2010 and 2020, Flanders



Note: Population aged 0 to 14.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on data from the Belgian Crossroads Bank for Social Security.

Young people with migrant parents face challenges in the education system…

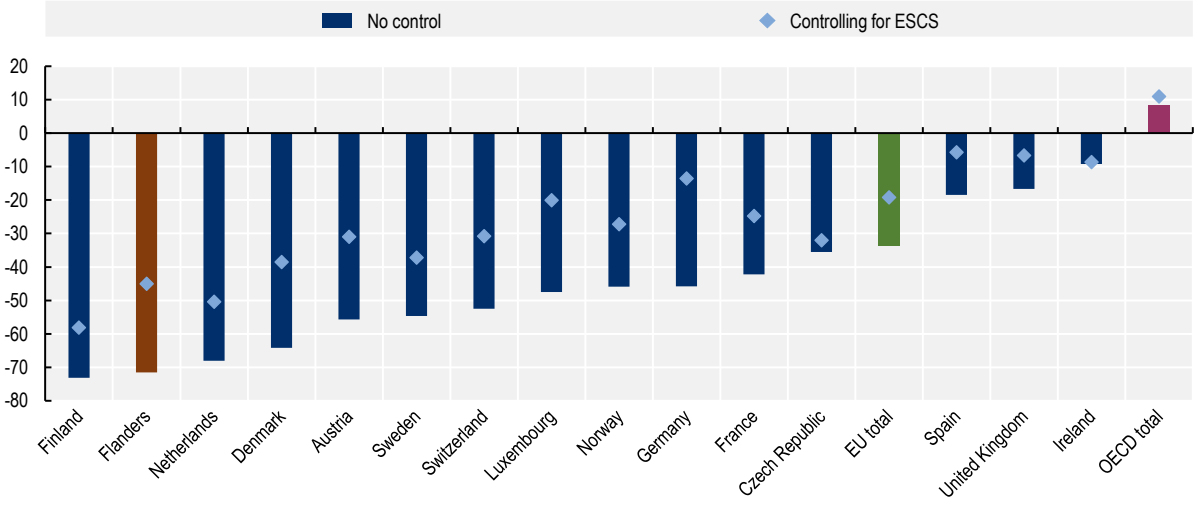
Youth with migrant parents face many challenges in the Flemish education system, and gaps in educational performance already manifest themselves at an early age (Vanduynslager, Wets and Noppe, 2013[4]; Boone and Van Houtte, 2013[5]). At the age of ten, the gap in mathematics performance between native-born children with migrant parents and children with native-born parents was – together with Finland – the largest among the EU countries that participated in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS, 2019[6]).

At the age of 15, native-born children of migrant parents in Flanders were on average two years of study behind children of native-born parents in terms of their reading skills, which is more than twice as high as the average EU performance gap (see Figure 6.3). What is more, the gap in school performance of youth with migrant parents vis-à-vis youth with native-born parents in Flanders has hardly changed over the past 15 years. The reasons for this gap are manifold, but socio-economic characteristics play a particularly important role in explaining why school performance among native-born children with migrant parents is

lower (Danhier and Jacobs, 2017[7]). When accounting for the family's socio-economic characteristics, the reading score gap between native-born children of migrant parents and children of native-born parents is reduced by approximately a third, one of the largest contributions across European OECD countries (see Figure 6.3). However, even after controlling for socio-economic background, native-born children of migrant parents still lag behind by over one year of schooling.

Figure 6.3. Socio-economic background explains close to one-third of the reading score gap between immigrant and native-born offspring

Difference in mean reading score between native-born pupils with migrant parents and native-born pupils with native-born parents, with and without controlling for socio-economic background, 2018, Flanders and selected European OECD countries



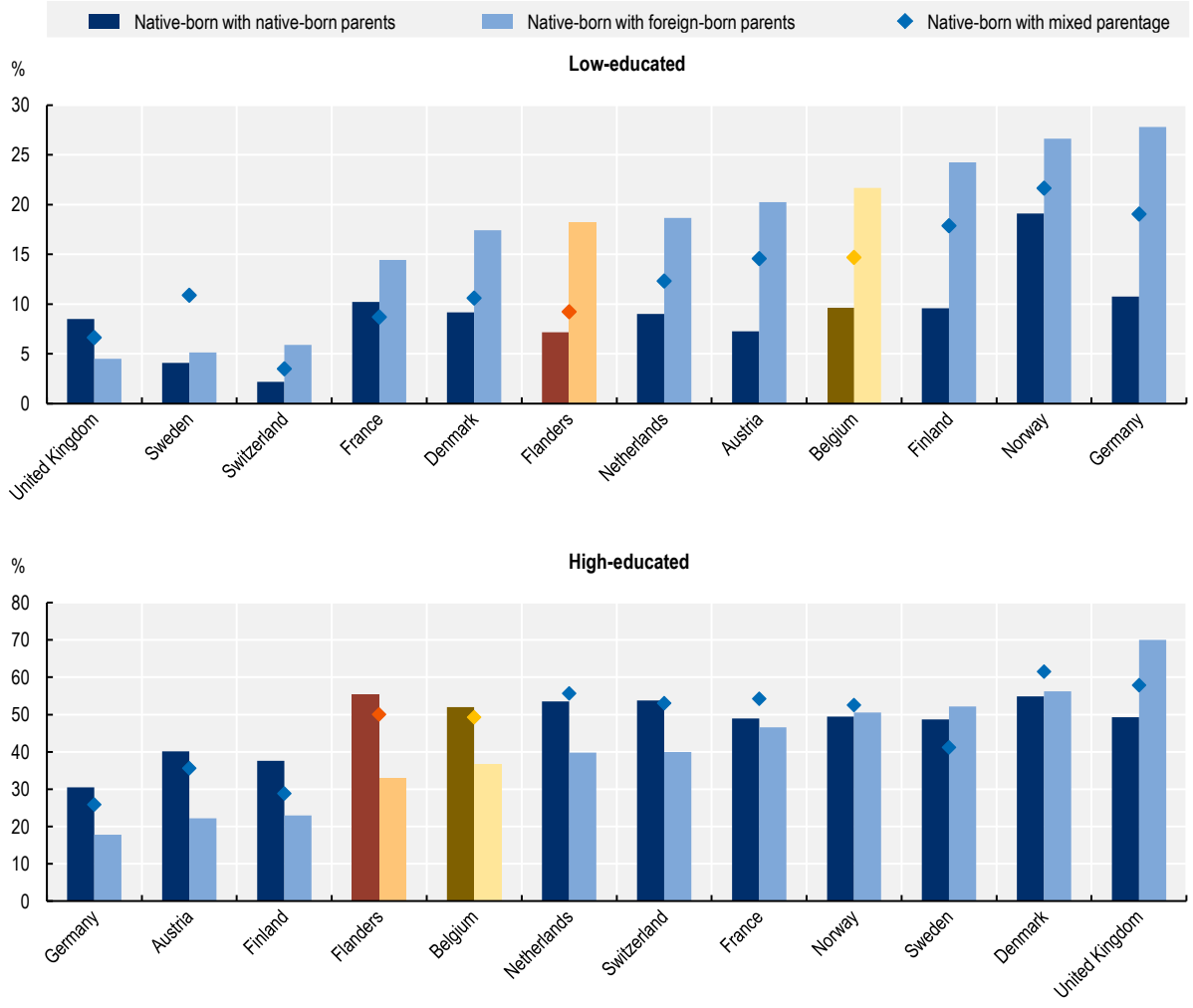
Note: Native-born population aged 15.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on data from PISA 2018 OECD (2019[8]), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where All Students Can Succeed*, https://doi.org/10.1787/b5fd1b8f-en.

Lower performance and reading levels put pupils with migrant parents at an over-proportionate risk of leaving school early. Furthermore, despite high education aspirations, those who successfully complete secondary education often struggle to enter further education pathways. As a result, in most of the European OECD countries, native-born adults with migrant parents have lower educational outcomes than their peers with native-born parents (OECD, 2021[9]).

The educational attainment gap between native-born adults with migrant parents and adults with native-born parents is more pronounced in Flanders than in many other European OECD countries. In 2020, the share of adults with at most a lower secondary education degree was more than twice as high among native-born with migrant parents (18%) than among native-born with native-born parents (7%). The difference between the two groups was only wider in Belgium, Austria, Finland and Germany. In the same year, 33% of the native-born adults with migrant parents had attained a tertiary education degree, compared to 56% of the adults with native-born parents (see Figure 6.4). Nowhere was the tertiary education gap more pronounced than in Flanders. Notably, however, the educational outcomes of native-born children with mixed parentage were much closer to those of children with native-born parents in Flanders and compare more favourably to other European OECD countries.

Figure 6.4. Educational gaps between native-born youth with and without migrant parents are large

Share of low- and highly educated, by parents' place of birth, 2020, Flanders and selected European OECD countries



Note: Population aged 25 to 35, not in education.
Source: OECD/European Commission (2023[3]), *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In*, https://doi.org/10.1787/1d5020a6-en; Flanders and Belgium: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the national LFS enriched with National Register data.

…and in the labour market

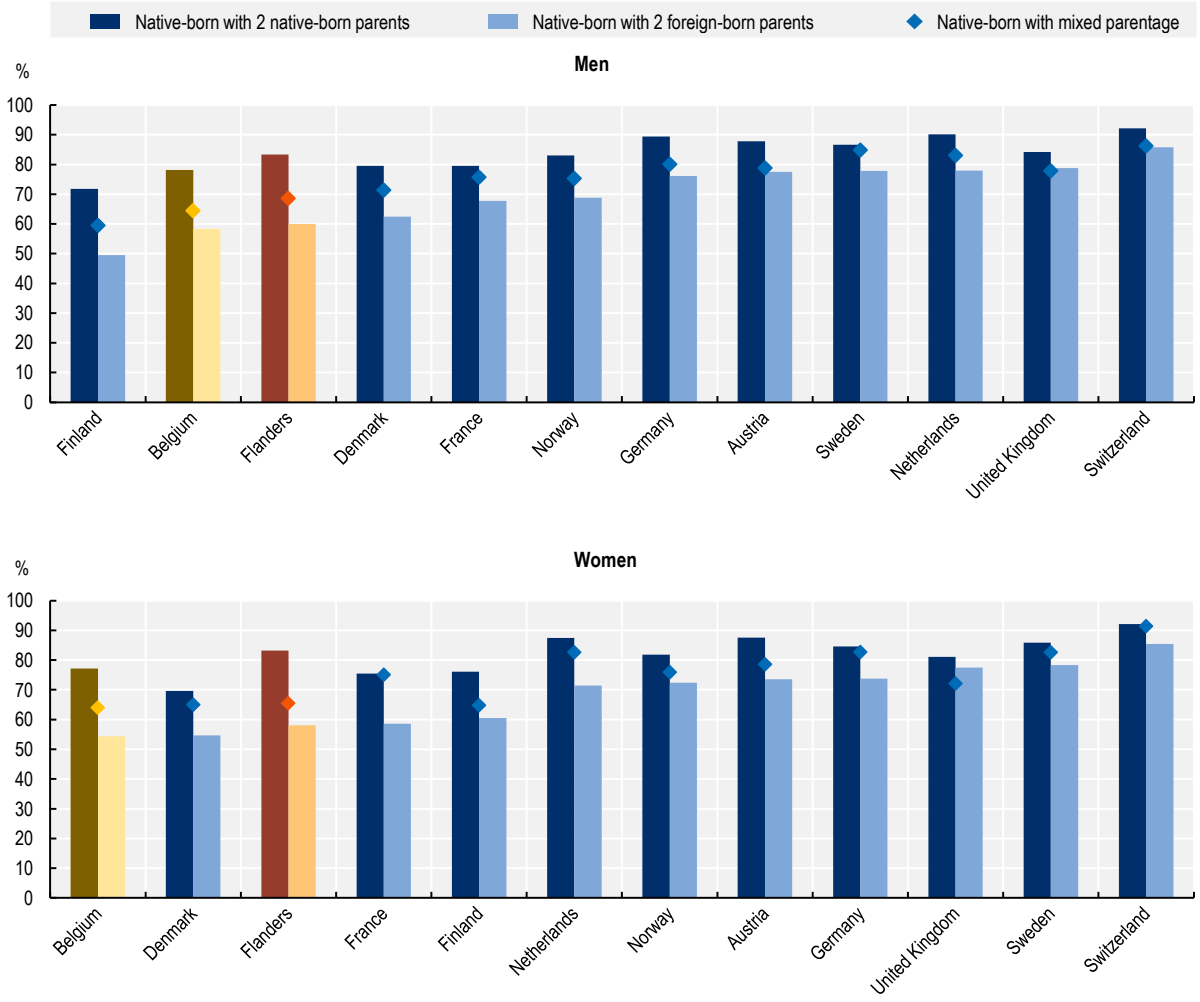
Entering the labour market also constitutes a challenge for youth with migrant parents in Flanders. In 2020, the employment rate of native-born children with migrant parents lagged almost 24 percentage points behind native-born children with native-born parents, for both genders (see Figure 6.5). The employment rate of children with mixed parentage was also lower than that of children with native-born parents, though by smaller margins.

While employment gaps extend to native-born children of immigrants in most European OECD countries, Flanders' performance falls far short of countries like Sweden and the Netherlands, where adult immigrants nevertheless face similar integration challenges (see Chapters 2 and 4 for further discussion). In fact, of the countries considered in Figure 6.5, Flanders had the most pronounced employment gap between

native-born children with and without migrant parents for both men and women, stressing the persistent nature of integration challenges in the region.

Figure 6.5. The employment rate of native-born children of immigrants is poor in Flanders

Employment rate, by parents' place of birth, 2020, Flanders and selected European OECD countries



Note: Population aged 15 to 35, not in education.
Source: OECD/European Commission (2023[3]), *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In*, https://doi.org/10.1787/1d5020a6-en; Flanders and Belgium: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the national LFS enriched with National Register data.

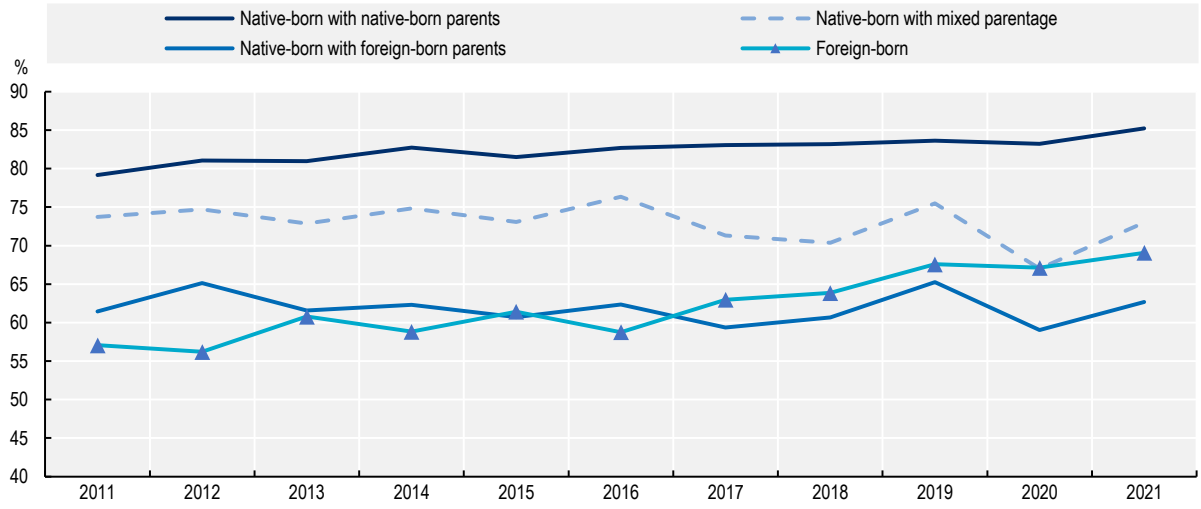
What is more, while the employment rate of young adults who are foreign-born showed a strong positive trend between 2016 and 2020, that of native-born adults with migrant parents remained largely stable (see Figure 6.6). The economic growth and growing imbalance between labour supply and demand in Flanders thus seem to have provided more chances on the labour market for the foreign-born than for the native-born with foreign-born parents (see Chapter 2 for further discussion). Figure 6.6 additionally shows that the employment rate of native-born adults with migrant parents was more adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the employment rate of native-born adults with migrant parents lagged 6 percentage points behind that of their foreign-born peers in 2021, which is a worrisome finding.

