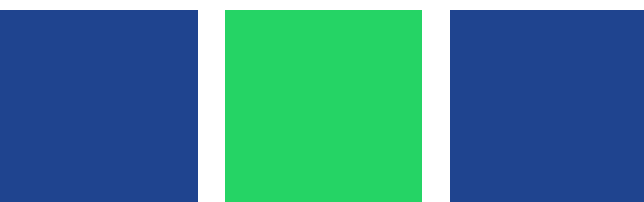# CEDEFOP REFERNET BELGIUM

IMPLEMENTING EUROPEAN PRIORITIES IN VET

Making national VET agile, flexible, innovative, attractive, inclusive and quality assured

BELGIUM

Implementing European priorities in VET

Making national VET agile, flexible, innovative, attractive, inclusive and quality-assured:
Belgium

Thematic perspectives provide national overviews of specific themes in a common format and offer comparative dimension across the EU Member States, Iceland and Norway.

This thematic perspectives series complements the general information on vocational education and training (VET) policies and systems provided in VET in Europe database and the Timeline of VET policies in Europe. The themes presented in the series feature high on the European agenda.

This thematic perspective was prepared based on data/information from 2023.

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Contents

CHAPTER 1. Introduction

Belgium is a federal state and as such, responsibilities regarding all vocational education and training (VET) matters, distributed across the federated entities: three Regions (Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels) and three Communities (Flemish-, French-, and German-speaking). For this reason, two National Implementation Plans (NIPs) coexist for addressing the European priorities as set out in the VET Recommendation and the Osnabrück Declaration: one for the Flemish Community and one for the French-speaking part of Belgium. However, the Region of Brussels is bilingual and thus priorities and measures set out in both NIPs can affect its residents.

In the NIP for Flanders, the main challenges, policy initiatives and reforms are linked to five themes, namely the promoting lifelong learning, strengthening dual learning, reducing the number of early school leavers and activating NEETs, increasing the attractiveness of VET by improving its image and updating the infrastructure and enhancing innovation and digitalisation in VET for a greener economy and industry.

In the NIP of the French-speaking part of Belgium, the main challenges, policy initiatives and reforms are reorganising work-based learning (WBL) and apprenticeship programmes to establish them as a sector of excellence (Walloon Region), securing upskilling, qualifications and employment integration pathways; promoting accessibility and inclusiveness in training; facilitating professional certification and recognition of acquired knowledge; strengthening digital skills (Walloon and Brussels Region) and encouraging skills development; tackling skills mismatch; strengthening digital skills (French Community (*Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*)).

The following chapter describes the advances made in 2023 in the priorities set out in both NIPs, presented in the second chapter in line with the six priorities as defined in the VET Recommendation. Further, the report presents the involvement of VET stakeholders, the main achievements since 2020 and the challenges of implementing measures planned in the NIPs. This text is not intended to be exhaustive nor include information from all stakeholders in every priority, but rather to provide an overview of the implementation of certain measures, the factors that have enabled progress to be made and the challenges encountered.

CHAPTER 2. Main policy developments in 2023

2.1 Agile and resilient VET, adaptive to labour market needs

The French-speaking Regions and the Flemish Community have all made progress towards a VET system that is adaptive to labour market needs, in particular by increasing the attractiveness of VET programmes.

In Wallonia, related projects are being implemented within the scope of the Walloon Recovery Plan (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2023k), which also includes deploying digital teaching methods, new solutions for the labour shortage in the construction sector, investing in training infrastructure and equipment, etc.

Concerning apprenticeship policies, financial incentives are provided to training companies, offering work-based training for adults. For 2023, the key indicators are: 3 425

bonuses awarded to training companies, which is an increase of more than 6.5% compared with the initially set target of the project. These bonuses amounted to EUR 2 568 750 in 2023. Further, learners enrolled in training areas of skills shortages, can get their enrolment fee reimbursed; in 2023, the reimbursement of enrolment fees amounted to EUR 1 241 855 and there were 4 400 reimbursements. Moreover, the Walloon Government approved the Decree on the Internship Agreement on 1 June 2023. This provides a regulatory basis for training under an internship agreement and for professional practice internships within the Walloon Institute for apprenticeship and entrepreneurial training in small and medium-sized enterprises (IFAPME) network, as well as for the granting of associated bonuses.

In Wallonia, IFAPME launched at the end of 2022 the learning platform ITSLEARNING, which is designed for teaching and brings together all stakeholders in WBL, centred on the learner and their training pathway. The tool effectively improves the WBL quality by enriching the current pedagogy with its specificities, notably through the integration of digital skills, as defined in the European Reference Framework (DigComp). The platform relies on the pooling of tools and resources, and on the exchange of best practices related to the development of learning and their evaluation, adapted to the specific needs of WBL. To this end, by the end of 2023, 172 calls for collaboration were proposed to all concerned trainers. These have helped to create and feed a library of educational resources for 76 training modules in various sectors. Other business applications and resources for trainers in the network have also been acquired and added to the platform, covering a multitude of professions in the mobility and food sectors.

