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1. Introduction

This VET policy brief produced by Cedefop presents a snapshot of vocational education and training (VET) policy developments in Flanders, Belgium, between 2020 and the beginning of 2023. It presents the context and the challenges the country faces, a selection of the latest VET-related statistics as well as the national priorities until 2030 identified in the Flemish national implementation plan. This VET policy brief provides information from Cedefop monitoring and analysis on the implementation of the [Council Recommendation on VET](#) and [Osnabrück Declaration](#). It offers stakeholders a regular source of information on VET policy developments that could be used for future policy making.

2. National VET context and challenges

2.1 National VET context

Belgium is a federal State comprising three Regions (Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels) and three Communities (Flemish, French, and German speaking). Citizens can access three different Vocational Education and Training (VET) systems: Flemish (BE-FL), French-speaking (BE-FR) and German-speaking (BE-DE). Brussels is a specific case, as both BE-FR and BE-FL systems coexist. The Flemish Government is responsible for the formal education system, including initial secondary VET in the Flemish system. Compulsory education covers learners aged 5 to 18, unlike most European countries where compulsory schooling ends at age 16.

The Flemish VET system is inclusive and offered at secondary, post-secondary and tertiary levels. VET strategy, policies and measures are negotiated with social partners, leading to formal sectoral agreements. As a result, social partners are involved in organising programmes of alternating work and education, and continuous vocational training through framework agreements. Students can attend a VET programme after the age of 14 at school, while from age 15 onwards students can opt to pursue an apprenticeship combining company and school-based learning (Cedefop; Bruxelles Formation, 2022).

2.2 Challenges

The main challenges Flanders has been facing in 2022 relate to the need to modernise VET, increase its attractiveness and relevance to labour market needs. Low participation in lifelong learning, particularly among lower-educated individuals, and a notable gap compared to the EU average is a challenge for Flanders and in Belgium overall (Flanders, 2022). Collaboration across policy areas is needed to guide early school leavers and NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) toward employment or qualifying

pathways. Attractiveness remains a hurdle for VET, encompassing issues related to image, infrastructure, and staying current with industry needs.

Moreover, Flanders is facing a growing shortage of teachers, while some teachers lack the skills and the qualifications required for their job. This poses a significant challenge for teachers who are required to constantly adjust in new, unpredictable situations such as online teaching, use of new resources and technologies in education and an increasingly updated curriculum. The rapid changes in the labour market, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, underline the difficulty of aligning VET with evolving demands. These challenges necessitate sustained efforts to improve the effectiveness and relevance of VET.

3. National VET policy priorities

In response to the [2020 Council Recommendation on VET](#) and the [Osnabrück Declaration](#), the national implementation plan in VET with a focus on Flanders was published in 2022. It identified the following priorities:

- a) Promote VET and increase participation in lifelong learning;
- b) Modernise VET infrastructure and offer, including dual learning;
- c) Support the professional development of teachers;
- d) Ensure quality, transparency, and recognition of VET qualifications.

4. Main policy developments between 2020 and 2023

4.1 Promote VET and increase participation in lifelong learning

The Flemish government developed several actions to promote VET and stimulate lifelong learning. The [STEM Agenda 2030](#) published in June 2021 focuses on incorporating more STEM courses and careers in vocational education. It promotes lifelong learning by strengthening STEM skills in society overall, including groups at risk. Measures aim at strengthening participation in VET for girls, for groups at risk of exclusion and linking VET to a network of stakeholders like social partners, STEM providers and intermediate organisations. The agenda will increase literacy in STEM subjects and benefit society overall long-term by increasing STEM courses and the number of STEM specialists in the labour market (Cedefop, 2023).

In 2020, the Partnership for Lifelong Learning (Partnerschap Levenslang leren) was established (Belgium, Flemish government, 2022). The Partnership has representatives from the Socio-Economic Council of Flanders (SERV), the education and training providers, the private training providers, the Lifelong Learning Committee of the Flemish Education Council (VLOR) as well as a higher education expert from the Vlerick business school. It prepared the [Action Plan *Setting course to a learning Flanders*](#), which was

adopted by the Flemish Government in December 2021, and sets the framework for making lifelong learning a reality in Flanders. Its objective is to achieve a participation rate of 60% in lifelong learning, by 2030, a target set by the EU. The action plan consists of a 'compass' that includes 10 goals and 47 actions listed under 7 'flagship initiatives'.

The Department of Education and Training in Flanders launched a call between 1 December 2020 and 31 December 2023 to develop educational transition pathways for pupils in the second and third stage of vocational secondary education at risk of early leaving. This call funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) is taking place in the wider context of a Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling en Beroepsopleiding (VDAB) update of their Flemish Youth Work Plan involving the Specialised Mediation Team ([Gespecialiseerd Team Bemiddeling – GTB](#)) and other [Socio-Economic Council of Flanders](#) (SERV) partners. The aim of these projects is to identify at an early-stage young and vulnerable people and provide them with educational training or a professional qualifying pathway ensuring they won't drop out (Cedefop, 2023).