According to research for Flanders and Belgium, native-born adults with migrant parents experience very different labour market outcomes depending on where their parents are born. A recurring finding is that

native-born adults with parents born in Türkiye or North Africa have a much harder time in the Flemish labour market compared to native-born adults with parents born in the EU or other non-EU countries (Corluy et al., 2015[9]; Piton and Rycx, 2021[10]; Maes, Wood and Neels, 2019[11]).

Figure 6.6. While the employment rate of young people who are foreign-born increased since 2016, that of their offspring saw a standstill

Employment rate, by place of birth and parents' place of birth, 2011-21, Flanders



Note: Note: Population aged 15 to 34, not in education.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the national LFS enriched with National Register data.

The remainder of this chapter focuses in more detail on how challenges for youth with migrant parents develop in the Flemish education system and the labour market. It reviews the mainstream programmes for all youth in need of support, and targeted programmes that account for the particular needs of youth with migrant parents.

Integrating native-born youth with migrant parents into the school system

Since the reforms of 1989, the Flemish Community has had its autonomous education system. It finances and subsidises all education provided with Dutch as the instructional language in the Flemish and Brussels Capital Region. The Flemish Government has its own Education Administration, consisting of one Department, three Agencies, and the Education Inspectorate. Headed by the Minister of Education, the Administration supervises education policy for all levels of education: pre-primary, primary, secondary, and tertiary, for both initial and adult education.

The Federal Government is only responsible for determining the duration and age range of compulsory education, the conditions for delivery of recognised qualifications, and the retirement regulations for teachers and educational staff. Since September 2020, education is compulsory from the age of 5 to 18 (before, the starting age was set at 6 years), a relatively long length of obligatory education in international comparison (Nusche et al., 2015[10]). The school system is organised in four main stages (primary education and first, second and third stages of secondary education) and preceded by a non-compulsory offer of pre-primary education. Until 16 years, there is full-time compulsory education; from 16 years, there is part-time compulsory education.

Flanders has one of OECD's most devolved education systems (Nusche et al., 2015[10]; Shewbridge, Fuster and Rouw, 2019[11]). Schools have a high degree of autonomy, grounded in the principle of "freedom of education". The Flemish Government defines the attainment targets (i.e. minimum goals to be reached; developmental objectives for pre-primary education) but does not regulate education processes and methods. The responsibility for the quality of education lies mainly with each school and its teachers. Yet, the Education Inspectorate carries out audits, provides reference framework for quality in education and interacts with the educational institutions and school advisory services. Schools are organised by different sectors (private/public, confessional/not), yet all those which are officially recognised are funded by the Flemish Government.

Despite an overall decline over the past decade, Flanders still ranks among the "top levels" in the OECD in terms of average performance in secondary education (Danhier and Jacobs, 2017[7]). However, international assessment also confirms the persistence of large inequalities in pupils' school trajectories and achievements in Flanders (Nusche et al., 2015[10]; Clycq et al., 2014[12]). These inequalities are primarily related to so-called background characteristics of pupils: their socio-economic status, parentage, and home language. In addition, schooling disadvantages tend to be reproduced across generations. Flanders shows one of the strongest correlations in the OECD between children's and parents' years of schooling. Flemish schools offer one of the lowest levels of social mobility at school among the 27 OECD countries that have participated in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) since 2003 (OECD, 2022[13]).

Against this backdrop, this section presents the performance of native-born youth with migrant parents at school and discusses the extent to which the Flemish education system is equipped to address the current challenges.

From a targeted policy towards an equal opportunities policy

Flanders progressively moved from a targeted policy for pupils with migrant parents towards an integrated approach (Flemish Educational Council, 2013[14]). From the beginning of the 1990s, the Flemish Community conducted the "Educational priorities policy" to enhance the educational chances of pupils with migrant parents. Schools counting at least 10% of pupils of foreign-born parentage (e.g. having a grandmother from mother's side born abroad or with a foreign nationality) were granted extra support. Most schools almost exclusively implemented measures to encourage pupils' Dutch language development.

The "Educational priorities policy" was followed by the "Non-discrimination policy" in 1993. Different measures were set up to actively prevent discrimination and combat school segregation. Schools voluntarily signed a declaration to fight against discrimination in their school, and in return, they received extra resources. Despite these policy measures, the Flemish education system hardly managed to improve the performance of students with migrant parents, nor, overall, to narrow the performance gap associated with students' socio-economic background (Van Petegem et al., 2004[15]).

For those reasons, the Flemish Government has elaborated from 2002 onwards the "Equal Educational Opportunity" (EEO) policy (*Gelijke Onderwijskansen, GOK*). The EEO policy proposes a more inclusive approach that benefits the entire school instead of focusing on the problems of individual students that are potentially educationally at risk. These "disadvantaged students" include students with a home language other than Dutch, who have the right to receive a school allowance, whose mother does not hold a diploma of secondary education, who are living temporarily or permanently out of the own family, and whose parents are part of the travellers' population. Schools with relatively many students meeting these criteria receive extra support to work in an integrated way towards a structural improvement of the educational opportunities of *all* their pupils. Additional teaching hours in mainstream preschools and primary education is an integral part of schools' basic funding since 2012. In secondary education, additional funds are allocated to schools based on a complex weighting algorithm (see Box 6.1). Particularly noteworthy is the

degree of autonomy enjoyed by Flemish schools when using additional funding to implement specific support measures (Shewbridge, Fuster and Rouw, 2019[11]).

An important implication of the EEO policy is that, since 2002, Flanders stopped collecting data that allows identifying pupils with migrant parents (i.e. country of birth of pupils and their parents) in the statistical data that the government asks directly from the schools. Instead, schools produce more integrated statistics on the EEO indicators, including pupils' home language, which this report uses as a proxy for youth with migrant parents. The students' home language is non-Dutch if the pupil speaks Dutch in the family with no one, or with maximum one family member, in a family with at least four members. This is to be kept in mind in particular when analysing the drivers of educational gaps between different population groups as it may overestimate the importance of language spoken at home versus unobservable variables linked to parents' origin.

Box 6.1. The revision of the Equal Educational Opportunities policy

Since 2002, the Equal Educational Opportunities (EEO) Policy aims at offering all pupils equal opportunities from preschool to secondary education. The integration of youth with migrant parents (either native-born or those that arrived during childhood) falls under this mainstreamed policy. The EEO includes three pillars. First, in a context of freedom of choice for schools, additional support is provided to guarantee that disadvantaged pupils can enrol in the school of their choice. Second, additional human and financial support (mainly in the form of teaching hours) is provided to preschools, primary and secondary schools depending on the number of disadvantaged children they have registered. Third, local consultation platforms are developed to guarantee equal educational opportunities.

In 2012, a new framework system in ordinary preschools and primary education was implemented, replacing the system with SES teaching periods and cycles. Since then, the SES teaching periods are part of the annually allocated basic funding at preschool and primary education levels. Teaching periods are allocated per pupil who meets the pupil characteristic "mother's education", "home language not the language of instruction" or "school allowance".

Guaranteeing freedom of school choice for all

Freedom of choice and autonomy are structural features of the Flemish school system. In contrast to many OECD countries where children are assigned to schools based on certain criteria (e.g. pre-enrolment tests, the student's residence, their parents' income level, class size or simply through a lottery system), children have the full right to enrol in their preferred school in Flanders. Only two exceptions allow Flemish schools to refuse an enrolment: when the school has reached its full capacity or when the student has already been sanctioned and forced out of the school. A mainstream school can refuse to enrol a student with special needs if required adaptations are not manageable by the school. In all these cases, however, schools have to offer a "document of refusal" indicating the reason of refusal.

Consequently, the enrolment system is designed to respond favourably to parents' school preferences. However, parents are encouraged to choose many schools to increase their children' chances to get enrolled. The Flemish Government offers additional support to guarantee that families from a weaker socio-economic background can access the school of their choice. This support consists in providing information on enrolment through the website of the Department of Education and Training and through local consultation platforms (see below).

Revision of the double-quota system

The double quota allocation system was introduced in 2012 to improve the social mix in schools. It entailed that schools' social mix of the neighbourhood had to be reflected in the school population. Two groups of pupils were identified (socially disadvantaged pupils on the grounds of their mother's education and reception of school allowance vis-à-vis other pupils) and a ratio of places had to be kept available for socially disadvantaged pupils in these schools. The Flemish Parliament approved a new *Enrolment Act* that came into force in September 2022 for the 2023-24 enrolment phase. The double quota system is abandoned (as announced in the 2019-24 Governmental coalition agreement) in order to reinforce the principle of freedom of school choice (European Commission, 2022[16]). The new Act still provides for the possibility of keeping up to 20% of the available places in schools free for "underrepresented groups" but leaves the specific elaboration to the local authorities.

A digital registration system must be used if a school expects a shortage of capacity. Regulation stipulates that the random allocation of pupils in highly demanding secondary schools should account for parents' preferences (ranking of schools) to the extent possible. In pre-primary and primary schools, distance from home to school is an additional criterion that can be used. In Antwerp, Brussels and Ghent, all schools must use a digital registration system and the Ministry of education developed a digital system which is at local authorities' disposal.

Allocating EEO funds

Additional funds are provided to schools that receive more disadvantaged pupils. Since the inception of the EEO policy, the allocation mechanism and criteria have been revised several times. Now, additional resources per school are calculated according to the number of pupils falling into at least one of the following situations:

- In preschools and primary education, four indicators are considered to determine the overall school's operating fund: not speaking Dutch at home, receiving a school allowance, having a low-educated mother and the neighbourhood (since 2008).
- In secondary education, two additional indicators are considered: living temporarily or permanently out of the own family and having parents who are part of the travellers' population (e.g., Roma). As opposed to preschools and primary education, these indicators are used to fix a number of additional teaching hours.

Since 2021-22, in pre-school and primary schools, more attention is paid to the use of additional teaching hours allocated in the context of the SES policy and conducted in conjunction with the care policy. These periods can only be used as part of an equal educational opportunities policy and priority must be given to optimal learning and development opportunities for students. Schools must include their equal education policy in their work plan, and external evaluations of the policy, including the use of SES teaching periods, are conducted during regular school inspections. Positive evaluations result in continued SES teaching hours, while negative evaluations require remediation. If the next evaluation is negative, their SES teaching periods are reduced by half until the following positive evaluation, and a new evaluation is planned within the same year. This change in policy is too recent to be evaluated in the context of this report.

Secondary schools must have a minimum share of disadvantaged students in order to claim additional teacher hours: at least 10% in the first stage of secondary education, and at least 25% in the second and third stages of secondary education. Conversely, there is no more such thresholds imposed to preschools and primary schools.

In secondary education schools, if the threshold is met, a complex algorithm calculates the number of additional teaching hours per school. Different weights are associated to each of the EEO indicators, ranging from 0.18 point to 0.8. In particular, 0.11917, 0.2671 and 0.29116 additional teaching hours are

allocated per pupil meeting the following characteristics, respectively: receiving a school allowance; having a low educated mother; not speaking Dutch at home. Points per pupil are cumulative but a cap is set at 1.2 points per pupil. Teaching hours are derived by multiplying the total number of points (sum of individual weights allocated to each disadvantaged student) by 0.2916 for students in the first stage and by 0.1225 for students in the second and third stages of secondary education. Teaching hours are not allocated to the school if the total is below six hours. Due to its set-up, the EEO fund allocation may result in fragmentation of support due to threshold effects (see below for further discussion).

From the 2021-22 school year onwards, a number of adjustments have been implemented to the EEO policy in secondary education. The main change is that there are no longer three-year cycles of successive initial situation analysis, interim self-evaluation and external quality control. Instead, there is more local autonomy in the EEO policy, annual calculation of resources and monitoring integrated in the regular school audit.

Local Consultation Platforms (LOP)

The Local Consultation Platforms (LOP) gather local partners (e.g. representatives of teachers, parents, pupils, migrant associations, local partners, and integration agencies) with the objective of facilitating the integration of disadvantaged pupils at school. Around 70 LOPs are spread across Flanders and co-ordinated by AGODI.

The LOP support parents and children with weaker socio-economic status to enrol in the school of their choice. To that end, the LOP system manages the local registry system which centralises the subscriptions of children by their parents' top preferred schools in cities and local municipalities where there is a capacity shortage. After the registration period, parents still need to personally contact the school to formally enrol their child. Furthermore, the LOPs are in charge of the protection of students' equal rights. They are supposed to prevent discrimination, exclusion and segregation and to promote social cohesion within schools. Yet, they have no legal responsibility in this regard. One tool to meet this aim is having a complaints office for parents who believe their child's enrolment was wrongfully denied. Since 2022-23, this tool became mandatory in each school that uses a digital registration procedure. Ultimately, parents can also contact the Commission for Pupils' rights *(Commissie Leerlingenrechten)* if they consider that their child's school enrolment is not fair.

High enrolment in early childhood education but limited focus on language acquisition

It is well established that language acquisition before starting compulsory education is essential for future success in school. In fact, children with migrant parents usually benefit even more from participation in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) than other young children (OECD, 2021[9]) (Hulpia and Peeters, 2014[17]). Across the OECD, policies to ensure all children acquire the necessary language skills before starting school can be grouped into two approaches: increasing the participation of children with migrant parents in ECEC and providing language screening and where necessary language support (OECD, 2021[9]).

In Flanders, pre-primary education (accessible for children from the age of 2.5 to 6) is not obligatory, but almost all children (98%) participate (Statistics Flanders, 2022[18]). Although native-born children with migrant parents participate slightly less than other toddlers, their enrolment rate is high in international comparison. Pre-schools are not covered by the EEO policy, but steps have been taken since 2007 to support ECEC teachers, especially since the Action Plan for Toddler Participation in 2016.

With regard to language screening, a language test in Dutch (the KOALA test) was introduced at the age of five in 2021 and is now mandatory in all pre-primary schools, with the exception of newly arrived children who receive systematic linguistic support. For pupils with low test scores, the school must set up language integration programmes, consisting of additional individual guidance or language immersions. Each school

has received a free practice guide offering inspiration on how to design these language integration pathways. While such a mandatory test is a good practice, introducing the test at age five is quite late in international comparison. In Denmark, for example, this is done at the age of three, and in Luxembourg at the age of 2.5.