Further, to optimise the pedagogical support for trainers and learners, a team of techno-pedagogues and e-pedagogue coaches was established in 2023 and has been offering support since then.

Additional digital equipment such as virtual reality headsets, computer hardware, and work practice simulators have also been provided to learners in the apprenticeship scheme in 2023.

Within the scope of the Walloon Recovery Plan, the Lifelong Digital Training project started in 2023 and aims to promote digital inclusion and to strengthen training in this field. It focuses on three main areas: the creation of nine Digital Factories in Wallonia, offering training and certification of digital skills, the development of a digital platform to support professional training and career guidance, and finally the implementation of an innovative digital education strategy in collaboration with the Walloon PES, Forem, and IFAPME. This infrastructure also aims to encourage interaction between learners and to foster digital projects in partnership with businesses. Since June 2024, the digital learning platform, Digilearn Studio, offers a physical and virtual space where public service education, training and guidance professionals can share and access resources to integrate digital learning into their pedagogical practices in an innovative, effective and efficient way. The platform meets three key functions: designing resources (training content and courses), sharing (resources, methods and best practices) and exploring (new tools, methods, facilities).

Brussels continues its efforts to upskill its citizens to meet labour market needs, with the deployment of Training and Employment Centres (*Pôles Formation Emploi*, PFE) (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2023b). The PFE centres are structures aimed at meeting the needs of the labour market: Technicity (technological industries), Digitalcity (digital professions), Logisticity

(transport and logistics), and Construcity (construction). The centres bring together industry social partners, the Brussels public employment service, Actiris, and the Brussels public training services, Bruxelles Formation and VDAB Brussel. In 2023, each centre approved a joint 2024 action plan with its partners, including the training and validation of skills offer. Moreover, building on industry round tables held in 2022 and leveraging European resources of the Recovery and Resilience Plan, the centres initiated the implementation of shortage occupations action plans. These plans include quantified commitments from public and private stakeholders and are organised around four key pillars: guidance, incentives, training, and collaboration.

In the French Community, the reform of vocational education, as part of the Pact for Excellence in Education (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2023h), aims to improve students' well-being and success by preparing them for concrete jobs directly linked to employment. In June 2023, the governance model decree for vocational education course options was adopted, which seeks to more effectively address current socio-economic needs, by eliminating outdated vocational education options and creating new, relevant ones. Socio-economic actors play a key role in these decisions. Since February 2024, a decision-support tool provides vocational schools with information to help them plan a coherent and modernised range of training offers, responding to tackle labour shortages.

In Flanders, the Flemish Partnership for Dual Learning continues to improve the dual learning system in secondary education (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2023f), which had been piloted between 2015 and 2019, and dual learning in adult education, which was introduced in September 2022. In 2023, a steady growth in various aspects of dual learning in secondary education was apparent: the number of programmes offered in a dual format, the number of students enrolled, the effective availability of dual programmes, and the number of agreements entered into force. The number of students enrolled in dual format in 2023 increased to 2 968, an increase of 22% compared to 2022. Since September 2023, companies and students have been eligible for a simplified premium: system, replacing the previously five measures with two premiums, the qualifying workplace learning premium for companies and the alternating training student premium to promote participation in dual learning and apprenticeship schemes. This system makes financial support more accessible by streamlining the application process and reducing paperwork, which increases the participation of companies and students. Dual learning is also supported by the Regional Technology Centres (Regionale Technologische Centra, RTCs), which ensure a closer alignment of education and training with the needs of the labour market, bringing together partners from education and the business world. In October 2023, the Ministerial Council decided to assign an additional task to the RTCs regarding the support of dual learning: facilitating local workplace learning opportunities, including dual learning, between education institutions and companies. The Flemish Government is providing RTCs with the financial support of up to EUR 1 million for the period between 1 October 2023 and 31 August 2024. This support will also be available in subsequent years.

2.2 Flexible VET, providing progression and lifelong learning opportunities

The French Community is continuing its reform of secondary vocational education programmes, aiming at more flexible and modular pathways designed to be adaptable to labour market needs and individual learning needs, to ensure learners' well-being and academic success. The vocational education pathway (PEQ) organises the training and qualification of learners over three years, from year 4 to year 6 of secondary education (with an optional year 7) ([1]). The learning scheme becomes modular in vocational education: the training process is organised into learning units which are validated progressively. The PEQ system is being implemented from 2022 to 2026, with the integration of additional learning years into the system ([2]). In the 2023-24 school year, years 4 and 7 in all qualification section secondary education were organised under the PEQ system for the first time. Once fully implemented, the new pathway will organise qualifying education in 10 sectors, leading to 173 trades.

