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Flemish Policies on Early School Leaving: A Field Description & Policy Analysis

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Introduction

This RESL.eu Working Paper gives an overview of the major policy measures taken and issues raised in relation to reducing early school leaving (ESL) in Flanders. As the Region of Flanders is a semi-autonomous part of Belgium, over the past decades it has gained almost full competence over its educational system. Consequently, when discussing education in Belgium it is necessary to clarify about which region one reports. This Working Paper is based on a document analysis and new data from interviews and focus group discussions with policy makers and stakeholders in Flanders. Although there is some overlap in the three main chapters of the report with respect to specific issues, each section has its own focus and angle on the issues raised by policy makers and stakeholders in Flanders.

Section A describes the changes in Flemish policy not only with respect to the domain of education but also to the domains of work and social policy. We discuss these changes and the tensions in rationales they brought and still bring about within Flanders. Due to the relevance for the issue of ESL, we particularly address the reform plans for secondary education and the implementation of the European Qualification Framework within the Flemish context. These discussions highlight an important tension between two central underlying rationales: is education primarily concerned with human development and acquiring generic competences or should it be more directly linked to the labour market? In other words, should education prepare individuals to participate in a knowledge society or in a knowledge economy?

Section B presents some key educational and labour market characteristics of the two research areas of the RESL.eu-project in Flanders: the cities of Antwerp and Ghent. Next to these general descriptions, local policy networks and existing practices in reducing ESL that are relevant for these research areas are discussed.

Finally, section C outlines the processes of implementation and resistance to European initiatives related to ESL. It is clear that Flanders - certainly on the level of the Flemish Government - enthusiastically inserts itself within broader EU education policy. Whereas there is no strong general resistance to EU policy among stakeholders, there is some discussion about Flanders being too eager to be an early adopter of EU education policy.

A. – Identification and analysis of educational and social policies related to reducing ESL in Flanders

1. Changing social, economic and/or cultural contexts and their impacts on the Flemish educational system starting from the Lisbon Strategy (2000)

In line with the former EU Lisbon Strategy (2000) and current EU2020 Strategy, Flanders has developed the following consecutive long-term plans: the Pact of Vilvoorde (2001), the Flanders in Action Plan or VIA (2006) and the Pact2020 (2009). Similar to the EU Strategies, Flanders' future plans are focussed on developing a knowledge and innovation based economy. The current Flemish Reform Program presented to the EU is built on both the VIA plan and the Pact2020 (Flemish Government 2013).

As is reflected in the documents mentioned above, Flanders is well aware of the relatively high number of high-performing pupils in compulsory education, of whom many attain higher education degrees. Nonetheless, the Flemish future objectives and strategies also show awareness of the fact that many pupils, especially those with a lower socio-economic status (SES) and/or immigration background, experience problems of grade retention and streaming down the hierarchically organized tracking system and finally leave education unqualified. It is within this spirit that the Flemish results on the PISA tests are also widely referred to by policy makers and educational stakeholders, a trend perceived in other EU countries too (Grek 2009). On the one hand the top tier mean results for math and science are highlighted to motivate the preservation of the early tracking in general and vocational secondary education, while on the other hand the large social disparities between the top and bottom scores are linked to the wide social stratification in educational outcomes of the Flemish secondary education. It is within this context of growing awareness that the Flemish Minister of Education is preparing a specific 'Action plan Early School Leaving', to be presented to the wider public in the fall of 2013. In the sections 1.a and 1.b we present the main ESL related educational, social and employment policy initiatives that were initiated in Flanders after the Lisbon Strategy (2000) up until the autumn of 2013 when this report was finalized.

a) Changes in the Flemish education and training system

From 2000 onwards, the Flemish compulsory education system has been transformed substantially. These transformations were both driven by a social justice and an economic efficiency rationale. Although the plans for and implementation of these transformations do not always refer directly to strategies outlined by the European future strategies, nor to its Flemish translation in the VIA Plan and Pact2020, in many ways the changes in the educational system target reduction of social stratification and reducing of early school leaving.

A first major transformation in the Flemish education system since 2000 is the implementation of the Flemish Equal Educational Opportunities Policy ("Gelijke Onderwijskansenbeleid – GOK"), which was initiated by the GOK-Decree adopted by the Flemish Parliament in 2002. The GOK Policy aims to assure that every pupil has the chance to develop his/her full potential irrespective of its socio-economic and ethnic background. Another central goal is to counter exclusion, segregation

and discrimination in education. To address these issues, GOK Policy consists of four main components: (i) the right to enrol your child in any school of choice; (ii) the development of Local Consultation Platforms (“LOP”) that bring together the different school principals, other educational partners, socio-cultural organisations and local policy makers in a certain geographical area to support and critically discuss a locally coordinated policy on GOK; (iii) the establishment of the Commission for Pupil Rights (“Commissie inzake Leerlingenrechten”), which is responsible for legal disputes concerning the right to enrolment; (iv) and finally the integrated support that mainly consists of extra financing for schools to implement a GOK Policy. Schools in secondary education should use these extra GOK resources for prevention and remediation of developmental and learning difficulties, language skills education, intercultural education, school career orientation, socio-emotional development and pupil/parental involvement.

In 2006 the former Minister of Education and Training launched a first Truancy Action Plan that avoided to focus merely on symptoms by tackling the phenomenon of truancy from a holistic perspective. The actions were directed towards all actors involved, namely the school, the centres for student guidance (CLB), external welfare partners, municipalities, the Department of Education and Training, and of course, the pupils and parents. To ensure the right to education for all youngsters, an integral policy with a focus on raising awareness, prevention, supervision and sanctions was prescribed (Flemish Government 2006b). In March 2012 the Flemish Government introduced a new and updated action plan to combat truancy. The actions proposed were still directed towards raising awareness, prevention, supervision and repression. However, in this reformed Truancy Action Plan the local authority plays a larger role and the plan now also includes special target groups and addresses specific forms of truancy and ‘unacceptable’ behaviour. Starting in September 2012, all enrolments, school changes, presences and absences during the entire school began to be monitored more closely. Furthermore, scientific research into the profile of truants and the influence of the school environment on truancy was financed to support the reformed Truancy Action Plan (Flemish Government 2012).