In 2021, the [Higher Education Advancement Fund](#) was adopted by the Flemish Government. Its purpose is to increase participation in lifelong learning by providing flexible and modular pathways to learners including the development of micro-credentials. A total of EUR 60 million have been awarded for 12 grants to colleges and universities in the academic years 2021-22 and 2022-23. They develop actions to strengthen digital forms of learning, develop flexible pathways for several target groups, including vulnerable learners and in cooperation with social partners.

In 2022, the Flemish government adopted a [decree enabling dual learning system in adult education](#). As of September 2022, Adult Education Centres (CVO) can offer dual tracks which consist of 50% of work-based learning and eventually lead to a professional qualification. Following the pandemic outbreak, multiple initiatives were implemented in Flanders, around areas that will provide more equal opportunities and access to labour market to everyone. These initiatives revolve around STEM, Lifelong Learning, the Modernisation of secondary education, teacher shortage, improving infrastructure in the Flemish Technological Centres (RTCs), adopting a Flemish Youth Work Plan and adopting a green skills roadmap.

4.2 Modernise VET offer and infrastructure

Various initiatives aimed at modernising the VET offer and infrastructure in Flanders have been developed and continue to be implemented. In December 2020, the [Digital Action Plan](#) (Digisprong) was approved by the Flemish Government, and in 2021 its flagship activities started. The plan is part of the Flemish Resilience Plan and the shortage in learning resources offered in distance learning programmes which is even more challenging for VET. During its implementation phase, ICT infrastructure at schools was improved including a device for each learner and better equipment for teachers and schools altogether. In addition, policy-making initiatives began by the provision of tools to create

policies, a statute for ICT coordinators passed and the Knowledge Centre for Digital Education was inaugurated (Cedefop, 2023).

In Flanders cross-educational network cooperation were promoted by participating in projects such as ErasDU and Connectief, aiming at increasing [internationalisation and mobility](#) in VET. The ErasDu project, funded by Erasmus, opened in 2021 to learners in full-time technical and vocational education, including special secondary education. It established cross-educational network cooperation setting up mobilities for learners and staff in VET. In addition, teachers, and staff from Technical and Vocational Education (including Buitengewoon secundair onderwijs) can now participate in 'job-shadowing' activities with a foreign partner.

The [InnoVET programme](#) was approved in 2021 and is currently implemented to support teachers in aligning school instruction with the needs of the future (Cedefop and ReferNet, 2023). The programme was designed by the Flemish government for schools offering technical secondary education (TSO) or vocational secondary education (BSO) courses. It familiarises teachers and students with labour market needs through 13 projects during 2019-2020 and 18 more from 2020 to 2022. Schools developed and tested innovative tools and methodologies in smaller-scale projects supporting young people during the pandemic and afterwards, to facilitate the transition to labour market. This was achieved using ICT technologies, techniques, and machines, as well as digital materials. Examples of these technologies include VR and AR tools, SCARA robots, and multimedia application, while thorough case studies exploring artificial intelligence and STEM subjects were explored (ReferNet and Cedefop, 2021).

4.3 Support the professional development of teachers

VET teachers' contribution is key to improving the VET provision and addressing the national priorities.

In May 2021, the [Extended Reality Action Plan](#) was adopted by the Flemish Government. It focuses on the use of innovative technologies and aims at supporting teachers acquire specific skills in the domains on augmented reality (AR), mixed (MR) and virtual reality (VR). The plan provides the necessary equipment to secondary VET schools, both software and hardware, alongside training materials increasing in this way staff professionalisation and XR knowledge in Flemish schools (Cedefop, 2023). In 2022, a new collective agreement was introduced and included a better induction programme for novice teachers, more room for core tasks and ICT support, in an effort to make the profession more attractive.

4.4 Ensure quality transparency, and recognition of VET qualifications

All changes which are implemented in the VET system in Flanders require evaluation, monitoring and setting of quality standards. In 2019, the Flemish government approved a decree on the common principles to ensure the quality of training and validation pathways

outside the formal education system, which is in place in Flanders since 2019. The [quality assurance process](#) targets five quality areas: learning objectives, design of the learning process, learner guidance, learning process evaluation and internal quality assurance processes.

Following the decree, several validation standards for professional qualifications have been developed during the period 2020-2022. About 40 private and public education and training providers have been accredited since 2020 to act as assessment centres and validate non-formal and informal learning. In addition, since the adoption of the decree, 26 training pathways leading to professional qualifications outside formal education and 7 validation pathways have been recognised in line with the quality assurance framework (Cedefop, 2023).

5. Statistical information in relation to EU targets

Belgium efforts to reduce the rate of early school leavers and NEETs are paying off. In 2022 the rate of early leavers from education and training dropped at 6.4% and has reduced in half in the last 10 years from 12% in 2012, while it is 3.2 percentage points below the EU average and the 9% EU target for 2030. The 9.2% NEET rate for 15–29-year-olds is very close to the EU target of 9% by 2030 and has reduced from 14.4% in 2012.

Continued efforts are needed to increase the percentage of adults (25-64-year-olds) with a learning experience in the last 12 months. Latest available data in 2022 indicate this at 34.9% slightly better than the EU average but below the EU target of 50% by 2030.