2.3 Innovative and excellent VET

In Belgium, the topic of digital transition is included in all the main governmental plans, such as the Go4Brussels Strategy, the Walloon Recovery Plan, the Digital Education Strategies of the French Community (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2023e). For compulsory education it is included within the systemic reform programme *Pacte pour un Enseignement d'excellence* (Pact for Excellence in Education) (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2023h) and in non-compulsory and adult education in the Flemish Recovery Plan.

The Flemish Government adopted the digital education action plan in December 2020 (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2023d) to address challenges such as improving the availability of ICT infrastructure in schools and creating the knowledge centre, Digisprong, as a unit within the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, to support them. In 2023, the knowledge centre evolved into an integrated unit within the Department of Education and Training within this ministry, with various new activities, such as policy preparation and implementation, and communication campaigns.

Many improvements have been made since the launch of the digital education action plan, both in the availability of ICT infrastructure for all schools in compulsory education and in the development of teachers' ICT skills, as well as in the provision of digital learning resources. Therefore, in 2022, all schools received funding to provide every student and teacher with digital devices, to be allocated until 2026. In 2023, schools were also offered information tools on the sustainability and circularity of digital devices. They were thus further encouraged to develop an ICT policy plan, including a long-term strategy regarding ICT hardware, software, competencies, and integration across multiple domains. Simultaneously, a large-scale Technical Support Instrument (TSI) project on team-oriented ICT coordination was completed.

([1]) Secondary education in the Belgium education system starts at in the seventh year of general education and lasts 6 years with the option of a seventh additional year. For better understanding, see the education chart in Cedefop. (2024). *Spotlight on VET Belgium.* Luxembourg: Publications Office.
([2]) See also: Cedefop, & Refernet (2023g). Learning becomes modular: Vocational education pathway (PEQ): Belgium-FR. *Timeline of VET policies in Europe.* 2023 update [online tool].

In 2023, 1 000 schools completed Digisnap, a tool which is based on Digital Competence Framework for Educators (DigCompEdu) and aims at assessing the digital competencies of education professionals at the school level, followed by the implementation of a professional development plan based on advice. Additionally, the educational resources platform, KlasCement, received several updates, and its database will continue to grow in the future.

Innovation in VET in the Flemish Community also continues with the introduction of extended reality tools, which provide hands-on training in realistic environments, enabling students to practise skills safely and efficiently (see Section 2.4) as reflected in the XR Action Plan, which was approved in 2021 (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2023a) and that the Flemish Government has implemented since then, with a special focus on the VET sector. Since 2023, schools can loan out XR material through the Regional Technological Centres. They can use it for educational purposes provided that ICT coordinators and school teachers participated in continuous professional development initiatives on the use of XR materials.

The French Community is continuing the implementation of its digital strategies for compulsory, non-compulsory and adult education. In 2023, adult education benefitted from the renewal of the fixed allowance paid to lecturers, who use their private computer equipment for teaching and the exemption of adult education staff from the cost of continuing training in digital technology. Further, a curriculum based on emerging needs in terms of digital professional skills was also developed in 2023, and two calls for collaboration for the design of online course modules, representing 102 additional projects, were announced.

Since the school year 2023/24, the Manual, Technical, Technological, and Digital Training (FMTTN) competency framework has been part of the polytechnic core curriculum in compulsory education, with learning outcomes including finding information online or using AI. Moreover, as of the school year 2023/24, digital skills are mandatory in all initial teacher education, regardless of discipline (2022 Decree amending the 2019 Decree defining the initial training of teachers).

In 2023, the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility continued to support schools and teaching teams funding initiatives, such as support and guidance for techno-pedagogical advisers in the education network to strengthen the digital skills of teachers and teaching staff and the launch of a second call for collaboration adding 34 additional projects. The Pix tool, which suggests relevant training and online resources based on teachers' self-assessments of their digital skills, helping schools and institutions create tailored courses and skills enhancement pathways, was introduced in January 2023. These pathways will also lead to skill certification (non-compulsory and adult education at this stage) and, ultimately, their recognition. Available throughout the French Community, Pix supports compulsory, non-compulsory, and adult education, both teachers and learners alike.

Finally, in 2023 the publication of the State of play of the Adult Education report (*État des lieux de l'Enseignement de Promotion Sociale* report) was published, the conclusions of which provide an opportunity to develop a vision and guidelines for strengthening and optimising adult education. In addition to defining objectives common to all players in the sector, including digital technology, this report also encourages the adaptation of the range of services currently offered to this target audience by the General Service for Digital Education.

In Wallonia, the lifelong digital training project, supported by the Recovery and Resilience

Plan, addresses the need to train young people, seniors, workers, and job seekers in the latest digital advancements related to the digitalisation of professions. It includes links to apprenticeship schemes and new curricula developed by IFAPME, such as training for Digital Transformation Advisor, which was developed in 2023-24 and started in September 2024 and offers advice and support to companies, administrations and self-employed people in the renewal, change and transition of their digital, IT and digital practices.