In 2008 another important legislation was voted: the Learning and Working Decree (Decreet Leren en Werken, July 10th 2008). This decree addresses all young people of compulsory school age (below age 18) by providing workplace learning. It ambitiously required the youngsters’ full-time commitment, the provision of customized trajectories leading to full qualifications, and a better coordination between part-time vocational secondary education and the apprenticeship programs provided by SYNTRA. In the wake of this new legislation for learning and working programs, these issues were communicated and discussed with the relevant stakeholders and they were held more accountable. Another central objective of the Learning and Working Decree is the continuous investment in guidance of the youngster’s trajectory during the workplace learning. To achieve this it is deemed crucial to heighten the cooperation between actors within education and the Flemish Employment Agency (VDAB). In a specific project, these trajectory counsellors are supported to invest in preliminary as well as bridging trajectories (“voor- en brugtrajecten”) and personal development trajectories (“Persoonlijke Ontwikkelingstrajecten or POT”). The implementation of the Learning and Working Decree is planned to be evaluated and this evaluation should lead to policy adjustments in the near future. In a joint recommendation of the Flemish Educational Council and the Socio-Economic Council of Flanders (VLOR & SERV 2010 - see also section A.3), the most important stakeholders from both the educational domain and the field of employment, stressed the

urgency of a mid-term evaluation of and adjustments to the original Decree because of concerns about its effectiveness and impact.

Another recent and on-going development (from 2005 onwards) at the crossroads of educational and employment policies is the development of a Flemish Qualification Structure by the Flemish Government in cooperation with the most important stakeholders from the policy domains of education (organized in the Flemish Education Council, VLOR) and employment (represented in Socio-Economic Council of Flanders, SERV). The implementation procedure was initiated in the spring of 2012. The Flemish Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Training (AKOV) launched a pilot phase to operationalize the procedure leading to several recognised professional qualifications. Currently the implementation phase for both professional and educational qualifications is in process (AKOV 2012). The development of a Flemish Qualification Structure should, as is proposed under the umbrella of the European Qualification Framework, enhance the promotion of the international mobility of students and workers and promote lifelong learning. The plans and implementation mostly follow the economic rationale of improving the transition from education to work, also outside of the Flemish borders and in a wider European labour market context.

Recently (May 2013), a reform plan for secondary education has been agreed upon by the Flemish government after a long process of consulting major political players, stakeholders in the educational and employment domains, and experts on education (e.g. Commission Monard 2009). The rationales for this reform plan are plural and differ according to the perspectives of the stakeholders involved, but reducing early school leaving is certainly one of the main drivers for this restructuring. Nonetheless, only the basic principles of the restructuring have been agreed upon and many specifics still have to be worked out and implemented by the next Flemish Government (2014-2018). These main principles are a strengthening of the third grade of primary education with a focus on science and technology and (Dutch) language proficiency; a broader first grade of secondary education with more diversity in educational domains and differentiation according to performance levels for each pupil; and a new matrix structure of the second and third grade of secondary education with horizontal options regarding areas of interests, and vertical options related to the finality of a pupils' educational career in secondary education (higher education, direct labour market access, or leaving both options open). The restructuring plan as it has been presented in the autumn of 2013 still has to receive a final approval from the councils representing the most important stakeholders in the fields of education and the labour market (respectively VLOR and SERV).

b) Changes in Flemish social and employment policies

When regarding major economic changes since 2000 one cannot ignore the impact of the global economic crisis. All around Europe, among the groups that struggle most in the shrinking labour market are the low- and unqualified workers, especially when they recently enter(ed) the labour market (VDAB 2011; 2013). An interesting side effect, however, is that the Flemish ESL rate has dropped since the start of the economic crisis (2008) for the group of pupils in vocational education that are close to graduation. This group, being traditionally a significant proportion of the unqualified outflow, now sees less labour market opportunities and are expected to choose to finish their vocational track before transiting to the labour market (Van Landeghem et al. 2012). The Flemish Employment Agency (VDAB) has repeatedly reported the decreasing job opportunities for early

school leavers, which not only includes those without a qualification but also those who only attained certificates from part-time vocational education or apprenticeship programs. Pupils graduating from full-time upper secondary education generally have more opportunities on the labour market but these opportunities also widely differ between specific educational tracks and domains. An important and enduring mismatch between the education system and the labour market is the high demand for technically skilled workers and the shrinking graduates from technical level secondary education (VDAB 2011; 2013).

Both the Federal and the Flemish Regional Government have policy levers to combat youth unemployment. The Federal Government can primarily intervene by adjusting Belgian labour law or by lowering taxes for employers as an incentive to hire low and unqualified youngsters while the policy responsibilities of the Flemish government mostly focus on investment in the human capital of youngsters. An important Federal program to enhance job opportunities for school leavers is the Starters Job System or Rosetta Plan. This policy measure focuses on young people that just made the transition to the labour market. Very recently, and related to current widespread policy attention towards youth unemployment in the EU, the Council of Federal Minister for work also approved the strengthening of the Activaplan (Federal Government 01/07/2013). This is an enhancement of the existing Rosetta plan and specifically focuses on low-skilled youngsters that enter the labour market by lowering employers' labour costs for low-skilled youngsters.

At the Flemish Regional policy level, the Flemish Government and the social partners reached an agreement in 2012 regarding a new Career Agreement ('Loopbaan-akkoord') targeting young people entering the labour market without an upper secondary education degree. The VDAB has developed a collective approach for this target group and aims to offer thousands of unqualified school leavers a work experience in employment projects every year. In the long run the goal of these projects is to guarantee the opportunity to a work experience and to strengthen the qualification level for all unqualified school leavers. The agreement acknowledges that this approach should be worked out together with a policy for urban areas and additional attention should go to youth with an immigrant background. The Flemish Government will therefore consult the local social partners and the local authorities involved (De Tijd 17/02/2012).

Another interesting new tool to address unemployment among early school leavers are the Educational Qualifying Training Trajectories ('Onderwijskwalificerende Opleidingstrajecten', or OKOT) initiated by the Flemish Employment Agency (VDAB). The first objective of OKOT is to respond to the needs of the labour market in finding employees for bottleneck professions. By means of a training contract for a maximum term of one year, unemployed jobseekers who have left compulsory education for at least two years can combine a cost-free trajectory in adult education, higher vocational education or a specialisation year in vocational secondary education combined with an apprenticeship or an additional training from VDAB.