Pre-primary schools have a lot of autonomy and can choose their pedagogical projects, staffing levels, and teaching strategies. Although the Flemish Government strongly encourages and supports language projects, it is up to the schools to decide how these are structured and organised, leading to a great deal of variety in language support. Notably, Peleman and colleagues (2019[19]) highlighted a limited emphasis on language acquisition in pre-primary education as well as low verbal interactions between teachers and young non-Dutch speaking students, which they attributed to teachers' lack of awareness and time, associated with large numbers of toddlers per teacher. This will become even more of a challenge in the context of increasing numbers of children under the age of five with a home language other than Dutch. In the school year 2020-21, 26% of pupils in pre-primary education did not speak Dutch at home, up from 18% a decade before (Statistics Flanders, 2022[20]).

The Flemish secondary educational system is highly stratified and tracks children early

In the Flemish secondary educational system, track choice (and therefore often school choice) plays a decisive role in the organisation of schooling. The secondary education system consists of three stages within six school years (see Figure 6.7).

The first two years in secondary education, when students are typically between 12 and 14 years old, are organised in two streams (A and B) depending notably on children's school performance at the end of primary school. Pupils need to obtain a certificate of primary school to access the A stream. Moving to the B stream for those who obtained this certificate is conditional on getting a consensus from the parents, the school board as well as the Pupils Guidance Centre. Most students follow the A stream (87%). A considerable share of the most disadvantaged pupils and those with grade retention in primary education tend to be sorted into the B-track, a track that almost inevitably leads them to the (part-time) vocational track (Van Praag et al., 2017[21]). Measures have been taken recently to increase possibilities to move to the A-stream after a first year in the B-stream. However, it is still rarely the case in practice, and most pursue a second year in the B-stream. In fact, it is much more frequent that pupils move to the B-stream after one year in the A-stream. A qualitative survey conducted by (Juchtmans et al., 2020[22]) showed that some primary schools use their additional Equal Education Opportunity teaching hours (see Box 6.1) to prepare disadvantaged students to enrol in the less prestigious B-track or to organise a kind of 'early tracking' via homogeneous level groups, which is in contradiction with what the policy is aiming for.

At the end of the first stage, usually at the age of 14, pupils are grouped into four tracks, each of which comprises particular fields of study. The second and third stages of secondary education, when students are between 14 and 18 years old, usually last for two years each. Moving from the second to the third stage, the education and training provided is more and more targeted to adapt to students' further education plans.

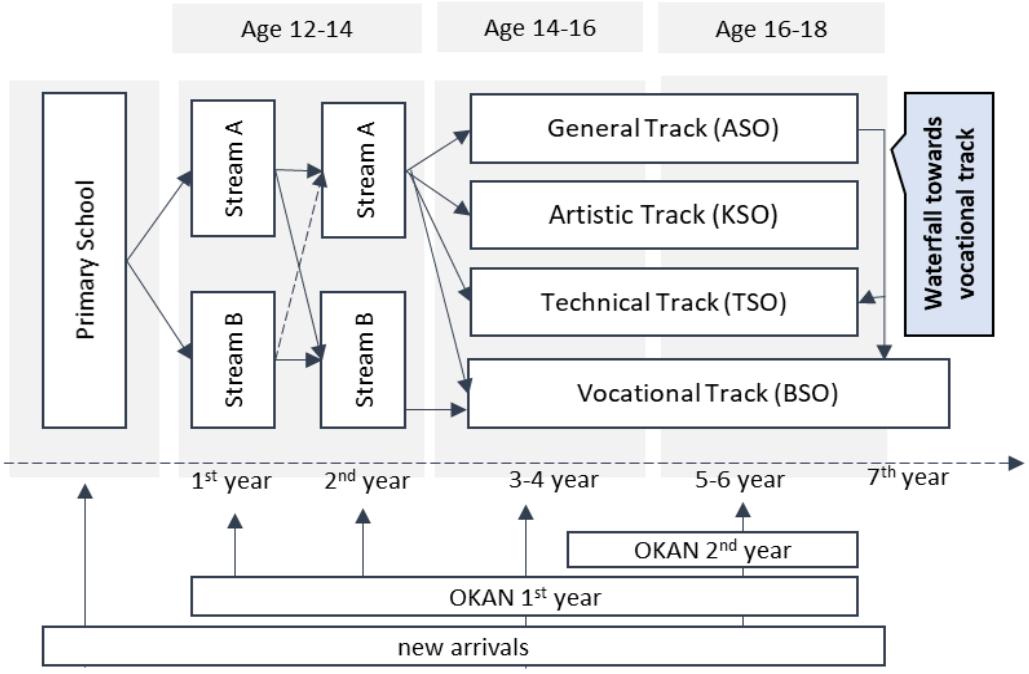
- the **general** track (ASO) offers a broad general education programme preparing students for tertiary education.
- the **technical** track (TSO) offers a mix of general, technical, theoretical, and practical subjects that prepares for a technical occupation or for tertiary education.
- the **arts** track (KSO) combines a broad general education with active arts practice.
- the **vocational** track (BSO) prepares students for entry into the labour market. A 7th year used to be necessary to get an upper secondary diploma although this is not any more an obligation.

Although an upper secondary diploma allows students to access tertiary education, regardless of the educational track they graduated from, it is especially the academic track (as well as some study fields in the technical track) that prepares students for higher education.

The general track is perceived and represented as the most prestigious track and the vocational track is located at the bottom of the hierarchy (Van Houtte, Demanet and Stevens, 2012[23]). Moreover, and given this hierarchy, the Flemish educational system is also known for its frequent down-streaming and the absence of upstreaming students. Mobility between the different tracks almost only occurs in one direction and once students end up in the vocational track, they can almost never climb up this hierarchy and change tracks. Students who move to a different track often have to change schools and build new connections with teachers and other students (Van Praag et al., 2017[21]).

Figure 6.7. Early sorting and "waterfall" tracking system limit educational upward mobility

Overview of the Flemish secondary education system



Note: New arrivals and reception education (OKAN) are discussed in the section below.
Source: Adapted from Nusche et al. (2015[10]), *OECD Reviews of School Resources: Flemish Community of Belgium 2015*, https://www.doi.org/10.1787/9789264247598-en.

In principle, students (and their parents) are not only free to choose their school, but also to select which track they enrol in for their first year of secondary school, and then continue or "stream down" based on their school performance. However, studies show that, even when their educational performance is the same, school staff orient students with migrant parents much more often to lower-status tracks than their peers with native-born parents (Unia, 2018[24]). Similar practices occur along lines of students' socio-economic characteristics (Boone and Van Houtte, 2013[5]). As a result, the segregation between tracks is at the same time a segregation along students' socio-economic background and parentage.

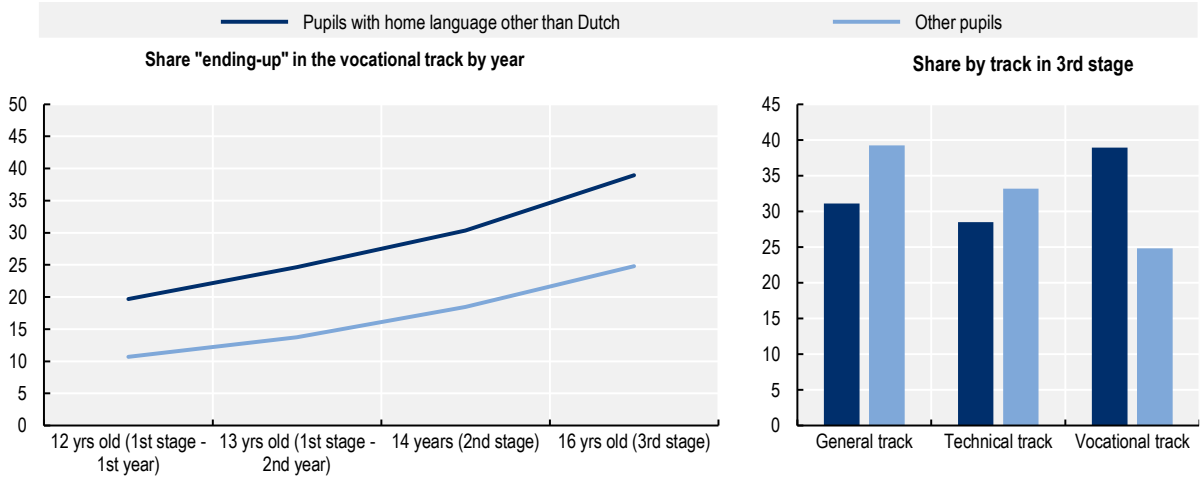
Figures from the Department of Education and Training for the 2020-21 academic year confirm that many students tend to gradually move towards the vocational track over the course of the three secondary school stages, but that this is especially true for students with a home language other than Dutch (see Figure 6.8).

Already at the start of secondary school, one in five pupils with a home language other than Dutch were in the B-track, compared to 11% for other pupils. While pupils can in theory freely move from one stream to the other, in practice, again, mobility only happens in one direction towards less prestigious, vocational, streams. By the third stage of secondary education, when pupils are between 16 and18 years old, almost four in ten pupils with a home language different from Dutch were in the vocational track, compared to 25% for other pupils.

As a result, in the third stage of secondary education, when pupils are typically between 16 and 18 years old, those who do not speak Dutch at home are strongly overrepresented in the vocational track and underrepresented in the general and technical tracks (see Figure 6.8).

Figure 6.8. Pupils who do not speak Dutch at home increasingly "end up" in the vocational track

Share of pupils by standard age in the vocational track (left) and in the three main tracks during 3rd stage of secondary school (right), by language spoken at home, 2020-21, Flanders



Note: Excluding DBSO and special needs programmes. Right hand side graph does not show individuals in the artistic track which has a small number of overall students. B-stream in 1st stage is assimilated to the vocational track since most of 1st stage students in the B-stream end up in a vocational track in 2nd stage.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on data from Department of Education and Training.

Youth with migrant parents are often concentrated in the same secondary schools

Flemish schools are typically organised around specific tracks and provide most of their education within either the academic or the technical and vocational tracks. At the same time, the free school choice principle guarantees (to a certain extent) that students or their parents can select (or avoid) certain schools. As a result, the segregation between tracks also becomes apparent in the segregation between schools along socio-economic background and parentage (Van Caudenberg, Clycq and Timmerman, 2020[25]).

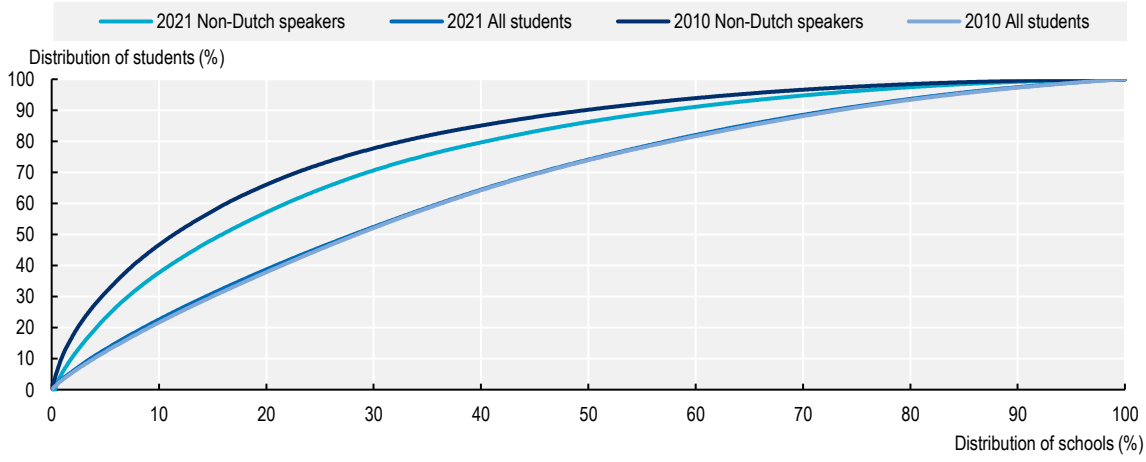
A key challenge for school allocation in Flanders is the strong parental involvement in school choice. In case of shortage in secondary school capacity, a registration system is used and parents are asked to rank their preferred schools. This puts migrant families who are more likely to have limited knowledge of the Flemish educational system at a disadvantage. In addition, schools have the legal obligation to communicate to parents how the enrolment process works. They also must report on the places they have available. However, not all schools have social mix policies in place, and some do not communicate widely to reach all families. As a result, information on school enrolment procedures is often provided informally and families with more resources frequently fill up available spots in the most sought-after schools while

some immigrant parents have trouble finding their way. Finally, the cost of more privileged schools is often an obstacle for lower-income families.

Although the situation has evolved favourably since the implementation of the EEO policy in 2002, the educational landscape in Flanders remains very segregated compared to peer educational systems (Havermans, Wouters and Groenez, 2018[26]). Figure 6.9 compares the distribution of students with a home language other than Dutch across the 970 secondary schools with the distribution of all students in those schools in school years 2010-11 and 2021-22. It shows that students with a home language other than Dutch are more concentrated in the same schools than other students. In the school year 2021-22, nearly 40% of the students with a home language other than Dutch were concentrated in 10% of the secondary schools. This share is nearly twice as high than for all students. This represents however an improvement over the situation in 2010-11, when around half of students with a home language other than Dutch were enrolled in 10% of the schools.

Figure 6.9. Pupils with a home language other than Dutch are heavily concentrated in the same schools

Distribution of pupils with a home language other than Dutch across secondary schools in school years 2010-11 and 2021-22, Flanders



Note: Schools are sorted in descending order of number of students with a home language other than Dutch/total number of students before calculating the cumulative share (distribution) of students across schools.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on data from the Department of Education and Training.

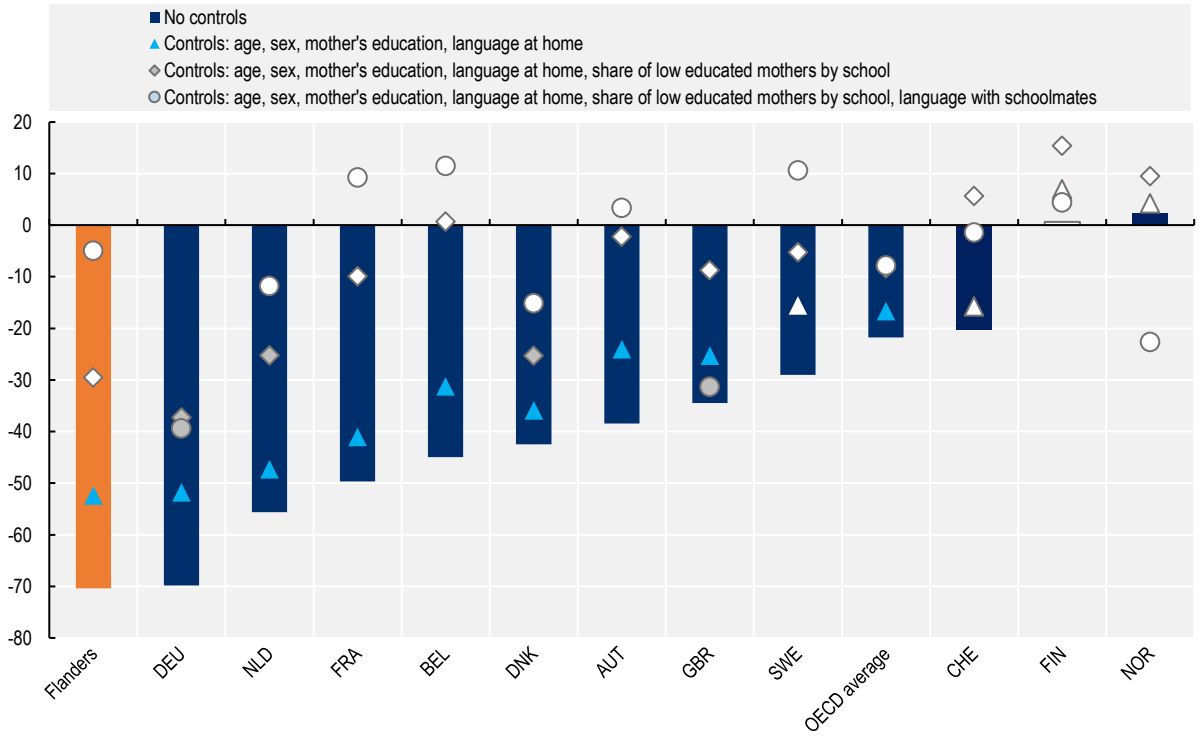
Additionally, research for Flanders shows that school segregation has a negative impact on school performance through peer effects (e.g. stimulating environment, motivation, discipline and school climate), the adaptation of teachers' pedagogical methods to their expectations of students, and the quality of the school and its organisation (e.g. teacher absences, staff turnover, type of leadership). Harker and Tymms (2004[27]), Thrupp (2002[28]), Danhier and Jacobs (2017[7]) and Agirdag, Van Houtte and Van Avermaet (2011[29]) also demonstrate that socio-economically disadvantaged students in segregated schools were more prone to develop a culture of futility, which was averse to their school performance.