2.4   Attractive VET, based on modern and digitalised provision

The Flemish Community is focusing on the professionalisation and further expansion of new technologies to support learning outcomes and to enhance the attractiveness of technical and vocational secondary education.

Following a lengthy preparation period, the lending service for hardware and software, along with the associated professional development pathways, XR Academy, officially commenced on 1 September 2023, following information campaigns in spring. The XR Academy offers programmes for the continuous professional development of VET teachers, who want to be involved in XR. It aims to lower the technical barriers and to make teachers and educational staff familiar with XR. If schools want to make use of the XR lending services, they must first follow training through the XR Academy. There is especially strong interest from schools, and the initiatives are now operating at full speed. The Learning Network XR, which is a collaboration between five universities of applied sciences promoting the integration of XR into the classroom in Flanders, provides various workshops, demo sessions, and one-on-one pathways, while the accompanying XR research is progressing as planned. This lending service is part of the overall XR Action Plan implemented by the Flemish Government since 2022 (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2023a).

The French Community administration has produced publications on Artificial Intelligence (February 2024) and Extended Reality (May 2024) to support the integration of digital technology in education. The XR publications were enhanced with a video featuring interviews with prominent figures from the French-speaking scientific community.

2.5   Inclusive VET promoting equal opportunities

On matters of inclusivity, vocational training stakeholders in Brussels regularly highlight the precarious situations experienced by the adult public in training. In the situation of poverty, people's basic needs are not met, which can have a negative impact on the follow-up and completion of vocational training (poor learning conditions, absenteeism or even dropout).

In 2019, Bruxelles Formation, the vocational training provider for adults in Brussels, launched the Precariousness Plan for facilitating access to training (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2023i). In line with this plan, new developments took place in 2023, which include the successful launch of the Trainee Inclusion and Digital Autonomy'plan to ensure the inclusion and retention of individuals facing a digital divide. Support has thus been organised for training centres in implementing the best solutions to support trainees and enhance their digital skills throughout the training period. In 2023, continuous professional development of trainers was expanded, focusing on support for people with learning difficulties commonly observed among socio-economically disadvantaged learners. The plan also introduced a new initiative to

address food insecurity with the provision of meals at the training centres or access to an affordable food struck at the centre. Finally, based on the analysis of data on precariousness and living conditions collected in previous years, the report, *Precariousness among trainees at Bruxelles Formation and its partners: an overview of the living conditions of jobseekers in training*, was published on 17 October 2023, the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty: which will allow progress to be made in the implementation of the plan.

The Flemish Government launched the Lifelong Learning Partnership in 2020 to promote VET, lifelong learning, and key competencies. This partnership steers the Setting a course towards a learning Flanders' action plan, which aims to create a culture of inclusive lifelong learning in Flanders.

The annual report of 2023 provides a complete overview of the developments and the achieved progress. Amongst the rolled-out projects, the learning and career account was enhanced in 2023 to improve the personalised use of lifelong learning incentives. The learning and career account aims to offer individuals tailored insights into their training, orientation, and guidance rights, with special efforts targeting vulnerable groups. Further, research began on bridge figures and accessible conversation methods to guide the learning activities of hard-to-reach target groups. In June 2023, the online app *Training Compass* was launched, which provides an overview of all adult education offerings, as well as various practical information. The app welcomed 84 515 unique visitors, accounting for 104 292 views between June and December 2023 (ReferNet Belgium; Cedefop, 2023).

2.6 VET underpinned by quality assurance

The Flemish Government approved a new Decree on common principles regarding the quality assurance of training (and validation) pathways outside the formal education system (2019), leading to professional qualifications, formally linked to the Flemish qualifications framework (*Vlaamse kwalificatiestructuur*) (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2023i). Since then, each year new training pathways leading to professional qualifications outside formal education, and new validation pathways, have been recognised within this quality framework. In 2023, these amounted to 23 training programmes and seven validation programmes, respectively.

Each recognised professional qualification programme is screened after an initial cycle, as provided for in the regulations. This happens during an on-site quality inspection undertaken by an independent supervision team and was first carried out in 2022. In 2023, there were 11 inspections (nine training programmes and two validation programmes), with four programmes undergoing reassessment in a follow-up inspection, following initial remediation advice in 2022. All 11 programmes received a positive result with the advice to extend them.

In 2023, an adjustment of the common quality framework for professional training (*Gemeenschappelijk kwaliteitskader voor beroepskwalificerende opleidingen*, GKK) regulations was introduced, allowing non-educational providers, such as private training companies, industry associations or other non-traditional education providers, the possibility to organise professional qualification programmes based on a partial qualification instead of the full professional qualification, offering them the possibility to offer more customised learning.