In 2022, the total percentage of recent IVET graduates aged 20-34 with a work-based learning experience as part of their vocational education and training was 49%, below the EU target of 60% set for 2025.

The overall employment rate for recent IVET graduates (20-34-year-olds) in 2022 was 79.6%, on track to meet the 82% target set by Council Recommendation for 2025. More indicators and their progress compared to the EU targets are presented in the below table.

Table 1. **European vocational education and training policy dashboard: Belgium**

Type of indicator ⁽¹⁾	Indicator	Last available year	BE	EU-27	Policy Document	EU target (year)
VET for developing a lifelong learning culture						
Progress	Adults (25–64-year-olds) with a learning experience in the last 12 months (%) *	2022	34.9	39.5	Skills Agenda	50% (2025)
					Council Resolution on EEA	47% (2025)
					ESPR Action Plan	60% (2030)
Progress	Low-qualified adults with a learning experience in the last 12 months (%)	2022	12.5	18.4	Skills Agenda	30% (2025)

(1) [Definitions](#) on the type of indicators are available.

Progress	Unemployed adults with a learning experience in the last 4 weeks (%)	2022	13.2	13.2	Skills Agenda	20% (2025)
Context	Employment rate for 20–64-year-olds (%)	2022	71.9	74.6	ESPR Action Plan	78% (2030)
Context	Early leavers from education and training (%)	2022	6.4	9.6	Council Resolution on EEA	<9% (2030)
Context	NEET rate for 15–29-year-olds (%)	2022	9.2	11.7	ESPR Action Plan	9% (2030)
VET for Resilience, transitions, sustainability and excellence						
Progress	Adults (16–74-year-olds) with at least basic digital skills (%)	2021	54.2	53.9	Skills Agenda ESPR Action Plan	70% (2025) 80% (2030)
Progress	Employment rate for recent IVET graduates (20–34-year-olds) (%)	2022	79.6	79.7	Council Rec on VET	82% (2025)
Progress	Recent IVET graduates (20–34-year-olds) with a work-based learning experience as part of their vocational education and training (%)	2022	49	60.1	Council Rec on VET Council Resolution on EEA	60% (2025)
Context	25–34-year-olds with tertiary attainment (%)	2022	51.4	42	Council Resolution on EEA	45% (2025)
Context	Gender employment gap (%)	2022	7.6	10.7	ESPR Action Plan	To be halved (2030)
Context	People at risk of poverty or social exclusion (1000s)	2022	2 144	95 284	ESPR Action Plan	15 million decrease (2030)
Context	Employed ICT specialists (1000s)	2022	277.5	9 370.2 ^e	2030 Digital Compass	20 million, with convergence between men and women (2030)
VET for the European Education Area						
Progress	Learners in IVET who benefitted from a learning mobility abroad (%) **	2021	0.4	2.1 ^{dV}	Council Rec on VET Skills Agenda	8% (2025)
Context	Average number of foreign languages learned in IVET	2021	1.1	1.2		

Available flags: d - definition differs, e- estimated, V - Cedefop estimate. Special value: - not available

* Eurostat data (Adult Education Survey, special calculation excluding guided on-the-job training)

** Provisional estimates affected by the Covid19 pandemic

Source: Cedefop. [European VET policy dashboard](#)

6. Conclusion

Important goals with tangible milestones, addressing the policy priorities outlined in its national implementation plan, were successfully established in Flanders.

Promoting lifelong learning and increasing participation, has been prioritised in Flanders. Diverse measures have been implemented to address this issue in a well-rounded manner, including the implementation of an inclusive STEM agenda. It targets groups at risk and aims at equipping graduates with the skills of the future to succeed in their career, in areas needed by the labour market. Early school leaving is an area of interest for Flanders, and several initiatives have been designed to tackle the high numbers of people on the verge of giving up their education. In this effort, new educational pathways have been created and emphasis has been given to apprenticeships.

Considering the priority of supporting teachers and educators, measures have been taken that reflect how important it is not only for individuals' professional development, but

what it means for the European dimension of VET, and its capacity to keep up with changes in innovation. Measures include the adoption of the InnoVET programme and the multiple projects that were implemented under its umbrella, aiming at aligning school instruction with market needs. The programme also supported teachers during the pandemic as it employed innovative technologies, tools and applications to help them explore ways to assist young people. In the same light, the Extended Reality Action Plan was adopted by the Flemish government. The Plan helps teachers acquire skills in cutting-edge technologies, which are essential long-term to support VET innovation in Flanders.

To ensure the quality and transparency of qualifications acquired outside formal education and training, an elaborate quality assurance process is being implemented currently. Initiatives within the Flemish Resilience Plan, alongside procedures to revise professional qualifications, reflect ongoing efforts to renew VET pathways and incorporate the latest innovations.

The measures which were implemented in Flanders since 2020 are multifaceted and linked with each other having lifelong learning, innovation, and the adoption of recent technologies at the core, targeting unemployment, and assisting learners at risk of exclusion in the best ways possible.

Further steps in the above measures and those planned in the NIP yet to be implemented are crucial for VET's relevance in a dynamic societal and economic landscape.

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