Figure 6.10 shows that the school performance gap between native-born students with migrant parents who are educated in highly concentrated schools and those who are educated in less concentrated schools is larger in Flanders than in many other European OECD countries. The penalty extends to nearly two years of schooling for pupils in the highest quartile of concentration, the highest gap in OECD comparison. The education of the individual pupils' mother and the language spoken at home explain only 25% of this penalty. However, as in most countries, the penalty disappears once accounting for the overall

higher proportion of low-educated mothers in schools where pupils with migrant parents are most concentrated. This finding suggests that it is rather the overall concentration of socio-economically disadvantaged pupils that matters, rather than the individual characteristics of pupils, such as the language they speak at home or their mother's level of education.

Figure 6.10. High concentration of native-born pupils with migrant parents in the same schools is negatively correlated with their school performance in reading

Difference in PISA points between pupils in the top versus the bottom quartile of schools ranked by the share of students with migrant parents, pupils aged 15 years old, 2018, Flanders and selected European OECD countries



Note: Schools with a high concentration refer to the top quartile of schools ranked by the share of students with migrant parents (foreign-born or native-born with at least one foreign-born parent). Each quartile has the same number of students overall. Results that are not statistically significant from zero at the 5% level are marked in white. Pupils with unknown origin are excluded from the analysis.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculation based on data from PISA 2018 and Chapter 5 in OECD (2021[30]), *International Migration Outlook 2021*, https://www.doi.org/10.1787/29f23e9d-en.

Box 6.2. Flanders' local initiative "School in sight" aims to bring more middle-class families into concentrated schools

The Flemish project "School in sight" (*School in Zicht*) aims at supporting middle-class parents (both native-born and immigrant) who deliberately choose to enrol their children in a "concentration school", i.e. a school with a large share of disadvantaged students which is nearby their home. The project starts from the premise that there are many open-minded, middle-class parents who would like to enrol their children in such local schools but are hesitant to do so out of concern that their children will be isolated. "School in sight" attempts to reassure parents by providing ample information about these schools and by facilitating the opportunity for middle-class parents to enrol their children together with other middle-class families. There are six medium-sized Flemish cities where the project is active (Mechelen, Hasselt, Lokeren, Molenbeek, Tienen, and Zele).

Source: OECD field mission; https://www.schoolinzicht.be/.

The quality of the part-time vocational track is poor, and a reform of the dual learning programme is ongoing

Students who have completed the first two stages of secondary education can transition to part-time education and work-based learning starting at the age of 16. Despite a drastic reform in 2008, the Learning and Working programme continues to be perceived as the least prestigious option within the secondary education system, the one where pupils end up rather than deliberately choose to be enrolled (Broek, 2020[31]). Although designed for an immediate entry into the labour market, the programme shows poor outcomes. The three options are:

i. part-time vocational secondary education (*Deeltijds beroepssecundair onderwijs, DBSO*), which combines two days of schooling in one of the Centres for Part-time education and three days in a company. They lead to an upper secondary education diploma including a VET qualification.

ii. apprenticeship (*leertijd*) organised by the regional Syntra Vlaanderen training centres, composed of one schooling day and three to four working days. Graduates receive a vocational qualification and an upper secondary education diploma. These programmes are also accessible to young adults up to 25 years old.

iii. part-time training programmes (*duaal leren*) have been implemented from September 2019 and will progressively replace the two current apprenticeship schemes described above. Selected professional fields are now covered in technical and vocational upper secondary education programmes.

The secondary vocational education was reformed with the objective of progressively moving to a full dual learning system. After a three-year pilot partially financed by ESF, dual learning has been implemented since 2019-20. Despite a slow down as a cause of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is still planned that it will progressively absorb the existing Learning and Working programmes by 2026-27. Previous programmes were merely designed to support particularly disadvantaged pupils. In 2020-21, DBSO still represented 75% of the Learning and Working options, and Dual Learning accounted for 15% of the total (Flemish Department of Work and Social Economy, 2021[32]).

The new Dual Learning Programme (*duaal leren*) gained some popularity with 2 800 students taking dual learning courses in 2021-22 (compared with 2 300 the previous year). Unfortunately, the Flemish Department of Work only publishes statistics by nationality, showing an underrepresentation of foreigners in Dual Learning.

While Dual Learning offers an interesting setting to improve the quality of vocational education, uncertainties remain about the ability of the most vulnerable students to benefit fully from this programme. The shift from traditional vocational training, such as DBSO and apprenticeships, to dual learning carries the risk that some students may face difficulties entering the introductory phase of dual education due to insufficient Dutch language or soft skills. Consequently, these students may find themselves in a precarious position, unable to pursue mainstream secondary education and yet not fitting into the dual education system. Ultimately, this may raise the likelihood of early school dropout if support is not provided to alleviate these obstacles.

Finally, there are still remaining challenges. In particular, additional funds received by the school to scale up the new Dual learning programme are only a fraction of the global budget, without control over its use or earmarking to specific needs. It is therefore possible that some schools, in particular those which do not have well developed social policies, use it for other purposes.

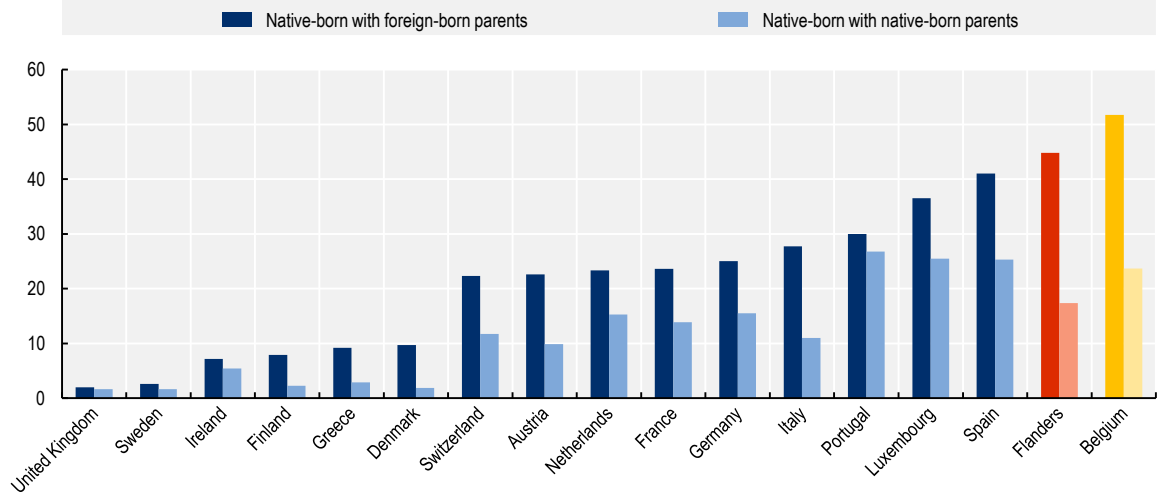
Repeating a grade is a common practice that does not help performing at school

In Flanders, a relatively high share of students repeats a grade. In 2018, 23% of the 15-year-olds reported that they repeated a grade at least once, compared to 15% on average for the countries included in Figure 6.11. Although grade repetition is most common in primary education, it also occurs regularly in lower and upper secondary education, partly due to the relatively long length of compulsory education in Flanders (5 to 18 years old) (Nusche et al., 2015[10]).

Native-born students with migrant parents are more likely to have repeated a grade than their peers with native-born parents in Flanders, as is the case in the majority of European OECD countries. However, the gap in the retention rate between students with and without migrant parents is nowhere as large as in Flanders (except in Belgium). In 2018, the retention rate at school was more than twice as high for native-born students with migrant parents than for their peers with native-born parents. Although grade repetition is intended to offer students additional time to catch up with their peers, in reality, there is no evidence that it results in reducing the educational gap between the two groups.

Figure 6.11. Native-born children with migrant parents are much more likely to repeat a grade

Retention rate at school at the age of 15, by parents' place of birth, 2018, Flanders and selected European OECD countries



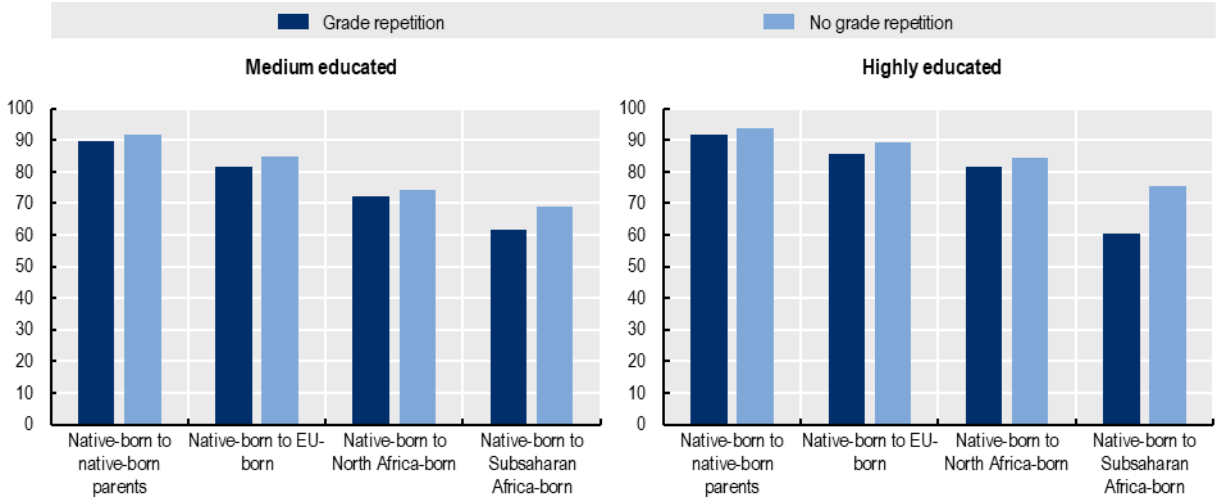
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on data from PISA 2018.

Overall, those who repeated a grade are more likely to drop out from school early and achieve lower levels of formal education. While less than 1% of students who never repeated a grade drop out of school, this is the case for more than 11% of those who repeated once and 32% for those that repeated twice and 46% who repeated more than twice (Statistics Flanders, 2022[33]). Grade repeating students are also less likely to access tertiary education. While more than three in five adults who never repeated a grade were highly educated, this is only the case for 27% of those who repeated at least once (FPS Employment and Unia, 2022[34]).

Native-born youth in Flanders who repeated a grade have lower employment rates than their peers who did not repeat a grade, irrespective of their parents' place of birth (FPS Employment and Unia, 2022[34]). This finding is potentially related with them struggling in the education system in the first place. However, the group of native-born youth with Sub-Saharan-born parents deserves attention in this respect. The employment rate of those aged 25-34 years old who are tertiary educated but had repeated a grade is very low – at only 60%, a full 15 percentage points below their peers who did not repeat a grade. It also stands out against a still very high employment rate of 92% of their likewise tertiary educated peers with native-born parents who also repeated a grade.

Figure 6.12. Youngsters who repeated a grade are less likely to be employed

Employment rate, by grade repetition and parents' place of birth, 2018, Flanders



Note: Population aged 25 to 34.
Source: OECD Secretariat adapted from FPS Employment and Unia (2022[34]), *Socio-economische monitoring 2022: arbeidsmarkt en origine*, https://werk.belgie.be/nl/publicaties/socio-economische-monitoring-2022-arbeidsmarkt-en-origine.

Teachers are not prepared for teaching in a multicultural setting

Nearly 50% of lower secondary school teachers in Flanders work in classrooms where more than 10% of the students have a home language other than Dutch (OECD, 2019[35]). Only Sweden and Austria record higher shares in this respect.

Since 2013, Flanders has made attempts to increase participation of teachers in professional training initiatives aimed at strengthening teaching in multicultural or multilingual settings. Indeed, according to the TALIS survey, the share of Flemish teachers who had recent training for teaching in a multicultural setting has increased from 8% in 2013 to 18% in 2018. Yet, participation in such training remains well below the

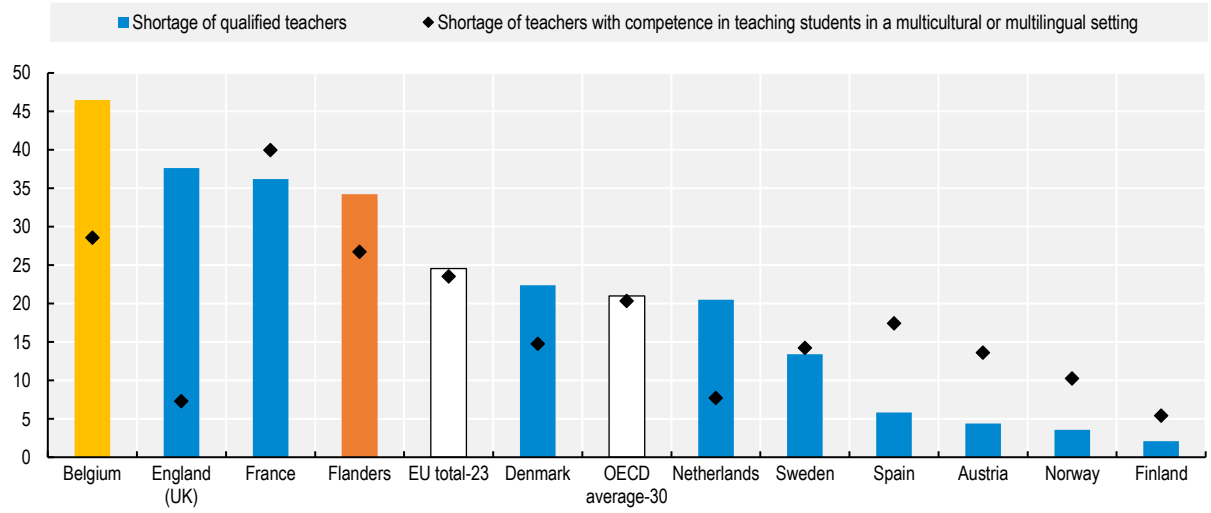
OECD average (22%), and according to the same survey, only 17% of the Flemish teachers reported feeling (very) well prepared for teaching in a multicultural or multilingual setting in 2018 (OECD, 2019[35]).