The French Community introduced the Quality Assurance National Reference Point (NRP)

for VET to bring together all relevant stakeholders within the French-speaking part of Belgium in 2022. In 2023, the cooperation agreement formalising the commitment of all parties involved was renewed for three years. The NRP held its first intervision (peer-led reflection) session in March 2023. The session focused on how French-speaking Belgium could enhance collaboration with stakeholders and better coordinate existing processes to more effectively meet the training and skills needs of the labour market.

Similarly, the Flemish Community established the NRP in 2021 and developed its 2021-2023 implementation plan. The NRP is hosted at the Flemish Agency for Higher Education, Adult Education, Qualifications and Study Grants (AHOVOKS). In March 2023, the Flemish NCP hosted a peer review of the organisation of quality assurance in VET in Flanders.

CHAPTER 3. Involvement of VET stakeholders in the implementation of policy developments related to NIP

3.1 French-speaking part of Belgium

Stakeholders implementing policy developments related to the NIP in the French-speaking part of Belgium are the main actors involved in VET on a daily basis. Covering geographically both the Walloon Region and Brussels, the French Community (Wallonia-Brussels Federation) is responsible for the implementation of all policies for formal education (compulsory and adult education), along with directly involved actors such as teaching teams in schools or psycho-medico-social centres and guidance providers.

The implementation of the vocational education pathway (PEQ) requires the mobilisation of several services within the French Community, for example:

(a) the Directorate for Compulsory Education (DGEO) supports schools in implementing the PEQ and draws up the certification profiles; its Department for the Organisation of Ordinary Secondary Schools is responsible for implementing and monitoring changes to the PEQ at the organisational level;

(b) the Directorate General for Steering the Education System (DGPSE), with the Internetwork Institute for Continuing Professional Training, organises inter-network PEQ training courses for teachers of the common general education course and the grouped basic option.

The digital strategies for compulsory, non-compulsory and adult education require the involvement of a vast number of stakeholders for the different axes of implementation. For developing digital governance, the IT service provider ETNIC is responsible for developments relating to the creation of the system's new digital architecture, and the Walloon and FC's Administrative Simplification and Digital Administration Service (eWBS) is the partner responsible for developments relating to the creation of the system's new digital architecture. Defining digital content and resources for learning, on the other hand, brings together consortia from universities and higher education institutions to carry out the scientific validation of distributed educational resources, while the General Inspectorate and other departments develop new resources focusing on innovative elements of the core curriculum. The

continuous mobilisation and active participation of stakeholders in the education system, such as school networks, the schools themselves, unions, etc., represent an important lever for the implementation of digital strategies.

The Quality Assurance National Reference Point for VET is also located within the French Community and requires the involvement of all VET operators, i.e., compulsory education, adult education, Le Forem, Bruxelles Formation, IFAPME, SFPME, and the Skills Validation Consortium. All signatory partners of the collaboration agreement participate collaboratively throughout the entire work programme. Each partner contributes to the best of their abilities, ensuring a balanced effort.

Projects within the scope of the Walloon Recovery Plan are implemented by the Public Service of Wallonia (SPW), Le Forem, IFAPME and players in the employment and vocational training landscape (e.g. skills centres). Each actor has its specific responsibilities, such as planning, implementation, monitoring, assessment, the awarding and payment of bonuses, etc.

Finally, in Brussels, Bruxelles Formation teams are responsible for the precariousness plan: the development, implementation, monitoring and assessment of the action plan, etc.

The involvement of diverse stakeholders in the implementation of VET policies in the French-speaking part of Belgium highlights the collaborative nature of education and training reforms. Each stakeholder, from government agencies to education institutions and training providers, plays a specific and vital role in ensuring the success of these policies. This coordinated approach not only enhances the quality and relevance of vocational education, but also ensures that policies are responsive to the evolving needs of the workforce and society.

3.2   Flanders

The Flemish education and work policies benefit significantly from the structured contribution of diverse stakeholders and their involvement in partnerships. By drawing on the knowledge and contributions of each group, these initiatives benefit from an expert environment, enabling them to adapt measures effectively to the changing needs of society and the labour market.

The Flemish Partnership, Dual Learning, involved in the improvement of the dual learning system in secondary education, is a council with representatives drawn from employers and employees, education institutions, other providers of dual learning, the Flemish public employment agency, VDAB, the Department of Work and Social Economy, and the Department of Education and Training of the Flemish Community. It provides advice on dual learning and related topics to the Ministers of Work and Education and develops a common vision of apprenticeships and dual learning. The Partnership has several legal authorisations, such as company accreditation; supporting and mobilising companies with a view to strengthening the supply of workplaces; monitoring the implementation of apprenticeship agreements with regard to workplace training, etc.