OKOT also surfaced as an interesting remedial practice for early school leavers in the interviews and focus group discussions with stakeholders from the labour market and among representatives of centres for adult education (CVO). During our interview with Fons Leroy, director-general of VDAB, he pointed out that the condition of having left compulsory education for at least 2 years results in a group of applicants wherein many have acknowledged the importance of a diploma or certificate after having some experience with and/or difficulties when entering the labour market.

This, according to him, results in a higher motivation for attaining a diploma or certificate through OKOT. This was also confirmed by local stakeholders.

Besides the initiatives and projects described above, the following Flemish policy instruments have been designed:

- Work Placement ('Stageovereenkomst'): A placement agreement is accessible for youngsters of a non-compulsory school age and combines practical training in a company with the theoretical lessons on professional knowledge for becoming an entrepreneur.
- Entry-level Training ('Instapopleiding'): An Entry-level Training is an employment measure that makes job seekers more attractive to employers. During an Entry-Level Training, the youngsters' vocational training or study is finished in a private company.
- Entry-level Internship ('Instapstage'): An Entry-level Internship Job can be proposed to youngsters who left education without a qualification from upper secondary education. With an Entry-level Internship youngsters have a chance at a first work experience, earn a salary and strengthen their position on the labour market.

2. Drivers and objectives influencing ESL related transformations in the Flemish education and training system

In Belgium, and by extension Flanders, education is put forward as one of the most important means to achieve upward social mobility. Yet, since the overall democratization of education from the 1960's onwards, the differences between groups based on their SES background remain strong and stable (Groenez 2010). While the Flemish educational system yields many youngsters with a degree of general education of whom it is expected that they will pursue higher education, the number of low-skilled youngsters leaving education is equally noteworthy in the context of a knowledge economy. Especially the low proportion of pupils graduating from technical education is repeatedly highlighted, also because of the high demand for technically skilled workers on the labour market. In this context, ESL is also conceived as a central problem for the future labour market prospects of youngsters in Flanders (Flemish Parliament 1998; 2003; 14/03/2006; 2010).

In the policy domain of employment, especially since the start of the economic crisis, more economic rationales – predominantly related to youth unemployment rates and its high societal costs – have stimulated policy action regarding ESL. Whereas in 1983 the rising youth unemployment was one of the reasons to raise the compulsory school age from 15 to 18 years (VDAB, 2011), new plans to fight youth unemployment were developed during the past years. During the implementation of the Competence Agenda (2007-2010) by the Flemish Ministry for Work, which was endorsed by the most important Flemish Educational partners, the Flemish government aimed for tackling the main socio-economic challenges and to contribute to sustainable growth and innovation targets in line with the EU2020 Strategy.

At the crossroads of Flemish educational and employment policies, the implementation of the Flemish Qualifications Structure (FQS) accentuates two main rationales in changing the Flemish education and training system, namely the tensions between the central objective of education to

serve a broad personal development opportunities for youngsters on the one hand and the economic objective of preparing youngsters for specific professions on the labour market on the other. While the implementation of the Flemish Qualification Structure has shifted the attention mainly to pinning down the professional qualifications needed in the 21st century labour market, educational stakeholders stress the importance of a broad personal development and more generic competences as a central objective of compulsory secondary education. Although partners in the educational domain also acknowledge the importance of providing youngsters with professional qualifications, especially in vocational education, the translation of professional qualifications into formal requirements for attaining educational qualifications leads to tensions with stakeholders from the employment domain. A main actor from the employment domain in the negotiations surrounding the link between the FQS and the qualification requirements set in education, confirmed these tensions in an interview. Furthermore, this stakeholder pointed out that the FQS is too rigid and non-transparent to allow a clear translation of all different types and levels of professional qualifications within the current structure of secondary education, which therefore further burdens the negotiations with partners from the educational field. This translation from professional qualifications towards the qualification requirements set in specific forms of education and training is an on-going process in which a stronger common ground has to be found in the next few years.

Recent discussions on the reform plans for secondary education highlighting the conflicting main drivers for transformations in the Flemish education and training system

Inequalities in educational achievement in Flanders are to a large extent linked to socio-economic and immigration background. The educational stratification inspired certain policy makers and stakeholders to reform the educational system. In the next paragraphs we discuss the clash of perspectives on the reforms of the Flemish educational system and the tendency of focusing on Flanders' top-position in international tests like PISA or rather on its top position in the group of countries/regions with the most social stratification in educational achievements. This discussion paints a clear picture of how the general topic of educational performance in general and the issue of ESL in particular are perceived and approached.

Since the late 1990's the (re)structure(ing) of Flemish secondary education has been high on the policy agenda, especially regarding the undervaluation of both full- and part-time vocational education (Flemish Parliament, 1998; 2002). For instance, in the Education Commission of the Flemish Parliament this issue has been raised by many parliamentarians from different political parties and for different reasons. The high ESL rate in both types of vocational education however is one of the main rationales in discussing the issue of the structure of Flemish secondary education. Both the high social stratification as a social justice rationale and the output of a high level of early school leavers from both an economic and social perspective have put the restructuring of Flemish secondary education persistently on the policy agenda.

Only very recently (May 2013) has the Flemish government reached a preliminary agreement on the restructuring of secondary education, called the Master Plan for Flemish secondary education. The different political parties in the current majority have, however, explained these principles and objectives differently (De Standaard 2013). The most important point on which the different political parties differ is on how the plans for the more comprehensive first two years should be perceived:

- The Social-Democrats (SP.a), who currently hold the position of the Minister of Education and Training, underline the idea that the comprehensive first two years will delay the tracking of pupils and therefore pupils will be more directed on the basis of their talents and interests rather than their socio-economic background.
- The Flemish Nationalists (N-VA), on the other hand, emphasize that a more comprehensive first stage of secondary education does not mean pupils should have to wait with making a choice concerning their future studies, that the high-valued general track will be preserved (including the Latin and Greek classes) and that the restructuring plans cannot lead to a downwards levelling of pupils' performances. N-VA insists that the Flemish education system does work for most of the pupils, but that some pupils indeed underperform. Yet, postponing study choice and creating more comprehensive first years will not solve the problems of, e.g. ESL. The main arguments for the N-VA (as well as the liberal party Open VLD for that matter) are that Flanders cannot afford to lose its current top position in the OECD ranking and that a structural reform would not be able to address the problems of language deficiencies and social context that lie within the home environment and cultural background of pupils (N-VA 2013, pp. 1-2).
- The Christian-Democrats (CD&V) take position in-between both other majority parties on the content of the Master Plan (De Tijd 2013).
- In the opposition, Groen! (the Flemish Green party) expressed that the current Master Plan for restructuring, which originally drew on the ambitious restructuring plan by the Flemish education expert Commission Monard (2009), is too heavily weakened by the conservative approach of the Flemish Nationalists to tackle problems of high social stratification educational outcomes and ESL rates (Meuleman 2013; Decruynaere 2013).