In international comparison, the preparation to teach in (pre-)primary and lower secondary is relatively short. As is the case in other OECD countries, a master's degree is required for teaching at upper secondary schools. However, for (pre-)primary to lower secondary education, a three-year bachelor programme is the norm in Flanders, which is short in international comparison. Flanders is also one of the few OECD countries that allows a short-cycle tertiary qualification for prospective teachers of vocational subjects (1.5 years for both lower secondary and upper secondary vocational subjects).

In addition, there is no general requirement to become a teacher and each school is free to define its own recruitment criteria, creating some disparity in teacher skills. Support for beginning teachers as well as part of the content of the training (inclusion of educational science studies and child/adolescent development studies) are left at the discretion of individual schools. This set-up also makes the teaching profession less attractive to high achieving students potentially interested to become a teacher. These challenges, combined with additional elements such as a heavy administrative burden and high job insecurity at the outset of the professional career, help explain why Flanders experiences a severe teacher shortage. According to data from the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), a third of principals in lower secondary schools in Flanders report that the shortages of qualified teachers hinder the school's capacity to provide quality instruction, which is a high share in international standards (see Figure 6.13.).

Figure 6.13. Flanders experiences a shortage of teachers

Share of principals reporting that the following shortages of resources hinder the school's capacity to provide quality instruction "quite a bit" or "a lot", Flanders and selected European OECD countries



Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on data from TALIS 2018.

Along with the lack of qualified teachers, there are also challenges with how teachers are distributed across schools, with schools with a high concentration of disadvantaged students – especially in the Flemish centre cities – encountering more difficulties in recruiting qualified and experienced teachers (Nusche et al., 2015[10]). Overall, two-thirds of lower secondary teachers in Flanders have at least ten years of teaching experience. However, the share of experienced teachers is 14 percentage points lower in schools with a high concentration of disadvantaged students than in schools with a low concentration of such students (OECD, 2019[35]).

Other OECD countries have faced similar challenges in attracting and retaining qualified teachers to schools with a high concentration of disadvantaged students. Some OECD countries introduced incentives such as higher salaries or more attractive working conditions. However, the evidence on the effectiveness of such schemes is mixed. Evidence from the United States suggests that if salary increases are substantial, they can make a difference: in North Carolina, a USD 1 800 retention bonus for certified teachers who work in concentrated schools reduced teacher turnover by 17%. Korea also offers teachers a higher wage to entice them to work in schools with a high concentration of disadvantaged students (OECD, 2021[9]).

Yet, such policy incentives are only effective if teachers are confident working with pupils whose parents are migrants. In the United Kingdom, the Department for Children, Schools and Families introduced in 2004 a professional development programme to provide teachers in primary education with more knowledge and confidence to meet the needs of bilingual students. The scheme produced promising results in terms of students' second language skills but did not affect their math and science test results.

Early school leaving is less of a problem in Flanders

The proportion of early school leavers in Flanders[2] is low when compared to other European OECD countries. In 2021, only 5% of the 18-to-24-year-olds reported being low-educated and not currently in education, compared to 10% on average in the EU. The fact that compulsory education ends at 18 in Flanders and that vocational education allows getting an upper secondary degree are the main factors that contribute to the overall positive outcome.

However, native-born students with migrant parents are more likely than their peers with native-born parents to leave school early, even after controlling for socio-economic background characteristics. In 2020, one in five students in secondary education who do not speak Dutch at home left school early, compared to 6% of those who speak Dutch at home (Statistics Flanders, 2022[33]). Several factors help explain the higher risk for immigrant offspring to leave school early. Van Praag and colleagues (2020[36]) show that pupils at risk of dropping out have often followed complex and erratic educational trajectories, lacked guidance at school and made orientation choices heavily driven by short-term financial and living conditions constraints. Van Praag and Clycq (2019[37]) additionally find that the decision to leave school and search for work was in some cases fuelled by the idea that work experience was equivalent to an educational qualification. Many of the youth realised after some time in often instable employment that work experience could not make up for the lack of educational credentials, and some decided to re-enter the formal schooling system. This research shows that informing youth with migrant parents about the importance of educational attainment is indeed crucial.

Many initiatives have been launched in Flanders to reduce the share of early school leavers. As part of the Action Plan on Early School Leaving (*Actieplan Samen tegen Schooluitval*), the Flemish Government developed in 2016 a comprehensive strategy to tackle school absenteeism and early school leaving. The Department of Education and Training has since launched other initiatives. To assist students (and their parents) in locating comprehensive information on education programmes and institutions, a website called Onderwijskiezer was developed. It has a section built especially for people without a diploma that offers details on all viable study paths for second-chance education. Already established in 2000, "Pupil Guidance Centres" also help to prevent early school leaving and create more equal educational opportunities (see Box 6.3).

Another way to inform youth with migrant parents about the importance of formal education is to connect them with other youths from similar backgrounds. A project from Austria focuses on this link. The so-called Integration Ambassadors are part of the broader "Together Austria" initiative, and the scheme encourages successful youngsters with migrant parents to become "ambassadors of integration". They visit schools to motivate other youth to see education as an opportunity and to make full use of the existing career options (OECD, 2021[9]).

Box 6.3. How Pupils' Guidance Centres support disadvantaged pupils

Pupils Guidance Centre setting

The Flemish Parliament Act of 27 April 2018 reformed the policy on student guidance, with the term "pupil guidance" now referring to the specific responsibilities of schools and Pupil Guidance Centres (CLB). Additional funds were allocated to CLBs in September 2022 to strengthen their core services.

Each school is responsible for developing its own policy on pupil guidance, which must address four areas of counselling: educational career, learning and studying, psychological and social functioning, and preventive healthcare. The school also appoints a pupil counsellor and is supported by its local CLB.

CLBs assume the responsibility of pupils' guidance and guidance throughout their entire school career, ensuring a comprehensive approach to pupils' well-being. There are 72 such centres in Flanders, providing quality pupil guidance services to foster the complete development of all pupils, prevent early school leaving, and create equal education opportunities.

CLBs support schools, parents, and pupils through a signaling function, consultative pupil guidance, reception, question clarification, and guidance. They perform action-oriented diagnostics to gather more information about a pupil's needs, provide action-oriented advice, counsel pupils themselves, or refer pupils to school-external organisations.

To ensure that pupils' diverse needs are met, schools and pupil guidance centres work within the framework of the "continuum of care". Broad basic care (level 0) is given to all pupils, with increased care (Level 1) and elaboration of care (Level 2) provided to those who need it. A customised curriculum in a school for mainstream education or a report that grants access to a special educational needs school (Level 3 IAC) may result from elaboration of care.

Schools are required to register pupils' absenteeism and pay special attention to problematic absence, adopting a school-wide approach to this issue. If a pupil misses five or more half days of school for no legitimate reason, the school must follow the guidelines laid down by the Flemish Government, informing its CLB and co-operating with it to provide further guidance to the pupil. However, the end responsibility for following up on absenteeism and guiding pupils lies with the school.

Finally, CLBs help establish connections with appropriate support organisations. They co-operate closely with the Integrated Youth Assistance, a system of co-operation between different sectors of youth care to ensure well-aligned and efficient assistance to students in need. When pupils leave school, with or without a diploma, CLBs are not authorised to provide them with further guidance. They can, however, help identify adult learning options.

(Van Avermaet et al., 2017[38]) noted a deficient involvement of CLB in the area of study choice and orientation towards mainstream education. (Kis, 2010[39]) showed that quality of guidance varied greatly across CLBs and that staff was overall lacking skills on career prospects and learning opportunities.

A reform of educational guidance services came into force in September 2022. These services received additional funds to reinforce the professional competence of the staff members of the educational institutions and CLBs. It is also planned to better target CLB that need additional support.

Sources: Nusche et al. (2015[10]); Background report of Belgium/Flemish community (2015), https://www.oecd.org/education/school-resources-review/; Flemish Educational Council (2013[14]), Analytical report: Education for pupils with a migrant background in Flanders, https://eunec.eu/sites/www.eunec.eu/files/members/attachments/analytical_report.pdf.

The Equal Educational Opportunity policy hardly compensates for socio-economic disadvantages

The effectiveness of the EEO policy has long been a concern in Flanders. Recent evaluations show non-significant or only minor effects of the EEO policy on the impact of socio-economic background as a determinant for pupils' outcomes within and across schools. (De Witte, Smett and Van Assche, 2017[40]) looked at problematic absenteeism, school performance and grade retention and did not find any significant effect of the EEO funding on the observed outcomes. (Tierens, Smet and De Witte, 2020[41]) examined whether the effect of the proportion of disadvantaged pupils in a (primary) school on educational outcomes differed before and after the introduction of the EEO policy in 2012. They found that it reduced the effect of concentration of disadvantaged pupils in schools on the likelihood for students to repeat a grade, but that this trend had already started before the introduction of the new policy and continued after its introduction. They also investigated the transition from primary to secondary school as measured by the transition to the academic A stream – first and then second year – (versus the less prestigious B stream) without repeating a grade and found no improvement after 2012. This research has also shown that the introduction of the EEO policy had only a small effect on pupils' school performance and did not succeed in reducing the gap between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils. One of the issues mentioned by the authors is the difficulty for schools with very high concentrations of disadvantaged students to effectively implement EEO measures. They observed that certain schools and teachers lowered their expectations for these disadvantaged students and frequently employed extra teaching hours to prepare students for the B stream in the first year of secondary education, which typically leads to the vocational track. (Juchtmans et al., 2020[22]) found similar results.

Stricter control over the use of additional SES teaching hours was implemented from 2021-22 in preschools and primary schools (see Box 6.1). The impact of this recent policy change could not be evaluated in the context of this review. In secondary education, several features can explain the low impact of the EEO policy. As discussed above (see Box 6.1), additional teaching hours are only allocated to secondary education schools if the proportion of disadvantaged students reaches a certain threshold (10% in first stage of secondary education and 25% in second and third stages of secondary education). It is noteworthy that there is no such allocation of additional teaching hours in part-time vocational secondary education (DBSO). In the school year 2019-20, 16 628 additional hours were allocated to 669 secondary schools, or less than 2% of the total number of teaching hours in all schools. This means that eligible schools received on average 25 additional hours. However, support is primarily focused on primary education and the first stage of secondary education, while less teaching hours are allocated to the second and third stages of secondary education and only schools registering at least 25% of disadvantaged students are eligible. While stronger support at a young age makes sense, lowering support from the second stage of secondary education (from the age of 14, if no grade repetition) may result in fragmented support for students that most need it.

In addition, the fact that additional teaching hours in secondary education schools are strictly proportional to the number of disadvantaged pupils combined with the absence of guidance provided to schools by the government, results in complex implementation issues. For instance, additional teaching hours may not be sufficient to recruit a full-time additional teacher. Attracting part-time qualified staff may be difficult in a context of shortage in teachers. Allocating extra hours to teachers in place may not be optimal, notably if the teacher has not received a proper training. Finally, the weight per individual disadvantaged pupil ranges from 0.18 to 1.2 (capped). Previous section has demonstrated that segregation in schools was particularly detrimental to native-born pupils with migrant parents in secondary education. Further analysis would be needed to check whether capping the weight at 1.2 per individual disadvantaged pupil is not associated with insufficient language support in segregated schools.

Furthermore, the EEO policy's lack of specific objectives and standards for evaluation is problematic. Little guidance is provided by the government to secondary education schools regarding how and why they

should use the additional resources. There is no guarantee that all schools will use the additional funds in the best way possible without explicit guidelines, objectively stated goals, and clarity regarding expected outcomes. In their report for the Flemish Parliament, The Court of Auditors (2017[42]) notes that school-specific actions based on the additional EEO resources are frequently not appropriately targeted. Whereas in the first three EEO cycles (2002-12), a school specific EEO policy had to be developed within prescribed themes, since 2012, schools are free to choose their strategy (providing it aims at realising "equal educational opportunities"). Heterogeneous and non-optimal use of additional resources has resulted from the autonomy of school staff combined with a lack of insight on goals and sometimes not enough policy-developing ability (notably in more disadvantaged school contexts). In particular, (Groenez et al., 2015[43]) noted that schools and school boards do not necessarily use additional funding for strictly pedagogical purposes. Possible factors at play are again the lack of government guidance in the use of additional resources; the unequal starting position of schools, the inequalities in the policy-making capacity of schools as well as the limited support from some parents.

While the Flemish education system is characterised by a large extra investment in schools with an underprivileged public in the form of additional teaching hours, teachers in underprivileged schools tend to be significantly less educated and/or less experienced (see above).

Providing flexible education pathways for youth born abroad

In most OECD countries, young people who arrive in the country past the start of primary education face a higher risk of falling behind in the school system compared to their native-born peers and those who arrive at a younger age. As students who migrate at compulsory school age need to adapt to a new language of instruction immediately, they need flexible education pathways and elaborate language support (OECD, 2021[9]). To ensure that new arrivals have sufficient time to adapt to their new school environment and catch up with the demands of the new education system, Flanders has since 1995 established reception education. Reception education in primary and secondary education is a specific and temporary kind of education provision that aims to teach newly arrived minors without any knowledge of the Dutch language – the language of instruction – as soon as possible and promote their integration into the Flemish school system.

The demand for reception education increased over recent years

Newly arrived youth make up a large share of the total migrant inflow in Flanders. Between 2010 and 2020, the region registered an average of 10 000 minors (aged between 2 to 17) each year, accounting for close to one fifth of the total migrant inflow. The age composition of newly arrived minors was relatively constant over the past decade: roughly one-third was aged between 2 and 5, another third was aged between 6 and 11, and a final third was aged between 12 and 18. In 2022, Flanders received a record number of newly arrived minors due to the large inflow of Ukrainian refugees (see Box 6.5).

Primary schools are largely autonomous in how to organise reception of non-Dutch-speaking newly arrived pupils. Within 60 days after being registered in a Flemish municipality, newly arrived migrants under the age of 12 must register at a primary school. Primary schools can then either integrate them into mainstream classes through extra (language) support and flexible programmes, or they provide short-term separate reception classes of maximum 5 weeks (*wereldklasjes*) which focus on introducing the Dutch language and improving the children's well-being and independency. Most primary schools integrate non-Dutch-speaking newcomers in existing classes as it is often presumed that children easily learn a new language at a young age. Moreover, schools often lack a critical mass of new arrivals to organise separate welcome classes. Indeed, only from a certain number of non-Dutch-speaking new arrivals (from four pupils for pre-primary schools and from six pupils for primary schools), can schools apply for additional teaching hours. Once this threshold is reached, schools receive one and a half teaching hours per non-Dutch-

speaking pupil, and four additional teaching hours per primary school that offers reception classes.[3] Primary schools can apply to extend this setting to pupils who arrived in Flanders the previous year and already benefitted from reception education.

In March 2022, there were 3 554 non-Dutch-speaking newly arrived pupils in primary education and 572 different schools shared 5 640 extra teaching hours – or 235 FTE teachers – to organise extra support for these pupils.[4] As evidenced by the OECD field mission, partnership between primary and secondary schools located in the same area, are promising. Taking non-Dutch speaking newly arrived pupils in their final year of primary education out of the World class allows them to benefit from the OKAN offer in secondary education and smoothens their transition to secondary education.