Every education provider retains their autonomy in the organisation of dual learning. The Department of Work and Social Economy supports the Flemish Partnership and the sectoral partnerships in their role to ensure the supply of qualitative workplaces for students in dual learning, in collaboration with different stakeholders. AHOVOKS, the agency for Higher

Education, Adult Education and Qualifications, is responsible for standard pathways within dual learning (i.e., the curricula on which learners' individual learning plans are based).

The Partnership Lifelong Learning has created an Action Plan involving government agencies to provide monitoring, planning, implementation, and support, including the Work and Social Economy, Education and Training, VLAIO, the Flemish PES, and the European Social Fund Flanders. Initiative initiators are invited to meetings, where members provide feedback to enhance these initiatives, ensuring direct government involvement. Members of the partnership serve as sounding boards for the Action Plan's activities, while government agencies oversee and support their implementation. The work area focuses on applying research findings and contributing to the Action Plan's mobilisation efforts.

The Expertise Centre for Innovative Learning Pathways, within the Department of Work and Social Economy, conducts various studies on lifelong learning, including learning organisations, individual learners, and learning opportunities.

Lifelong learning is vital for reskilling and upskilling citizens amid societal transitions and labour market challenges. Engagement from various policy domains, SMEs, civil society, nonprofits, and local authorities is needed. The Expertise Centre for Innovative Learning Pathways leads efforts to inspire, connect, and innovate with diverse partners, emphasising tailored approaches and expanding partnership membership.

The Knowledge Centre Digisprong supports Flemish school leaders, teachers, and ICT coordinators in using educational technologies for the digital education action plan (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2023d). An advisory group, including representatives from education, research, government, and student organisations, guides this effort. The advisory group of the Knowledge Centre also oversees the XR action plan, in collaboration with various stakeholders from Flanders and the provinces. Regional Technological Centres are supported by universities and colleges in its implementation (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2023a).

For the implementation of quality assurance for non-formal VET, the Department of Work and Social Economy and the Department of Education and Training establish regulations. The Department of Work and Social Economy also supports recognition applications and chairs the recognition committee. The Recognition Committee, with VDAB, VLAIO, and AHOVOKS, oversees the recognition of professional qualification programmes. On-site quality is monitored by the Flemish Social Inspection, VDAB, and the Flemish Education Inspection. Providers register in the learning and validation qualifications database (LED) and provide monitoring data.

The Flemish education policies therefore demonstrate the power of structured involvement and collaboration amongst diverse stakeholders. By leveraging the expertise and contributions of various groups, these policies effectively adapt to the evolving needs of society and the labour market.

CHAPTER 4. Achievements of implementation

4.1   French-speaking part of Belgium

Progress made in increasing certification levels in the French Community through the implementation of the PEQ contributes to making VET agile and resilient. During

implementation, emphasis was placed on information and communication through various means and channels (information sessions given in schools, publication of information circulars, organisation of webinars and workshops for teaching staff, training opportunities, etc.), which enabled all stakeholders affected by the implementation of this reform to be informed on a large scale.

In the French Community, the Digital Strategy for Education (adopted in 2018 for compulsory education and in 2021 for non-compulsory and adult education) underlines the need to invest in digital skills in education (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2023e). The supported projects represent a significant digital leap, particularly for adult education institutions, as they have had to develop a strategic digital plan and identify their needs in terms of tools and/or materials to enhance their learners' skills. Notable progress has been made in the latter, with the implementation of several new developments, mainly the Decree of the Government of the French Community laying down the conditions for the organisation of hybrid teaching in adult education, which was adopted on 21 December 2022. Digital and blended learning are one of the key elements of the adult education reform project, notably through the upskilling of teaching staff, but also through support for the creation of adapted educational content.

The context of reflection fostered by the project to strengthen and optimise adult education is an unprecedented opportunity to rethink the organisation and implementation of strategies, including those based on digital education. A review of the state of adult education was carried out in 2023 under the previous government. The findings led to the identification of nine main projects. Given the change of government in 2024, the work, although initiated under the previous legislature, has been put on hold with a view to being resumed by the new government.

The ongoing mobilisation and sustained participation of stakeholders within education institutions and networks is a significant lever for the implementation of technical and vocational education systems that make use of digital technology.

Lastly, the pooling of high-quality resources, designed in response to needs identified by adult education stakeholders, helps to ensure that all those involved have the necessary skills.

The result of several complementary action programmes, the Walloon Recovery Plan guides the Walloon Government's actions in terms of jobs, the economy, the environment and the climate. 74 projects are dedicated to employment, encompassing themes such as apprenticeships, the vocational training offer, certification, digital skills, etc. All these projects are at different levels of progression, which can be checked online. Progress is facilitated by the participation of all stakeholders, the synergy between them, and a focus on delivering user-centred services.