Generally speaking, whereas the Social-Democrats mainly addressed the social justice rationale of combatting social stratification in educational outcomes, the Flemish Nationalists put more emphasis on the economic rationale of providing the labour market with sufficient high performers, especially in the domain of science and technology (Smet 2010; N-VA 2013).

In the recent discussions about the reform plans among the top representatives of the two largest governing bodies in Flemish compulsory education, Raymonda Verdyck (GO!, the largest governing body of public education) and Mieke Van Hecke (VSKO, the main body of privately organized education) have in their public statements both linked the restructuring plans to the objective of reducing ESL:

- Raymonda Verdyck has expressed that the reform of secondary education is the top priority of her term as head of the GO! governing body (De Morgen, 2009). More recently Verdyck pointed out that the early tracking in Flemish secondary education results in study choices that are too strongly influenced by pupils' backgrounds rather than their interests and talents (De Morgen, 2012).
- Mieke Van Hecke, representing the Flemish Secretariat of Catholic Education (VSKO), also points out that current Flemish education does not succeed in reducing the social inequalities in society. Nonetheless, she highlights the changing socio-demographics in society more as its main cause. Van Hecke also reported problematically motivated study choices, which result in pupils streaming down the hierarchical tracking system, in

grade retention and a high ESL rate. On the one hand, she refutes a series of critiques of the reform plans of secondary education, some of them coming from her own ranks. On the other hand, she refers to specific sections in the VSKO's vision text on the reform plan where the VSKO's ideas diverge from the orientation text of the Minister for Education and Training (Smet, 2010; De Tijd, 01/09/2012).

As mentioned earlier, despite the fact that all educational governing bodies in principle supported the basic ideas of the reform plans, some civil society organizations such as the Christian Education Teachers Union Central (COC) stressed their fear of the impact of the reform on the teachers and other educational personnel (COC 2013). The main criticism by COC concerns the perceived lack of respect for the role and perspectives of teachers and other personnel, an argument that was also raised in the recent discussions with respect to the restructuring of secondary education.

Some scepticism towards the Master Plan was also reported during the focus group discussions with coordinating school principals in Antwerp and Ghent. A central critique is that the reform plan seems to be proposed as a budget-neutral operation, which would make the structural reform plan impossible to implement in the current settings of their secondary schools. Considering the plans for the postponement of study choice, a local educational stakeholder reported the concern that the voluntary choice of schools to work out comprehensive first two years and the provision of different levels within the same interest domain would allow too much room for 'elitist' schools to evade their responsibilities towards pupils that in the current system are enrolled in lower-status tracks like (part-time) vocational education. Furthermore, some directors saw the reform plans as merely a rephrasing of the names of the current educational tracks while retaining their hierarchical structure. Other topics that have not received enough attention in the reform plans but are stressed as being crucial for a successful restructuring of secondary education according to several of these school principals, is the uncontrolled freedom of school and study choice appointed to pupils and their parents, which leads to a problematic amount of negatively motivated school changes and to making study choices that go against the study advice of the school professionals.

In a recent recommendation of the Flemish Education Council (VLOR), the Master Plan for the structural reform of secondary education was also criticised for being unable to address the negative effects of early tracking and the widespread problem of streaming down the hierarchy of the Flemish tracking system. Considering the comprehensive first two years, the VLOR feels that the current Master Plan is not ambitious enough regarding the proposed postponement of study choice. The VLOR also fears that a mere change of labels for educational tracks would only reinforce the perceptions that the Flemish education system remains hierarchically structured. The future structure still distinguishes between tracks based on its finality in preparation for the labour market or tracks that lead to higher education. Another concern of the VLOR is how the new matrix structure will incorporate links with alternative forms of education like special, part-time vocational education and adult education programs (VLOR 2013 pp. 30-36). In relation to the target in the Master Plan to reduce early school leaving, the VLOR is also surprised that there is no mention of specific planned measures in the announced action plan on reducing ESL (VLOR 2013 p. 9).

3. Role, networks and decision making power of the main Flemish actors/stakeholders in decision-making processes with regard to ESL

a) The Flemish Government in the Federal State of Belgium

After consecutive revisions of the constitution, Belgium was transformed into a federal state comprised of three communities (Flemish, French and German community) and three regions (Flemish Region, Walloon Region and Brussels). Federal powers exist alongside the powers of the communities and regions.

For Flanders, Educational policies are related to the Flemish Community. Yet, the federal authorities still decide on the start and the end of compulsory education, the minimum requirements for obtaining a qualification and the pensions of the educational staff. Within the Flemish Government, the Ministry of Education and Training is responsible for educational policies, from nursery to higher education and including alternative learning like adult education and educational qualifications attained through apprenticeship training. The minister heads the department of Education of the Ministry of the Flemish Community (Lambrechts & Geurts 2008).

With regard to the policy domain of labour the responsibilities of the government are also shared among different government entities at the Federal, Community and Regional levels. The federal government is responsible for labour and social security law while the Flemish Community powers are related to education, training and assistance to individuals, such as social promotion and professional retraining, vocational training and all post-compulsory education. Among the regional powers is the actual employment policy, including the recognition of the employment agencies and employment programs.

When specifically regarding policy making on ESL that is relevant for this policy analysis, we primarily focus on the Flemish Community level, where consecutive ministers of Education and Training have made efforts in reducing ESL rates since the signing of the EU Lisbon Strategy in 2000:

In 2000, the Minister of Education and Training, Marleen Vanderpoorten (1999-2004), first targeted a decrease of 20% in the number of pupils that leave compulsory education without a formal qualification. During the same policy term the Flemish Government designed an ambitious pact in consultation with the Social-Economic Council of Flanders (SERV) (Vilvoorde Pact, 2001) and aimed to decrease the number of young people leaving school without a basic qualification by 50 per cent by 2010. The succeeding Minister, Frank Vandenbroucke (2004-2009), also stated that young people should leave compulsory education with a (better) qualification. His policy focussed more on providing opportunities to achieve basic qualifications for those who left education without a formal qualification.