In secondary education, non-Dutch-speaking newly arrived migrant students participate in full-time separate reception classes (*OnthaalKlas voor Anderstalige Nieuwkomers, OKAN*), organised within mainstream secondary schools spread across Flanders. Students can enter a reception class when they are between 12 and 18 years old, have not been in Belgium longer than one year, have not Dutch as their mother tongue, and have not mastered the Dutch language sufficiently enough to enter mainstream secondary education, and have not been enrolled in a Dutch-speaking school for more than 9 months. Still, the Class Council can also deviate from the conditions regarding age, length of stay and school career. Secondary schools that offer OKAN classes are entitled to a specific package of 2.5 teaching hours per non-Dutch-speaking newly arrived migrant student. Although there is no regulation to limit the duration of the OKAN programme, in practice, pupils generally follow this programme over a school year and eventually benefit from a one-year extension. Schools generally aim for enrolment in mainstream education as soon as possible, preferably after one full academic year of reception education. The weekly schedule in OKAN classes consists of a minimum of 28 slots of 50 minutes, of which at least 22 slots need to be spent on learning the Dutch language (with a strong focus on reading skills and vocabulary) and 2 hours dedicated to philosophical subjects. That means that schools are free to determine the content of at least six slots with other school subjects. Over the 2017-21 period, the number of schools that offered OKAN classes increased from 86 to 94. The number of non-Dutch-speaking newly arrived migrant students in Flemish secondary education also rose significantly, from around 4 300 in 2017-18 (0.87% of the total student population) to around 5 400 in 2020-21 (1.14% of the total).

Reception education is rather fragmented…

Newly arrived migrant students come from a variety of backgrounds. In the school year 2019-20, 38% had a nationality from either Afghanistan (17%), Somalia (8%), Syria (6%), Palestine (4%) or Iraq (3%). Another 13% had a Bulgarian, Romanian or Spanish nationality. Newly arrived migrant students often have a relatively weak socio-economic background. In the school year 2020-21, 64% had a low-educated mother, compared to 23% in the total student population. At the same time, 58% lived in a neighbourhood where at least 25% of the 15-year-olds had a school retention of two years or more, compared to 25% in the total student population.

Secondary schools that offer OKAN classes are hence confronted with the situation of having to prepare newly arrived migrant students who differ greatly in socio-economic background, do not yet understand the complex Flemish education system and who often have high educational aspirations (Pulinx et al., 2017[44]).This situation is set in a context where schools have few legislative guidelines on how to organise reception education (Kemper et al., 2022[45]). Legislation explicitly states that reception classes are aimed “at the widest possible audience while at the same time offer the possibility to differentiate according to individual needs” (Kemper et al., 2022[45]). Many schools have therefore developed their own classification approach. Most of the time, schools make use of “ability groups” in which students are supposed to stay in until the end of the OKAN programme. The highly diverse group of students is allocated into groups after only a couple of weeks in reception education. In practice, the “ability groups” lead to different tracks, and this is anticipated by differentiating the pace, academic standards, and curricula between the groups. The most important factor that is looked at when dividing the students is how quickly they are expected to learn

Dutch. Furthermore, the Flemish hierarchical education system with early tracking clearly affects the orientation of OKAN students, whereby the highest ability group is reserved for students who are expected to progress to general or technical secondary education (Emery, Spruyt and Van Avermaet, 2021[46]).

The classification of students based on their estimated capacities hence becomes a very determining factor in the educational career of OKAN students. Yet typically very little is known about these students' educational background and abilities. In addition, few formal assessment tools are available to teachers to assist them in allocating newly arrived students to groups. Both factors imply that the uncertainty typically associated with the classification is large. The fact that this classification is mainly based on non-standardised tests and teacher assessments which are designed unilaterally to gauge how quickly students learn Dutch, means that the potential of students who need more time to master the language of instruction is systematically underestimated. This helps to explain why the diverse group of OKAN students has a very homogeneous orientation towards more professionally oriented fields of study in secondary education (Pulinx et al., 2017[44]; Kemper et al., 2022[45]).

Another challenge takes place when non-Dutch-speaking newly arrived migrant students switch to another school because of relocation. Schools often lack detailed follow-up files on OKAN students' progress, such as the competences that the student has already acquired. OKAN schools often work in a completely different way, which makes switching to another school very difficult. Finally, the evaluation systems and reporting differ greatly from school to school, so that the new school often has difficulties in interpreting the reports from the previous school.

…and embeddedness in mainstream education remains a challenge…

The embeddedness of reception education in the educational system is also a challenge. Reception programmes often operate as an entity on their own, isolated from the "main school" (i.e. the part of the school that is responsible for mainstream education), sometimes even physically. The responsibility to incorporate newly arrived migrant students in the educational system is almost solely assigned to reception education, without asking major adjustments from the secondary education system itself. This is reflected in the fact that the responsibility for the formal support for former OKAN students throughout their whole school career lies with further education coaches (*vervolgschoolcoaches*), who belong to the staff of reception education.[5] Few secondary schools have, for example, developed a clear language policy and structural accommodation for newly arrived migrant students, even though these could boost the students' chances for succeeding, especially in the more academic tracks (Pulinx et al., 2017[44]).

A valuable tool to increase the interaction between reception and mainstream education is the so-called "sniffing internship" (*snuffelstage*), during which OKAN students can experience the life and ways of the regular school. Some secondary schools have also started to integrate OKAN students with other students during music or sport classes or have allowed students to follow classes in mainstream education after being in reception education for a certain period. Other schools encourage teachers from mainstream education to take on a few teaching hours in reception education, during which expertise on teaching multilingual students is actively shared between teachers in reception and mainstream education. Nevertheless, such initiatives remain the exception to the rule (Kemper et al., 2022[45]).

…leading to poor transitions from reception to mainstream education

At the end of the school year, non-Dutch-speaking migrant students who have attended the reception year as a regular student receive a certificate confirming their attendance. The class council of the reception education then gives an advice considering the transition of the student to further education. No specific level of competency in the Dutch language is required to make the transition to mainstream education: OKAN teachers and the class council decide when the student is ready to make the transition, taking account of the admission requirements. In practice, this will primarily mean that entry into regular education

takes place either based on a decision by the class admissions council or based on age. The admissions council must consider the advice from the class council of the reception education. Every decision that diverges from this advice must be justified in detail.

Not all secondary schools offer reception education, so students often change school when they transition from OKAN into mainstream secondary education.

As discussed before, regular secondary education in Flanders is characterised by early tracking, which implies that the study choice migrant students make after reception education is decisive for their educational career. Newly arrived migrant students can transfer into any grade of any track after reception education but are strongly overrepresented in the vocational track. Table 6.1 provides an overview of the general distribution of newly arrived students after they have followed one or two school years of reception education, for school year 2017-18. As newly arrived students can start reception education at any time during the school year, a considerable proportion of them (36%) follow a second year of reception education. About 26% enter the first stage where there is no formal tracking. Of those who enter regular education in the second or third stages, approximately 17% enrol in the most prestigious track (i.e. general education). The majority (51%) enrol in vocational education (compared with 24% for students who are not newly arrived migrants). Completing a second year of reception education does not change the distribution of OKAN students across tracks.

The main criterion for assigning ex-OKAN students to education tracks is their level of Dutch language skills. Due to this role of Dutch as the de facto entry ticket into regular education and because Dutch is often viewed as the most important key to school success, the acquisition of Dutch becomes conflated with students' general academic ability. High aspirations are only realistic when students easily acquire Dutch. In addition, as OKAN mainly focuses on Dutch language acquisition, the set-up allows little to no time for classes in French, mathematics, science, English, and digital skills, despite these competencies being essential to enable a transition to the general or technical track. As a result, despite migrant students' great intrinsic motivation and existing competencies, they often end up in part-time education, vocational education or leave without a qualification. Newly arrived students also often face a double disadvantage of coming from migrant and socio-economically disadvantaged families. Specifically, newly arrived migrant students are often one or two school years behind compared to their age cohort when they enter secondary education; have a higher chance of having to repeat a year; are greatly over-represented in the vocational track and are more likely to leave secondary education early and unqualified. School absenteeism is also a serious problem among former OKAN students. This picture contrasts with research showing that newly arrived migrant students often have high educational aspirations (Pulinx et al., 2017[44]).

Table 6.1. Newly arrived migrant students are strongly overrepresented in the vocational track

Distribution of non-Dutch-speaking newly arrived migrant students over different tracks in percentage, school year 2017-18, secondary education, Flanders

	Non-Dutch-speaking newly arrived students		Other students
	After first year of reception education	After second year of reception education	
Second year of reception education	36		
First stage	26		
Second and third stages	37		
Of which:			
General track (ASO)	17	17	43
Technical track (TSO)	30	30	31
Artistic track (KSO)	2	2	2
Vocational track (BSO)	51	51	24

Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on data from the Department of Education and Training.

Some vulnerable groups require specific attention going forward

Many children and youth are not prepared for immediate schooling when they arrive in Flanders. Some need psychosocial support to overcome their difficulties before joining the educational system. Refugee students, who drove the recent increases, often experienced trauma and an interrupted school career which makes their integration into education even more challenging. Among this group, non-accompanied minors are most vulnerable.

Initiatives on having psychological and social support at school are underdeveloped in Flanders. As was evidenced by the OECD field mission, some cities, like Mechelen, set an example by employing education assistants to help vulnerable students both in and outside the school context. However, there are no region-wide structures or policies to ensure psychological and social support in schools. Instead, in most cases, OKAN-teachers have to deal with these vulnerable youth, in addition to their already high work pressure and fluctuating hours of support. This situation adds to the challenge of retaining qualified OKAN teachers and results in high staff turnover. Teachers also report a challenge to set realistic goals and find a way to smoothen the transition to school. While guardians and authorities want the youth to start with school as quickly as possible, many teachers feel that many young refugee arrivals are not ready for school.

Particularly challenging is the situation of students who arrive during their teenage years with little prior formal education, low literacy skills and learning difficulties. Students from that age have very low chances to succeed in a regular secondary school – even after their two-year OKAN training. A repeated concern is that these students need more time to become proficient in Dutch but at the same time would need to develop other academic skills to succeed in ordinary education. Thus, simply staying longer in the reception programme does not meet all their needs.

When turning 18, migrant students reach the end of compulsory schooling, but many are still in need of additional education and training. Those who arrived during adolescence require targeted and ongoing follow-up, in the form of further studies and training at Centres for Adult Education. A key problem for this group is low Dutch language skills, even after one or two years of reception education. As a result, many young migrant students do not meet the language requirements (often at the A2 level) to enrol in standard further education or training.

Newcomers that are nearly 18 and have attended one year of reception education, no longer have the opportunity to follow a community integration trajectory for adults. To create a better starting position for 17-19 year-olds who are in the transition from (reception) education to work or further training, the integration agencies organise a tailor-made civic integration programme mainly during school holidays. It includes the 60-hour civic orientation course that is individually tailored to youth and in addition personal counselling, language training if needed, and further 30 hours for extra group activities. The programme targets migrants with a short school career in Flanders or difficult school-to-work trajectory. Students are selected for the programme during intake with the integration counsellor and outreach is mostly done through information sessions in (OKAN) schools and reception centres for asylum seekers.

Another approach that has been piloted in Antwerp, is to support youth directly in getting to know different professions in a more practical manner. LIGO, the umbrella organisation of the Centres for Adult Basic Education, and partner organisations set up a project called BENO, which stands for Basic Education after OKAN. The BENO project was launched in Antwerp in 2016, and since then, seven other co-operatives have been established across Flanders (see Box 6.4).

For youth who arrive at age 13 to 15, these programmes are not an option, as they are too young to join them even after the two-year OKAN programme. In addition, due to their young age, they are not able to start part-time vocational education yet.

Box 6.4. Supporting adolescent arrivals through the BENO project (Basic Education after OKAN)

BENO offers an additional year of schooling focused on preparation for vocational education. The project targets recent adolescent migrants between the ages of 18 and 22 who, for various reasons, are unable to start working or pursue vocational training after having finished reception classes. The full-time programme generally runs from September to June and includes an intensive Dutch language and literacy course (the target level is A2), hands-on learning in vocational training courses, math, communication and ICT courses, a civic orientation course, and sports lessons.

The Centres for Adult Basic Education provide Dutch language, math, ICT, and communication classes, whereas the Centres for Adult Education organise the vocational training. Vocational training generally consists of two streams: one aimed at technical professions (e.g. woodworking, painting, plumbing, welding, electricity, bike repair) and one aimed at other professions (e.g. catering, care, retail). During the programme, PES and integration counsellors provide students with tailored guidance to orient them towards further vocational education and work.

The BENO programme started in Antwerp, six years ago, and is now active in eight other cities in Flanders. Descriptive data on the BENO programme's outcomes in Antwerp, the only data available at the time of writing, are promising. Out of 78 migrant students in the programme between 2017 and 2020, after completion, 58 students were enrolled in education (i.e. vocational training, or part-time and second chance education), 13 were employed (including subsidised work) and only 7 were neither in education nor employment. A few months to one year after the programme, these figures changed to 34 in education, 34 in employment and 10 not in employment or education.

Source: OECD field mission; https://www.atlas-antwerpen.be/nl/nieuws/binnenkijken-bij-beno-basiseducatie-na-okan; https://www.vlor.be/beno-projecten-basiseducatie-na-okan.

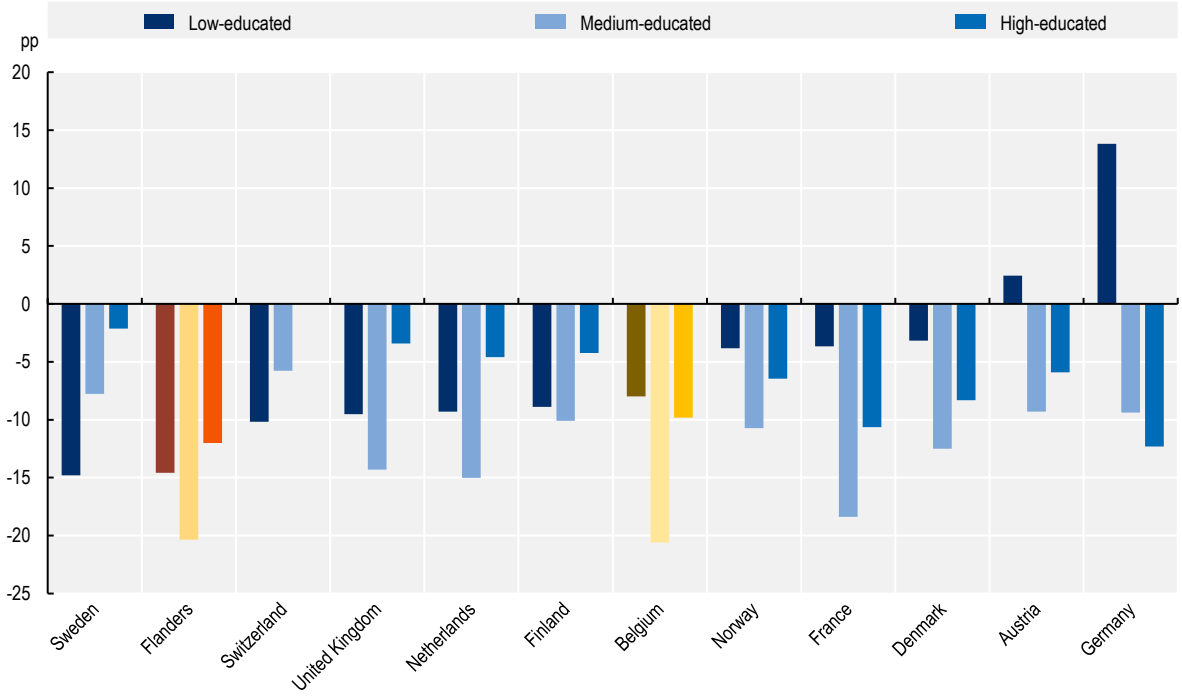
Supporting the school-to-work transition of youth with migrant parents

Large employment rate gaps persist irrespective of educational attainment

In most OECD countries, formal education levels correlate positively with employment rates among youth. In Flanders, the employment gap vis-à-vis the native-born offspring among the medium-educated is almost twice as big as that among the tertiary-educated (20 versus 12 percentage points) (see Figure 6.14). Higher education thus has a positive impact on the labour market integration of the native-born children of immigrants. However, education does not appear to be the only key factor. Indeed, immigrant offspring face a strong penalty even among the tertiary-educated – one of the largest in international comparison.