4.2   Flanders

The Flemish Government strongly supports the value of dual learning and has fostered collaboration between the Education and Work policy domains. Assessment of the Learning and Working system has highlighted the need for change, leading to reforms that enhance labour market-oriented education. International best practices, showcasing the effectiveness of workplace learning in high-quality training programmes, have underpinned these reforms.

The government's commitment to these improvements is reflected in the progress made, with better alignment between educational outcomes and labour market needs.

The Digital Education Action Plan (DEAP) benefitted from the COVID-19 period, as it prompted strong determination to enhance digitalisation in education. Monitoring data shows an increased willingness among school leaders, teachers, and students to sustainably integrate ICT into their educational practices. However, specific projects may encounter implementation challenges.

The Partnership for Lifelong Learning was established by the Flemish Ministers of Work and Education, highlighting the political importance of lifelong learning and the need for cross-policy collaboration. It emphasised knowledge-sharing among its various members, addressing the lack of awareness across different policy domains. The Action Plan consolidated various initiatives, making government efforts on lifelong learning more coherent and manageable. There is a sense of urgency due to societal transitions and labour market challenges, as Flanders lags behind in lifelong learning participation. Although the field is evolving, with many good practices, efforts are often fragmented. Funding and human resources have been allocated to the Expertise Centre for Innovative Learning Pathways, resulting in a unified lifelong learning dashboard and a shared research agenda in collaboration with the Partnership.

CHAPTER 5. Challenges of implementation

5.1 French-speaking part of Belgium

The challenges related to the implementation of the Walloon Recovery Plan are significant. With a budget of over EUR 7 billion and comprising more than 300 projects, the plan aims to address current social, economic, and environmental challenges, including the impacts of recent crises such as the historic floods of July 2021. In March 2022, 42 priority projects were identified based on their potential to create quality jobs and have a positive impact on the environment. The signing of a joint declaration with social and environmental partners in March 2022 facilitated progress, with over 85% of projects initiated to date, and some already completed.

In the French Community, the main obstacles encountered during the implementation of the PEQ (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2023g) include the need for a new organisation within qualifying schools, transitioning from a dual system (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2023c) to a unified system applicable to all options. This transition has elicited concerns and hesitation among stakeholders. These obstacles have been overcome through collaboration among stakeholders and by emphasising communication and change management support. This has reassured stakeholders on the ground and facilitated acceptance of and adaptation to the PEQ guidelines.

The main remaining obstacle in the implementation of the digital strategy for compulsory education in the French Community lies in the need for cooperation agreements between the Walloon Region and the Brussels-Capital Region. Another challenge, as the new digital architecture of the education system is gradually developed and reporting on various measures is implemented, is to optimally utilise the available data.

Efforts have been made in recent years and months to promote the adoption of digital tools within the education system. While the use of digital tools is increasing, transformative uses such as hybrid teaching remain limited. Two main obstacles are identified in adopting these transformative practices, including hybrid teaching:

(a) developing teachers' skills and their willingness to use digital technologies;
(b) insufficient development of high-quality digital and/or hybrid educational content, and questions about the current capacity to scale up these contents.

Initiatives are currently being pursued to address these challenges.

The main obstacles encountered during the implementation of the French Community's National Reference Point and in setting its objectives include the additional workload for agents directly involved in the tasks. These challenges have been addressed by redistributing roles through the formation of multiple working groups, aiming to better distribute the workload.

At the level of the Walloon and Brussels regions, in collaboration with Adult Education, the NIP of the French Community announced the desire to simplify the landscape of professional certification by implementing the 'Professional Skills Certificate' (CCP) common to the five authorities responsible for professional certification: Le Forem, IFAPME, Bruxelles Formation, SFPME and the Skills Validation Consortium (CVDC). Implementing this certification presents numerous challenges, as it requires complete consensus among all involved parties and updates to legislation that depend on multiple ministries. Following numerous working group sessions, the involved parties prepared a preliminary draft agreement in July 2023. This draft is now with the relevant ministers, awaiting further progress and the finalisation of this large-scale project.

5.2   Flanders

The Flemish Partnership Dual Learning formulated an action plan at the beginning of 2023, identifying a number of challenges for dual learning and proposing actions in response. The partnership aims to reshape a previously negative image through positive communication and to align with federal frameworks that decrease administrative burdens for schools and enterprises. Moreover, the Partnership offers a framework to face challenges; the initiative lies with stakeholders, with support from the administrations.

The DEAP and the XR Action Plan exemplify the efforts being made in education innovation. The Knowledge Centre Digisprong acts in an advisory capacity, respecting educational autonomy while engaging all stakeholders. Meanwhile, the XR plan faces challenges in finalising agreements for hardware and software, with strict deadlines and diverse provincial stakeholders, necessitating frequent coordination to ensure alignment and the timely resolution of problems. Both initiatives emphasise inclusive stakeholder involvement, practical support, and alignment with overarching educational goals, promoting comprehensive progress in digitalisation and the integration of extended reality within Flemish education.