A more recent political agreement at the Flemish level, Pact 2020, aims to put Flanders among the top regions in Europe by 2020. One of the concrete PACT 2020 objectives is to halve the proportion of early school leavers compared to the baseline of 2008. Specifically, this means a decrease from 8.5% to 4.3% in the ESL rate according to the Eurostat Labour Force Survey indicator by 2020. By halving the ESL rate, Flanders explicitly wants to do better than the EU 2020 objective.

One of the most important Flemish Government agencies in reducing (or remediating for) early school leaving is the Flemish Employment Agency (VDAB). Although VDAB primarily invests in remediating leaving compulsory secondary education without a final qualification by supporting youngsters in their search for employment or training, Fons Leroy, the Director-General of VDAB has repeatedly pleaded – publicly and in the interview we had – for a stronger role of the Employment Agency within secondary education, particularly in vocational education. For those pupils that have experienced a problematic school career, for instance by streaming down the hierarchical tracking system and have grown tired of mainstream education, VDAB could provide specific workplace learning pathways that allow them to attain a basic qualification (partly) outside of regular education. According to Leroy, schools that provide (vocational) secondary education would benefit from more intense cooperation because of the stronger link with the current labour market and a broader range of opportunities for apprenticeships (Leroy 2013).

b) The main stakeholders at the Flemish level

In reporting on the most important stakeholders at the Flemish level we focus on stakeholders in the educational domain and on the domain of employment as far as the influence of these stakeholders concerns the reduction of the ESL rates and the qualifications provided by the Flemish educational system.

In Flanders, compulsory education is provided by different governing bodies. Almost all schools in Flanders are publicly funded but the main governing body is privately organized by schools within the Flemish Secretariat for Catholic schools (VSKO). Additionally, some other privately operated schools of a different denomination (mostly alternative schools like Steiner, Freinet, etc.) are grouped in specific representative governing bodies. Besides privately operated schools, there are public schools organized by the Flemish Government (GO!), by the different Flemish provinces (POV) and by different local authorities in the larger Flemish cities (OVSG; e.g. Antwerp and Ghent).

The governing bodies are all represented in the Flemish Education Council (VLOR), and are therein complemented by representatives from training centres, educational advisory services, teachers unions, parents' organisations, pupil- and student organisations, civil society and minority organisations, education experts and elected school heads. The VLOR is predominantly an advisory body that gives advice both upon request of the Minister of Education and Training as well as on its own initiative. The second task of the VLOR is to organize consultations between different educational and social partners. They meet in commissions and working groups to discuss the organization and development of education and training programs. The council also functions as a knowledge centre for education. To support its consultation task and to deliver well-founded recommendations, the VLOR addresses results of national and international studies and reports, and invites experts to share their insights.

Despite the strong representation of educational stakeholders, members of the council reported in our interviews that the Ministry of Education and Training would not (sufficiently) meet the recommendations made by the VLOR. Furthermore, a member of Parliament (MP) for Groen!, acknowledged in an interview that these recommendations are mostly taken into account in a late stage of

the legislative process, which in some cases does not leave much margin for incorporating the recommendations thoroughly.

The VLOR has recently published two recommendations directly concerning early school leaving. A first advice, issued in April 2011, took on the EU targets of the Lisbon Strategy and EU2020 Strategy and reflects on the role and content of an EU policy on ESL (VLOR 2011). A second and more detailed advice also referred to an EU policy initiative to stimulate countries to invest more actively in reducing ESL rates (European Council 2011). Based on the rationale of the negative societal effects of leaving education without a qualification, the VLOR strongly recommends a more active qualification policy. This policy would emphasize the prevention of ESL through further investment in existing policy levers such as increasing participation in pre-school, equal opportunity policies, action plans against truancy, time-out projects, a renewal of part-time vocational education and apprenticeship programs, extra support for education policies through local authorities and investing more in adult education. Furthermore, the VLOR recommends fast implementation of policy measures still under development like the restructuring of secondary education, a new framework for school career counselling and increasing the competence level of educational personnel. The VLOR, similar to EU level recommendations, concludes that an active qualification policy should prevent, intervene and compensate, although the VLOR feels that the focus should be on prevention. A specific ESL policy is necessary throughout the whole of the education system, but, given youngsters' developmental trajectory and needs for guidance and coaching, there should be a particular focus on the second stage (year three and four) of secondary education (VLOR 2012a).

Besides stakeholders from the field of education, stakeholders in the domain of employment have also published recommendations considering the qualification levels of pupils leaving Flemish education. Similar to the VLOR, different stakeholders in the domain of employment are organized as an advisory board for the Flemish Government. The Socio-Economic Council of Flanders (SERV), consisting of the social partners at a Flemish level, informs the Flemish Government about socio-economic matters. In this section we only report on recommendations for the translation of the EU2020 target on reducing the ESL rate, the reform plans for Flemish secondary education and programs for workplace learning.

The SERV has published two recent recommendations regarding the Flemish reform programs for meeting the EU2020 targets (e.g. VIA Plan; Pact2020). The SERV acknowledges that the Pact2020 is closely linked to the EU2020 strategies and confirms the need for a reduction of the Flemish ESL rate. Yet, the SERV points out that the Flemish target is ambitious and will require sufficient investments and a reform of secondary education. Furthermore, a stronger link between the labour market and qualifications attained in (compulsory) education is highlighted. The development of a Flemish Qualification Structure is therefore welcomed by the SERV (SERV 2010). In a more recent publication, the SERV emphasises that the Pact2020 highlights the right key points concerning the improvement of the Flemish education system, of which reducing the ESL rate is an important component (SERV 2011a).

Another recent recommendation from the SERV specifically regarded the reform plans for secondary education. The SERV confirms the important underlying problems described in the orientation note and acknowledges the importance of the reform.

According to the SERV, however, the key objectives to reduce ESL should be (SERV 2011b):

- a better connection between education and the labour market;
- an upgrade of vocational and technical oriented learning pathways;
- eliminating bottleneck professions by reducing the discrepancy between the post-school skills and competencies;
- reducing the impact of the SES of students on their school performance and career (cf. PISA scores)
- to tackle the risk of streaming down the hierarchically organized educational tracking system
- to invest more in workplace learning programs
- to strengthen training and provide more career prospects for teachers.