Figure 6.14. Employment gaps vis-à-vis the children of native-born persist across educational attainment levels

The employment gap between native-born with immigrant parents and native-born with native-born parents, by educational attainment, 2020, Flanders and selected European OECD countries



Note: Population aged 15 to 35, not in education.
Source: OECD/European Commission (2023[3]), *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In*, https://doi.org/10.1787/1d5020a6-en; Flanders and Belgium: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the national LFS enriched with National Register data.

Poorer labour market outcomes among youth with migrant parents result in large part from differences in educational outcomes. Research for Belgium shows that almost three-quarters and one-third of the employment gap vis-à-vis the native-born offspring is explained by these characteristics for children with EU-born parents and non-EU-born parents, respectively (Corluy et al., 2015[47]; National Bank of Belgium, 2020[48]; Piton and Rycx, 2021[49]). Other important factors are that youth with migrant parents have thinner social networks to help them obtain relevant information and improve their opportunities in the job-search process (Verhaeghe, Li and Van De Putte, 2013[50]). They also often lack role models to look up to and remain underrepresented in the public sector. Finally, negative stereotypes and discrimination are further components that complicate the search for a first job and subsequent career advancement (Baert, 2018[51])

Finding a first job takes longer time for youth with migrant parents

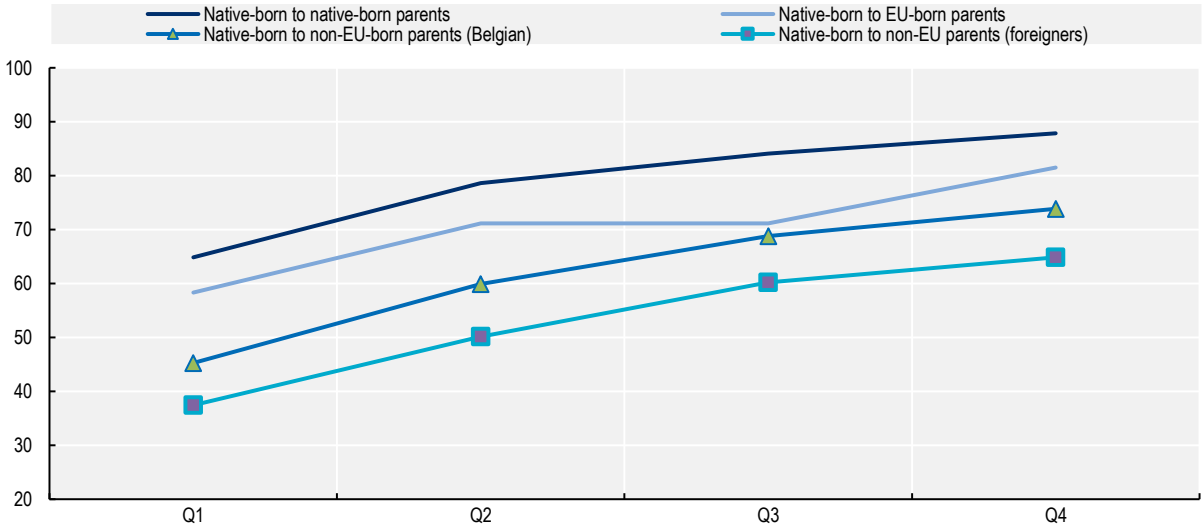
Young people under the age of 25 who register for the first time as jobseekers do not immediately receive unemployment benefits. Instead, they first go through a one-year (310 days) professional integration period (*beroepsinschakelingstijd)*. During this period, all these youngsters receive guidance from the PES. They can also follow PES training, but they are not obliged to do so. At the end of this period, if they do not have a job and if certain conditions are met, they are eligible to unemployment benefits.

In 2018, more than 20 000 young people (aged 18-24) registered for the first time as jobseekers in the third quarter of the year (at the end of the school year) in Flanders. Around 15% of them were born in Belgium to foreign or foreign-born parents. About 70% of these native-born offspring of immigrants were medium-skilled.

While nearly 90% of native-born offspring of native-born parents were employed at the end of their professional integration period, this was only the case for three-quarters of native-born youngsters with foreign-born parents. Among them, those with parents born in the EU had higher success rates than those with parents born outside the EU. Finally, only half of immigrant youngsters managed to find employment within one year.

Figure 6.15. The mandatory professional integration period is less beneficial for youth with non-EU parents

Share of the unemployed who at least had one employment one to four terms after they started their professional integration period, by parents' nationality and place of birth, 2018, Flanders



Note: Native-born population aged 18 to 24.
Source: OECD Secretariat adapted from FPS Employment and Uni (2022[34]), *Socio-economische monitoring 2022: arbeidsmarkt en origine*, https://werk.belgie.be/nl/publicaties/socio-economische-monitoring-2022-arbeidsmarkt-en-origine.

The challenges faced by young people with migrant parents in Flanders have been documented in the literature. Most of these studies focus on youth, native-born with parents born in Türkiye and Morocco. Baert, Heiland and Korenman (2016[52]) find that even after adjusting for differences in family socio-economic background, native-born youth with Turkish and Moroccan-born parents take longer than their native-born peers to finish secondary schooling, to start tertiary education and in their school-to-work transition in general. They find that these gaps relative to those with native-born parents are larger for women than men. Research using longitudinal microdata focusing on women alone finds that compared to women with native-born parents, women with Turkish and Maghreb-born parents are less likely to enter and more likely to exit a first sustainable employment spell and that these differences are reproduced and reinforced over labour market careers (Maes, Wood and Neels, 2019[53]).

A fast transition into work is also key for the future career. Laurijssen and Glorieux (2014[54]) compare the progress in socio-economic status that youngsters with native- and foreign-born parents make from their first to later jobs at the start of their career. Both groups experience upward occupational mobility, but the first job offers less socio-economic status for native-born with foreign-born parents than their peers with native-born parents and this gap in occupational attainment remains constant thereafter. The future career is thus largely determined by the characteristics of the start of the occupational career. Promisingly, however, they find that a first job with a relatively low occupational status does offer better opportunities for native-born with Turkish and Moroccan-born parents than for youth with native-born parents to catch

up later. They argue that this finding together with the long-term negative impact of initial unemployment suggests that youth with migrant parents are best off with starting to work as soon as possible after school leaving.

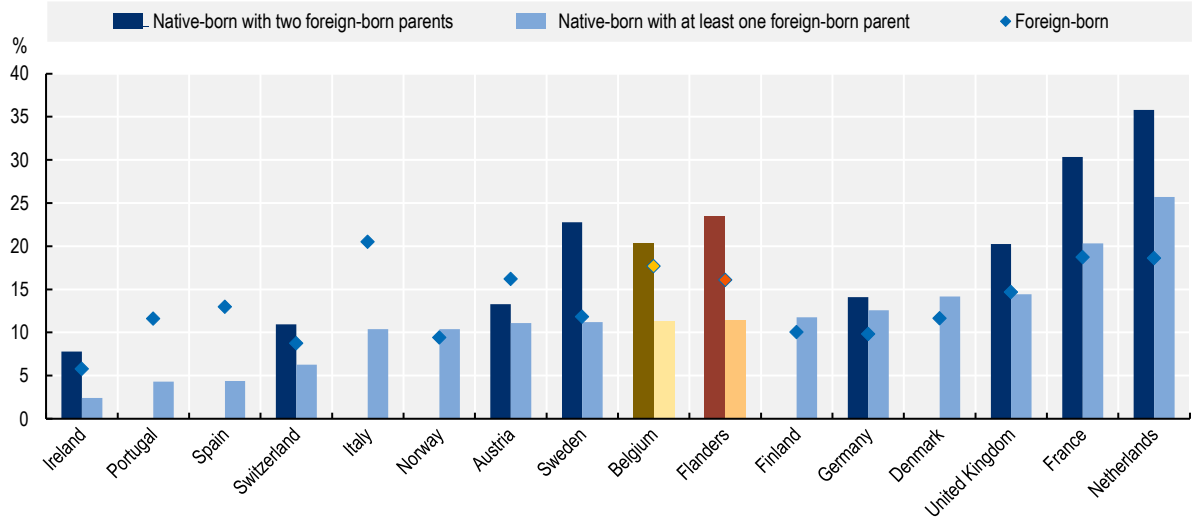
Perceived discrimination is high among native-born children of immigrants

As discussed in previous parts of the report, discrimination is a key obstacle to social and economic integration. Native-born offspring of immigrants are a particular group in this respect. Across the OECD, native-born youth with two foreign-born parents report higher levels of belonging to a group that is discriminated against based on ethnicity, nationality, or race, than young immigrants themselves. As native-born know their society and can identify discrimination easier, they also know that the difficulties they face are not due to their own language skills or an unknown new context (OECD, 2021[9]).

According to the European Social Survey (ESS), in Flanders almost one in four (23%) of the native-born youth with immigrant parents state that they belong to a group that is discriminated against (see Figure 6.16). This figure is one of the highest in the OECD and is only surpassed by the Netherlands and France. Perceived discrimination among foreign-born youth is also relatively high in Flanders, at 16%.

Figure 6.16. Perceived discrimination among native-born youth is high in Flanders

Share of youth who consider themselves members of a group that is discriminated against on grounds of ethnicity, nationality, or race, by place of birth and parents' place of birth, 2012-18, Flanders and selected European OECD countries



Note: Population aged 15-34. Perceived discrimination is measured as the sentiment of belonging to a group that is discriminated against on grounds of ethnicity, nationality, or race.
Source: OECD Secretariat calculations based on data from the European Social Survey 2012-18.

Even more worrying findings are shown by data from the 2022 Barometer Living Together, a survey conducted by the Flemish Agency for Home Affairs (see Chapter 3 for further discussion). According to the survey, half of the native-born respondents with non-EU-born parents reported having experienced discrimination based on origin, skin colour or religion over the past 12 months, compared to 46% of the respondents born in a non-EU country. These figures stood at 13% for native-born respondents with EU-born parents and 27% for EU-born respondents, respectively.

In addition to the sentiment of discrimination, a self-reported measurement, discrimination of youth with migrant parents is also well documented in the Flemish housing and labour market (see Chapter 5 for further discussion).

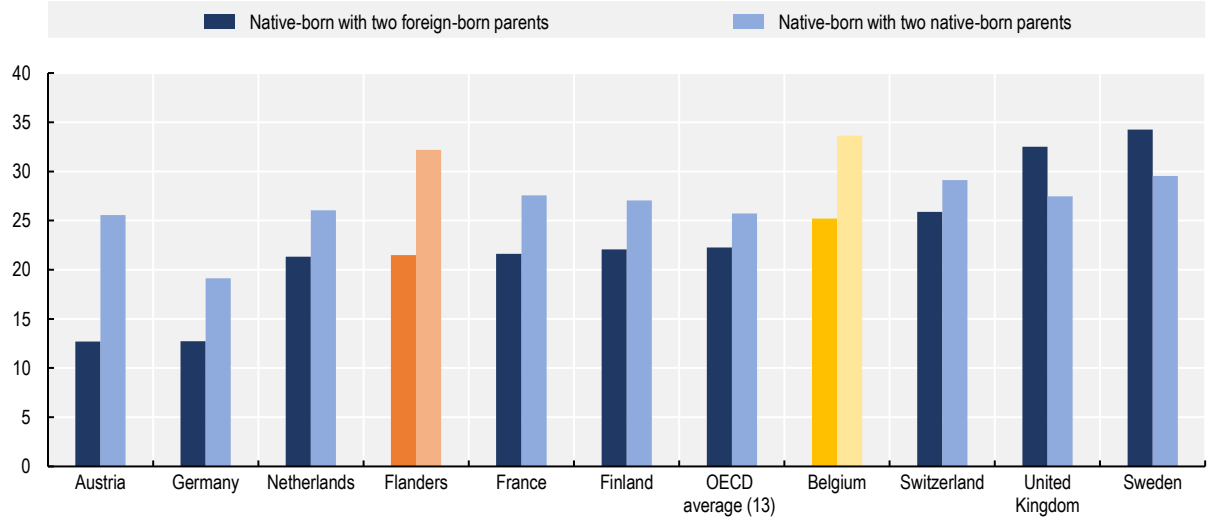
Youth with foreign-born parents are underrepresented in the public sector

One way to support the integration of youth with foreign-born parents is to ensure their equal representation in the public sector. Public sector employment of youth with migrant parents generates several benefits. First, the presence of civil servants with migrant parents enhances diversity within public institutions, making them more representative of the communities they serve. Second, how the wider public perceives immigrants and their children depends in part on their "visibility" in public life and the contexts in which they become "visible". Teachers, police officers, or public administrators with migrant parents, can also act as role models (OECD, 2021[9]).

Despite rising political awareness about the benefits of diversity in the public sector, youth with migrant parents remain underrepresented in public sector jobs in most OECD countries. In Belgium and in Flanders, public sector employment accounts for a relatively high share of youth employment in international comparison. However, while one in three young people works in the public sector in Flanders, this is the case for only one in five native-born with foreign-born parents.

Figure 6.17. Youth with migrant parents are underrepresented in public service sector jobs

Share working in the public service sector, by parents' place of birth, 2020, Flanders and selected European OECD countries



Note: Native-born population aged 15 to 34.
Source: OECD/European Commission (2023[3]), *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In*, https://doi.org/10.1787/1d5020a6-en; Flanders and Belgium: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the national LFS enriched with National Register data.

Policy can encourage the employment of youth with migrant parents in public sector jobs. In fact, the Flemish Socio-Economic Council, a key advisory body to the Flemish Government which consists of the main trade unions and employer associations, just recently advocated for increasing the diversity of teachers in the education sector (Flemish Social and Economic Council, 2020[55]). The Strategic Equal Opportunities and Flemish Government diversity plan 2021-25 also highlights the importance of increasing diversity in public administration (Flemish Social and Economic Council, 2021[56]).