With regard to the Partnership Lifelong Learning, overcoming organisational interests presents challenges, as members advocate for their own agendas, which can constrain open dialogue. The partnership composition struggles with balancing diverse policymakers and stakeholders, often questioning the government's dual role as both neutral secretariat and

implementor of various policy measures. Information dissemination within the field remains insufficient, hindering effective engagement. The partnership lacks a clearly defined mandate, impacting its effectiveness. Meanwhile, the action plan consolidates mainly government-led initiatives without direct partnership input. Moving forward, there will be a focus on enhancing research efforts, and a mobilising initiative with widespread participation to disseminate findings. The upcoming 2024 work programme aims for thematic depth and practical insights. Partnership members actively shape future mandates, aiming to strengthen their role in upcoming legislative periods.

As outlined in the previous sections, the implementation of programmes falling within the scope of quality assurance in non-formal VET is moving forward, but the number of recognition applications for professional qualifying pathways remains low, influenced by various factors. For instance, initiatives such as 'learning jobs' aim to benefit unqualified youth by providing work experience, culminating in the assessment of previously acquired competencies and leading to professional qualifications. These experimental pathways, developed by VDAB, Syntra, and industry sectors, were given a regulatory framework in 2023, and will undergo testing from 2024 to 2027.

Additionally, certain professional pathways are lengthy and complex and not always well-suited to learners' needs. In response, adjustments to labour and education regulations in 2023 have allowed non-educational providers to offer partial qualification-based vocational pathways.

Looking ahead, the Department of Work and Social Economy has been planning initiatives in 2024 to increase awareness and highlight the societal value of professional qualifying pathways to the market.

CHAPTER 6. Conclusions

The VET systems in the Flemish Community, the Walloon and Brussels Regions, and the French Community have made strides towards the European priorities of becoming more agile, flexible, innovative, attractive and inclusive. These initiatives encompass a broad range of reforms and projects, each contributing to a comprehensive VET landscape that addresses current and future workforce demands.

In Wallonia, the focus has been on making VET more attractive through work-based learning and apprenticeships, supported by financial incentives for companies and learners. Advances made in the priorities set out in the NIP often occur within the scope of the Walloon Recovery Plan projects. Noteworthy achievements in 2023 include the awarding of bonuses to training companies and the reimbursement of enrolment fees for learners in shortage trades, demonstrating a clear commitment to supporting both trainees and training providers. Additionally, the enhancement of digital learning platforms and the provision of advanced equipment, such as VR headsets, underscore Wallonia's commitment to the integration of technology in VET.

The unique context of Brussels, characterised by a large number of highly qualified professionals alongside a significant proportion of the population engaged in low-skilled and often unstable jobs, necessitates efforts focused on inclusive and equitable vocational training.

Initiatives such as the Precariousness plan (Cedefop, & ReferNet, 2023l), which supports learners in completing their training, and the Trainee Inclusion and Digital Autonomy plan, which addresses digital divides, are crucial to ensuring that even the most disadvantaged individuals can access and benefit from vocational training programmes.

The French Community is making progress in implementing its Digital Strategies for compulsory education and for non-compulsory and adult education, developed using a holistic and multidimensional approach, by gradually overcoming obstacles. After having created a regulatory context favourable to digital education, it is now a question of stimulating transformative uses of the resources and tools that have been made available (e.g. curricula integrating digital technology, Pix) and of mobilising stakeholders to promote a rise in digital skills and the scaling-up of new behaviours (e.g. the sharing of educational resources).

The Flemish Community has emphasised the dual learning system in secondary education, which has seen growth in the number of programmes offered, learner enrolment, and company participation. The introduction of the 'qualifying workplace learning premium' and the 'alternating training student' premium reflects efforts to simplify and incentivise participation in dual learning schemes. The Regional Technological Centres play a crucial role in aligning education with labour market needs, receiving substantial financial support to facilitate workplace learning opportunities. These efforts are bolstered by initiatives such as the Lifelong Learning Partnership, which promotes lifelong learning and key competencies, particularly targeting vulnerable groups through various support measures and digital tools. Additionally, the Flemish Government has invested in digitalisation, ensuring that both educators and students have access to modern technology and resources that enhance learning experiences.

Overall, the commitment across the regions and communities to enhance VET reflects a comprehensive strategy to adapt to labour market needs, support lifelong learning, and leverage digital tools to provide modern, inclusive education. By aligning educational offerings with industry demands, and fostering an environment of continuous improvement and innovation, they aim at being well-positioned to equip learners with the skills necessary to succeed in an evolving labour market. The collaborative efforts and targeted initiatives demonstrate a robust framework for achieving excellence and inclusivity in VET.

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