Furthermore, the SERV expressed its appreciation for the crucial role workplace learning received in the Pact2020 plans of Flemish education and training. However, they would like to see an increase in the number of workplace learning programs, not only in vocational education but within all the educational tracks in upper secondary education. The SERV also expressed great interest in the (timing of the) development of the Flemish Qualification Structure and the role of the social partners in this process (SERV 2011a). The SERV (2011c) points out that there is still much progress to be made regarding workplace learning in order to achieve a better connection between education, employment and lifelong learning as well as to reduce early school leaving. The SERV notes that there is a need for a clear agreement on the objectives of workplace learning and the expectations of the education and training institutions, the involved companies and learners (SERV 2011c). A more recent SERV recommendation regarding the development of Work Experience Projects for young people reaffirmed the objective of creating more pathways connecting education and work through a route that includes a combination of work experience and attaining an educational qualification (SERV 2012).

Besides concerns expressed by the VLOR and SERV about the role of workplace learning programs in secondary education, there were also a range of issues raised during the interviews and focus group discussions with local stakeholders in education and employment in both Antwerp and Ghent. These issues concern both the inflow of specific profiles of pupils as well as the finality of the workplace learning programs:

- The increasing inflow of pupils coming from special education and therefore the increasing care needs of pupils in educational tracks, which should be primarily focused on preparation for the labour market.
- The scarcity of apprenticeship opportunities for pupils in part-time vocational education, which is linked to the increasing care needs and presumed lack of work attitudes in this student population.
- The polarisation of differences in inflow and apprenticeship opportunities between part-time vocational education and learning time programs provided by SYNTRA Centres.
- Part-time vocational education is reported to have become a last resort for pupils who experienced a negative trajectory in other full-time education tracks.

Overall, the stakeholders articulated that these educational and socio-economic shifts have led to a lack of apprenticeship opportunities and (therefore) a decrease in motivation and full(-time) com-

mitment among the youth. To address these issues, the different stakeholders seem to be convinced that the current organisation and structure of workplace learning programs is not adjusted to the situation on the terrain. Educational trajectories that combine working and learning would benefit from investing more in remediating care needs and motivational problems and from providing more apprenticeship opportunities on the labour market.

The German and Austrian dual system of vocational education is proposed as an inspiration for a reform of the workplace learning programs in Flemish secondary education. The dual system places a higher emphasis on labour market experiences and is based on a stronger input and responsibility of employers in the organisation of the workplace learning programs. Some stakeholders expressed critiques towards employers in Flanders for not investing enough in providing quality learning opportunities on the workplace. On the other hand, local representatives of employer organisations expressed concerns about the weak motivation and work attitudes among these youngsters and raised the issue that many trajectory counsellors in schools for part-time vocational education do not support the youngsters sufficiently, which then requires an extra investment from employers. While the local stakeholders acknowledged that the dual system cannot be exported directly to the Flemish context, an adjusted legislative framework and clear agreements on the mutual expectations between employers, educators and pupils could support investments and motivation among all stakeholders involved.

B.– Identification and analysis of local policies and practices in reducing ESL in Antwerp en Ghent

1. A field description of the research areas

Within Flanders we selected two specific areas – the cities of Antwerp and Ghent – to conduct our research and established criteria, common for all partners in the RESL.eu-project, to allow within- and cross-country comparisons.

The RESL.eu consortium agreed that all research areas should be similar according to the following criteria: an urban context; a high level of early school leavers; a population or more than 100.000; under the same political framework on education and training; and with a high youth unemployment rate.

Both research areas could differ according to the following criteria: the migration background composition of the population; general socio-economic characteristics; local policy on education; and in local labour market opportunities.

b) Research Area 1: the city of Antwerp

Antwerp is the largest city in Flanders in terms of demographics, with a total population of 502.604 at the beginning of 2012. It is an urban area with a high rate of early school leavers. Recent research showed that its rate is the highest in Flanders with 28% ESL in 2010 (Van Landeghem et al. 2013). With respect to youth unemployment, Antwerp also tops the charts with a rate of 25% unemployed youngsters (younger than 25 years old) in October 2011.

The local policy context is one of the major criteria on which the research areas can differ. Since the beginning of 2013 and in more than 100 years, education is no longer a responsibility of a (centre-left) social-democrat political party or Alderman, but of a (more right) liberal party and Alderman. The right-wing and conservative nationalist party N-VA delivers the Mayor in Antwerp. As such, on the political level this is a large difference from all the past decades. Yet it is too soon to state that this also leads to a different educational policy, and a policy towards ESL in particular.

In Antwerp, 37.7 % of the population has an immigration background and the top five countries of origin are: Morocco, Turkey, The Netherlands, Poland and (ex-)Yugoslavia. Antwerp has a higher share of citizens with an immigrant background than Ghent, and to some extent a different composition of countries of origin.

c) Research Area 2: the city of Ghent

Ghent is the second largest city in Flanders in terms of demographics with a total population of 248.242 at the beginning of 2012 . It is an urban area with a high rate of early school leavers. Recent research showed that its rate is one of the highest in Flanders, with 22% early school leavers in 2010 (Van Landeghem et al. 2013). With respect to youth unemployment, Ghent is also at the top of the charts with a rate of 21% unemployed youngsters (younger than 25 years old) in October 2011.

Since 2013, Ghent differs strongly from Antwerp with respect to its political constellation. In Ghent the (centre-left) social-democrat party delivers the Mayor and the Groen! Party (Green party) is accountable for the educational policy. As such, the major differences between both research areas are found on the policy and political level.

In Ghent 25.4% of the population has an immigration background and the top five countries of origin are: Turkey, Bulgaria, Morocco, The Netherlands and Russia. Although high in comparison to other Flemish cities, Ghent has a lower share of citizens with an immigrant background than Antwerp, and to some extent a different composition of countries of origin.

In the following sections we will discuss policy initiatives and good practices that specifically target the reduction of ESL in the cities involved in the RESL.eu Research project, namely Antwerp and Ghent. Education is in general a Flemish Community responsibility but major issues and policy actions with respect to the Labour Market are divided between the Belgian-national level and the Flemish level. While focusing on the domain of education the VLOR (2012a) also acknowledges that within the broad framework offered by the EU, and a more specific Flemish 2020-strategy, freedom is given to more local initiatives to tackle ESL.