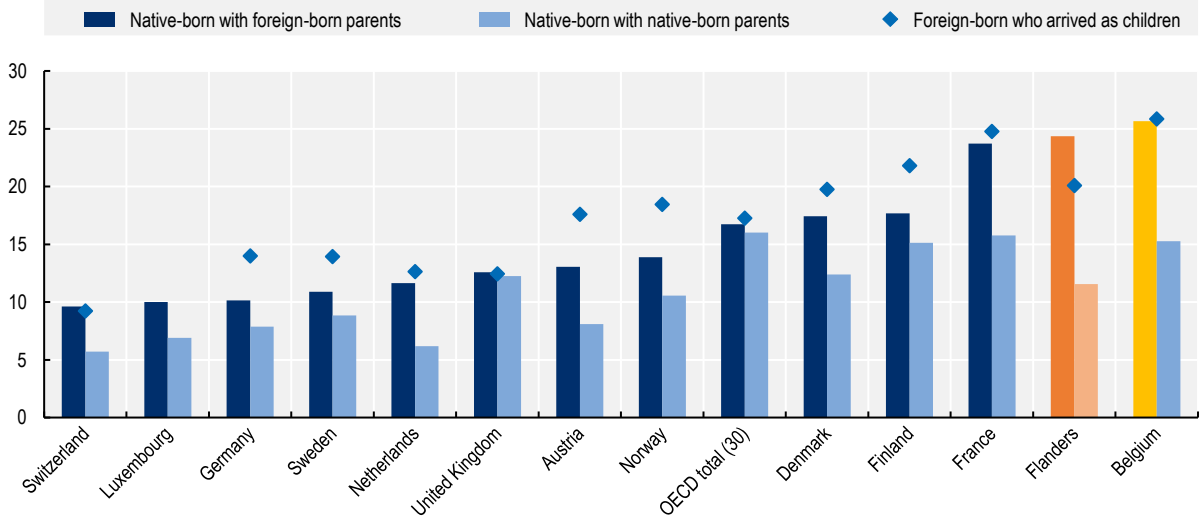
Several OECD countries have actively promoted public sector recruitment of candidates with migrant parents – especially at the local and regional level. Austria, for example, has encouraged recruitment of applicants with migrant parents into the Viennese police force in the framework of the "Vienna needs you" project. The initiative launched targeted information campaigns in co-operation with migrant communities, associations, and schools. Finland offers targeted preparatory training, and professional education offers to encourage youth with migrant parents to start a teaching career. German cities and federal states aim to increase the share of public sector trainees with migrant parents through initiatives such as the "Berlin needs you" and "We are Hamburg" campaigns (OECD, 2021[9]). In Norway, for public sector jobs, employers must invite at least one applicant with migrant parents for an interview, and in case of equally qualified candidates offer the job to those with migrant parents first. Norway also put in place a pilot to test anonymous CVs in the public sector (OECD, 2022[57]).

NEET rates are high, despite the existence of second chance programmes

In the OECD, youth native-born with foreign-born parents as well as those who arrived as children are more likely to be not in education, employment or training (NEET) than their peers with native-born parents. In some countries such as Switzerland, the Netherlands, France and Belgium, the differences among native-born youth by their parents' place of birth are particularly large. However, nowhere is the absolute and relative difference as large as in Flanders. In Flanders native-born youth to immigrant parents are twice as likely to be NEET, at 24%, compared to their peers with native-born parentage (12%). Rates of youth who arrived as children are somewhat lower at 20% (see Figure 6.19). A recent analysis by the Flemish Policy Research Centre for Work confirms that even though NEET rates among 15 to 29-year-olds have steadily decreased since 2013, these rates continue to vary widely by place of birth (Boey and Vansteenkiste, 2022[58]).

Figure 6.18. Immigrant offspring have high NEET rates

Share not in employment, education or training, by place of birth and parents' place of birth, 2020, Flanders and selected European OECD countries



Note: Population aged 15 to 34.
Source: OECD/European Commission (2023[3]), *Indicators of Immigrant Integration 2023: Settling In*, https://doi.org/10.1787/1d5020a6-en; Flanders and Belgium: OECD Secretariat calculations based on the national LFS enriched with National Register data.

Youth who are NEET have typically left the formal schooling system, either by choice or because they dropped out involuntarily. Here, comprehensive second-chance programmes provide school dropouts and other youth with an opportunity to catch up. Some programmes enable participants to obtain an occupational qualification, while others focus on preparing youth to reintegrate into mainstream education and training programmes. Successful second-chance programmes display several characteristics that distinguish them from mainstream education. These include a focus on individualised teaching methods; flexible and needs-based curricula; holistic assessment approaches; small classes with low student to teacher ratios; multi-professional teams supporting learners, welcoming learning environments; and partnerships with mainstream education institutions, local communities and employers (UNICEF, 2017[59]).

Also, for Flanders it has been shown that youth who dropped out of school early, often face the inability of the combination of rigid school and working duties. Due to family obligations, predominantly financially, for example as the oldest male child, they found it impossible to keep being enrolled in school and working full-time (Van Praag and Clycq, 2019[37]).

In Flanders, there are several options for second-chance education. Centres for Adult Education offer second-chance education opportunities (*tweedekansonderwijs*) in the evening but also during the day or over the weekend. Another option is self-study and sitting examinations at the Secondary Education Examination Board. Both options are similarly popular. Over the last two years, around 23% of early school leavers registered for evening classes and around 20% of early school leavers registered for the self-study option within two years after leaving school early. It is also possible to re-enrol in formal upper secondary schooling after dropping out, basically to go back to the standard education path, but this is not popular and only done by a very small share of dropouts (around 2%).

Second-chance education offers early school leavers the opportunity to obtain a degree of secondary education based on a modular structure. It also allows young adult learners to set out their individual learning path. As a financial incentive, graduates are paid back their tuition fees when obtaining a diploma. Data on registration for this type of second-chance education shows that it has become increasingly popular, especially among youth not speaking Dutch as a first language. In 2018/19 close to 27% of early school leavers with a home language other than Dutch registered for this type of second-chance programme, up from just 14% in 2013/14. Also, among youth with a home language different from Dutch the programme gained in popularity, though not as strongly from 18% to around 23% enrolling.

Those who wish to catch up on their own on the education they have missed can sit examinations before the Secondary Education Examination Board and obtain their secondary education diploma or certificate in this way. The Examination Board does not organise lessons or provide textbooks, so self-study is the only option. Data on the numbers of early school leavers who enrol for this path up to two years after leaving school early show that this option is equally popular among youth speaking Dutch and those who do not speak Dutch at home. Data on the outcomes of these students show however, that those who have migrant parents are less likely to obtain their certificate in this way – with about a third of the cohorts 2016-18 obtaining their diploma, against 40% of those with native-born parents.

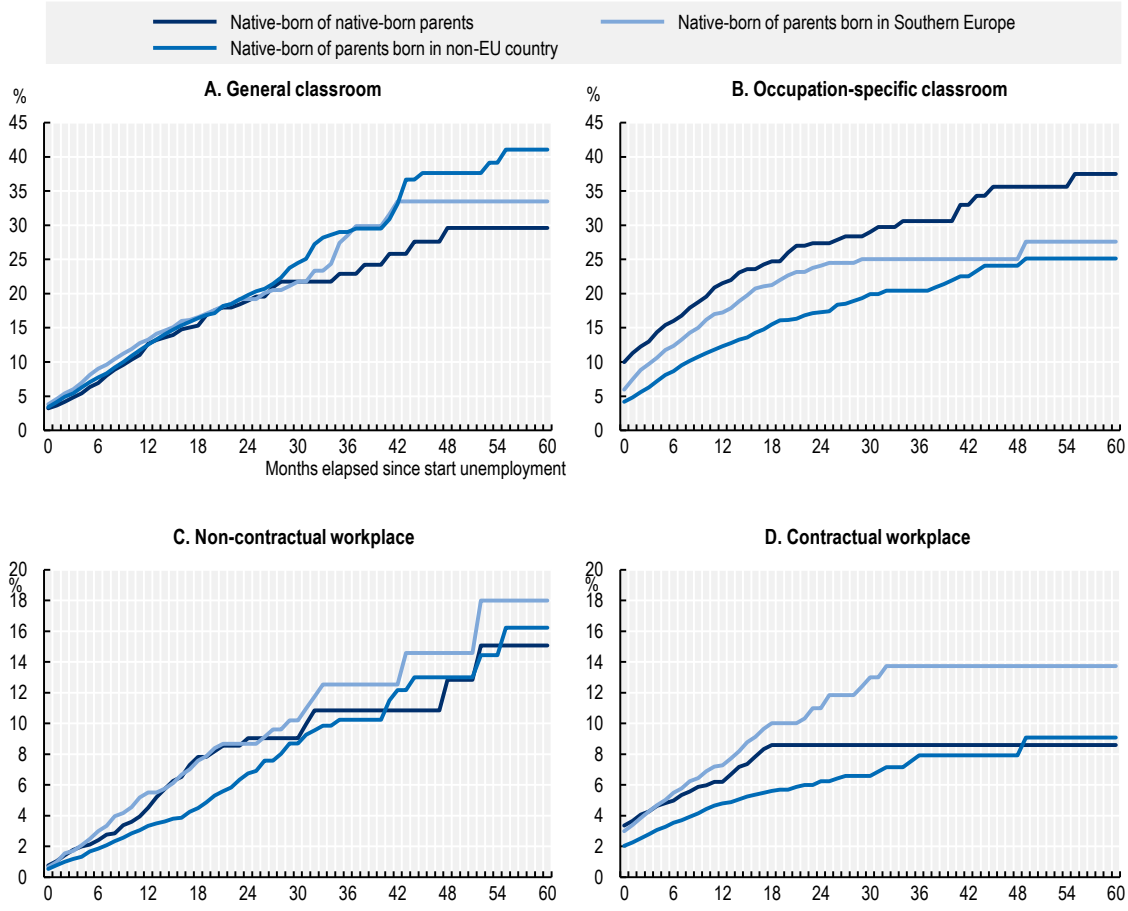
In addition to large scale public programmes, also the private sector can help in tackling the NEET challenge. In Germany, for example, the Joblinge programme trains mentors and connects young people with the labour market (OECD, 2021[60]). Participants are mostly between 16 and 25 years of age and over two-thirds have migrant parents. Based on a close collaboration with regional employers, individual mentorship and skills training the programme supports youth to find their own vocational training place or job. In Slovenia, the PUM-O programme helps young people ready themselves for re-entering formal education or finding a job. The ten-month programme operates with small groups of 15 to 20 youth with an average age of 20 years old, supported by three mentors (OECD, 2021[9]).

Youth with migrant parents are unrepresented in most effective ALMPs

Recent research for Flanders shows that native-born jobseekers with non-EU-born parents are less likely to find a job than native-born jobseekers with native-born parents, even after taking into account differences in socio-demographic background characteristics (De Cuyper, Havermans and Vandermeerschen, 2018[61]). At the same time, native-born youth with migrant parents from a non-EU country are somewhat underrepresented in occupation-specific and workplace training (see Figure 6.19), which – as discussed in Chapter 4 – are the training types that have a larger return in terms of employment entry (Wood and Neels, 2020[62]). It is not entirely clear to what extent this is linked to their own interest in these types of measures or the preference of employers, but the intervention of PES counsellors who encourage job seekers to take part in these options was shown to be an important factor (Elloukmani and Raeymaeckers, 2020[63]).

Figure 6.19. Native-born youth with non-EU-born parents are underrepresented in workplace and occupation-specific training

Cumulative incidence of entering a PES training measure, by duration since start of unemployment and parents place of birth, 2006-16, Flanders



Note: Population aged 18 to 64. The unit of analysis is all unemployment spells (pooled) that start within the 2005-16 period. The cumulative incidence, or failure function, is computed as $1-S_t$ from the life table using the Kaplan-Meier approach. For a detailed discussion of the PES training measures, see Chapter 4.

Source: OECD Secretariat adapted from Wood and Neels (2020[62]), *Wegwijs naar werk. Longitudinale analyse en evaluatie van inburgerings- en activeringstrajecten in Vlaanderen, 2005-2016*, https://www.vlaanderen.be/publicaties/wegwijs-naar-werk-longitudinale-analyse-en-evaluatie-van-inburgerings-en-activeringstrajecten-in-vlaanderen-2005-2016-eindrapport-van-de-viona-leerstoel-migratie-integratie-arbeidsmarkt, based on the MIA panel (respop) (see Chapter 4 for further discussion).

Box 6.5. Ensuring educational continuity for Ukrainian refugee children in Flanders

The school years 2021-22 and 2022-23 have seen many more refugee children entering the Flemish education system. According to Statbel figures, about 20 700 children and young people from Ukraine were registered in Belgium between February and December, including more than 3 300 pre-schoolers (aged 2.5 to 5), about 7 500 children of primary school age and about 7 000 young people of secondary school age. To ensure the integration of these children and young people into the education system, a number of measures have been taken, captured in an Emergency Act adopted by the Flemish Parliament on 22 April 2022.

During the first months of the refugee crisis, many refugee children continued to follow a Ukrainian curriculum remotely, supported by the online platform of the Ukrainian Ministry of Education. The Flemish Department of Education and Training opened schools in emergency villages, alongside current schools, to provide children with collective home schooling under the guidance of teachers speaking Ukrainian.

As a significant proportion of the Ukrainian minors only arrived in Flanders late in the school year, the Flemish Government supported summer schools in July and August, that could be tailored to their needs, for example with a focus on learning Dutch and trauma support. The organisation was in the hands of schools and local authorities, whereas the Flemish Government was responsible for the funding.

Primary and secondary schools receive extra resources for extra pupils in an accelerated manner initially until the end of school year 2022-23. There are also measures in place to address overcrowding and teacher shortages, including budget for adding modular units to school grounds and extra funding for recruitment and support staff. In preschools, primary, and secondary education, extra teaching periods, (para)medical, social, and psychological and remedial staff are provided. The Centres for Pupil Guidance and reception education for non-native newcomers also receive extra support. Pre-primary schools, too, can count on extra financial support: for each foreign-language newcomer younger than five years old, a school is entitled to an additional EUR 950.

To facilitate and ease access to both upper secondary and adult vocational training, entry fees are waived for Ukrainian refugees. Finally, in higher education institutions, Ukrainian students have been able to benefit from pre-existing policies and measures in place for refugee students, including host language training or support, psychological counselling, academic guidance, introductory courses, scholarships, and reserved study places.

Source: https://onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/nl/oekrainecrisis.

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Notes

[1] In this report, the term “youth with migrant parents” refers to all youth who are migrants (foreign-born) themselves but arrived during childhood, as well as those who are native-born but have at least one parent who is foreign-born.

[2] The OECD Secretariat defines the proportion of early school leavers as the share of people aged between 15 and 24 who are neither in education nor in training and have gone no further than lower-secondary school. This differs from the Flemish Department of Education and Training who defines an early school leaver as a person aged 18 to 24 who has not completed upper secondary education and is no longer in any form of education or training.

[3] This applies to individual schools only. In cases where several schools within the same school cluster co-operate, 12 teaching hours are allocated.

[4] Non-Dutch-speaking newly arrived children are not registered separately in primary education. The figure accounts only for newly arrived children for whom the schools requested additional teaching hours. Since not all schools apply for additional teaching hours, the number of newly arrived children is underestimated.

[5] After 2016, the support for further education coaches was substantially increased. Now, every school who offers reception education receives 0.9 teaching hours per non-Dutch-speaking newcomer during the reception years.

Working Together for Integration

Skills and Labour Market Integration of Immigrants and their Children in Flanders

Flanders experienced large inflows of immigrants over the past decade, coming from an increasingly diverse range of countries, with growth rates outpacing the Netherlands, France and Germany, as well as Belgium as a whole. While integration outcomes have improved in recent years, some of the core indicators remain unfavourable in international comparison, especially for non-EU immigrant women, refugees, and youth with migrant parents. Against this backdrop, Flanders has developed a comprehensive integration policy. This review, the fourth in the series *Working Together for Integration*, provides an in-depth analysis of the Flemish integration system, highlighting its strengths, weaknesses, and potential areas for improvement. Earlier reviews in this series looked at integration in Sweden (2016), Finland (2018) and Norway (2022).

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