2. Local decision making power and stakeholders

Since ESL is mostly concentrated in some of Flanders' larger cities, local authorities have been taking interest in the issue. Cities such as Antwerp and Ghent are confronted with high rates of ESL and have developed specific strategies to reduce ESL. In general these cities are seen as pioneers in Flanders (Het Nieuwsblad 2009; De Morgen 2012).

From the introduction of the Equal Educational Opportunities Policy in 2002, the importance of local initiatives and involvement was stressed by policy makers, and this led to the establishment of Local Consultation Platforms (LOP, see section A.1). Furthermore, since 2006 the Flemish Government insists that local authorities develop local policies through their Flanking Educational Policy to address matters involving inequalities in educational outcomes, because it felt issues such as language proficiency difficulties, poverty and social exclusion are mainly present in more urban environments. Flanking educational policy by local authorities is defined as the collection of actions to support local educational actors by enhancing them to cooperate. This policy wants to motivate local partners to deal with unequal educational opportunities within their local realities (Lambrechts & Geurts 2008).

Stakeholders in the domain of employment are also grouped in a local version of the SERV, called the RESOC-SERR. Furthermore, as part of the Learning and Working Decree (2008), Regional Consultancy Platforms for workplace learning (ROP) were established with stakeholders from the employment and educational sector to ensure the monitoring and evaluation of local policy on workplace learning.

Although the Flemish Government encourages local policy networks and initiatives to reduce early school leaving, some critique is given regarding the way these networks and piloted good practices have received structural support from a Flemish level. This support could allow good practices to be exchanged between different local authorities or even to be exported to the level of the Flemish Region. Member of the Flemish Parliament Elisabeth Meuleman and Alderman Elke Decruynaere

(both Groen!) highlighted that these bottom-up initiatives should receive more structural support from the Flemish Government (Meuleman 2013; De Cruynaere 2013). Similar critiques on the lack of a legislative framework and structural support were expressed by local providers of interventionist programs like time-out and remedial instruments such as Centres for Second-Chance Education (Focus group discussions in Antwerp and Ghent 2013).

In the following section on local decision making and stakeholders, we discuss how local decision making and stakeholders regarding reducing ESL are organized in the Flemish RESL.eu research areas Antwerp and Ghent.

a) Local policy networks and initiatives in Antwerp

In January 2003, Antwerp was the first Flemish city that organized a local education network, which incorporated the different governing bodies of schools and the city administration. The previous Flemish Minister of Education and Training took on this initiative to encourage the establishment of such local education policy networks that incorporate different governing bodies. These initiatives were later renamed as Flanking Education Policy. In the local education policy plan of the previous administration (2007-2012), the city of Antwerp has made reducing ESL the first of its strategic objectives in their local education plan, which explicitly refers to the Lisbon Strategy and its 10% benchmark (Stad Antwerpen 2007). In 2013 a policy shift took place in Antwerp and the Social-democrat (more 'centre-left') Alderman of Education was succeeded by a Liberal (more 'centre-right') Alderman. This was part of a fundamental reshuffle of the city council after the latest local elections where the Social-democrat Mayor was replaced by a Flemish Nationalist Mayor.

After ten months in office, the Antwerp Alderman of Education presented - together with the VDAB and the OCMW (Public Social Service Centre) - a specific Action Plan to tackle ESL in October 2013, in which there is also reference made to the EU 2020 target of reducing ESL (JongerenAanBod 2013). In this plan, the issue of ESL is addressed via the issue of youth unemployment and its societal costs (hence the cooperation with the VDAB and OCMW). A focus is placed on youngsters at the end of their educational careers, or on the verge of early school leaving. Preventive actions are implemented at this stage and do not consider the beginning or the middle of educational trajectories. The focus is thus on the transition from education to the labour market and the guidance of (early) school leavers to a place on the labour market. Special attention is also given to the category of NEET's and the 'labour market paradox': many jobs remain vacant while there is a high youth unemployment. The policy makers partly explain this paradox by the specificity of the Antwerp labour market, with a demand for higher educated employees and a supply characterised mainly by lower educated job seekers. However, a more concrete plan, agreed upon by the City Council and presented to the public, will be discussed in future papers of this project (JongerenAanBod 2013).

Antwerp explicitly targets involvement in European projects with the objective to further increase the realisation of their local plans on education. Both Antwerp and Ghent are involved in the European platform Eurocities which is a European lobby organization of (medium and) large European cities. Thematic forums and working groups inform cities on European policy developments and connect different city level approaches to each other. Nonetheless, Antwerp's city administration on education participates only in the Education Group. The Education Group works on three main

themes, namely reducing early school leaving, improving school to work transitions, and strengthening parental participation in pre-primary and primary education. Representatives of the city of Antwerp are involved in policy-making at the European level through the stakeholders meetings that aim for the exchange of good practices.

At a local level, the Antwerp policy initiative “Samen tot aan de meet” (“Getting to the finish together”) specifically targets a reduction of the proportion of pupils with grade retention, as retaining pupils is conceived as being counter-productive for the future school career and therefore an important risk factor for ESL. The city of Antwerp together with academics, the governing bodies of schools in Antwerp, the student guidance centres, schools for teacher education and the local consultation platform for secondary education (LOP) are all involved in this policy initiative funded by the city of Antwerp in the context of its local education plan 2007-2012. In the local education plan, the “Samen tot aan de meet” Project is specifically connected to the strategic objective of reducing ESL. The steering committee of the project chooses the method of networking across different governing bodies of compulsory schools in Antwerp. Additionally, a specifically designed study informs the different parties on how to avoid pupils having to be retained and on how to provide more positive alternatives for the practice of grade retention.

Another relevant policy initiative was the establishment of the Central Registry Point for youth at-risk (Centraal Meldpunt voor Risicjongeren) in 2003. It is an overarching organization incorporating Pupil Guidance Centers from the different educational governing bodies and a wide range of other relevant organizations in prevention, intervention and remediation towards ESL in Antwerp. It is therefore mainly a central truancy monitoring and prevention network. In the focus group discussions it was mentioned that this network invests in preventive (such as increasing the policy capacity and potential of schools), intervention (dispatching between schools and youth welfare organisations like time-out projects), as well as compensating actions for pupils at risk of ESL.

The sharing of knowledge and expertise is also put forward as an important strategy, and in November 2013 a ‘Search Conference’ was organized that aimed to discuss qualifying trajectories for early school leavers between 18 and 24 years of age with a large group of local stakeholders. Furthermore, the VDAB organizes yearly seminars for trajectory mentors within part-time education to inform them about labour market evolutions, as it felt that the distance between both domains is still too large. A different but equally important current issue is the lack of apprenticeship possibilities for pupils in part-time vocational education. The VDAB as well as the City of Antwerp acknowledge the necessity of raising awareness among companies and labour market actors for providing opportunities for apprenticeships and on the job training (JongerenAanBod 2013).

b) Local policy networks and initiatives in Ghent

Similar to Antwerp, the city administration in Ghent designed a local education plan for the policy term 2008-2013. Reducing ESL was not considered one of the strategic objectives but was strongly linked to the strategic objective of providing equal opportunities at all educational levels. The local education plan set out actions to reduce inequality in educational outcomes through strengthening cooperation between educational institutions from different governing bodies and other partners from the domains of welfare, youth and culture (Stad Gent 2008).

The Alderman of education of the City of Ghent stressed the fact that the city aims at playing an overarching 'directive role', tries to facilitate cooperation between partners and to fill the holes between education and external partners (Decruynaere 2013). In particular, they want to invest more in intermediary-figures between the school and parents. The city of Ghent also implemented or supports the following policy networks and initiatives that target reducing ESL:

- The STAP Centre for study guidance: The STAP Centre is a study guidance centre that operates across the different governing bodies within secondary education, adult education and alternative learning arenas and aims to provide those who seek education with professional guidance counselling. Because of its neutral character, this study advice should not be influenced by the supply in study possibilities of a specific school or governing body. In these professional study guidance activities socially disadvantaged pupils are an important target group. Furthermore, the STAP Centre also provides training for intermediaries in education and publishes information on study opportunities.
- The Centre for the Right and Obligation to Learn ("Steunpunt Leerrecht en Leerplicht"): The centre has the objective to tackle truancy while regarding it as a symptom of a deeper problem. To be able to meet this objective, the centre developed a platform of all relevant partners in truancy counselling. Based on this platform, tailored paths are presented in order to motivate at-risk youngsters and preventing a definitive dropout. Overall, the centre invests in providing positive solutions and not (only) sanctioning.
- Project Part-time@Work ("Deeltijds@Work"): The project Part-time@Work is a platform for alternative learning supported by the city of Ghent and consisting of all providers of part-time education centres, relevant actors from the welfare domain and cooperating private companies. The Part-time@Work projects supports part-time learning youth by providing them with an apprenticeship. The project also invests in supporting the youngster's personal stability in order to eventually guide them to a sustainable form of employment in the regular labour market.

A specific target group in the local education policy of the city of Ghent are people who migrated from Middle and Eastern European countries (called MOE-countries), especially with regard to truancy and ESL. The Permanent Consultation Platform's Workgroup on Education (POC Education) highlighted these issues and also linked the high truancy and ESL figures to the overrepresentation of the target group in specific educational tracks like vocational, part-time vocational and special education. To address these issues, the workgroup proposes a balance between voluntary and obligatory assistance with cooperation between the domains of education, welfare and the justice department. In this policy there is a special focus on dropouts among Roma girls, who in various cases were found to leave education after primary education (POC Werkgroep Onderwijs 2013).

3. Identification of prevention, intervention and compensation measures

a) Prevention measures

As a preventive measure, the city of Antwerp specifically aims to tackle truancy. Truancy rates in Antwerp are among the highest in Flanders, specifically for those in part-time and special education and for those above the age of 18 and still enrolled in secondary education. As a working

method, the city employs truancy officers that monitor and address the truancy rate in the city and also set up a central reporting point for schools (Stad Antwerpen, 2011). The city of Antwerp also participates in the Stay on Track project together with the city of Vienna, which develops an instrument to register, analyse and reduce truancy in part-time vocational education. In their strategy to reduce ESL, Antwerp specifically invests in tackling grade retention and truancy, as these issues are seen as being strong predictors of leaving education unqualified (Kenis 2011).

A specific experiment with respect to truancy which is tested in some (mainly part-time vocational education) schools in Ghent is the 'School Phone' (Decruynaere 2013). Those pupils that are not in school in the morning, as well as their parents, receive a text message that is generated by an automatic computer program. This procedure will be repeated until the pupil offers an explanation for his absence. The primary goals of this project is to reach these pupils and get them back to school, after which specific trajectories can be designed to address their specific situation. The Alderman acknowledges that it is too soon to evaluate the project, however, the experiment was recently implemented in more schools.

b) Intervention measures

One important practice to tackle ESL by intervening in an educational trajectory are the Time-Out projects. In these interventions the Centres for Pupils Guidance (CLBs) always play the role of intermediary and refer a pupil to a specific organization such as Elegast vzw, On@Break and Arktos. In short-term Time-Out projects, round tables are organized to discuss if such a Time-Out (e.g. individual-centred activity; or a group-centred activity) can be beneficial. In a long-term Time-Out project pupils leave school for several weeks and receive personal guidance with the aim to eventually re-enter regular education. These projects try to focus on the individual needs and well-being of the pupil. A similar project is the Working Together towards a Future (SWAT) project. These projects start from the perspective of the pupil and link this with the surrounding actors such as the parents and the teachers. The focus is on developing a structured trajectory aiming to increase pupil's intrinsic motivation (as the extrinsic motivation of gaining a diploma is often present) and, in some cases, even to help pupils change schools, which can be helpful for some youngsters.

c) Compensation measures

With respect to measures and policy actions taken to compensate for ESL, three main pathways are designed to gain a qualification after leaving school prematurely: the Centres for Adult Education (CVO), the Exam Commission for Secondary Education, and youth employment programs.

Attaining an upper secondary education diploma through the Examination Commission: Youngsters enrolled for the examination from the Commission for secondary education can, at their own pace and through self-study, attain a diploma in a number of disciplines. The Exam Commission Secondary Education has also increased in popularity: in 2011 54% more youngsters tried to gain a qualification via this commission, compared with 2003. Although most candidates aimed for a Vocational Education Certificate, only 3% of all candidates are successful in attaining a qualification (be it VET or other) (De Standaard 2012).

The Centres for Adult Education (CVO) and more specifically the so-called Second Chance Education, are able to provide early school leavers the opportunity to attain a qualification. In recent years a shift took place and almost half of the population in the CVO's were younger than 21, making it a popular alternative for regular education. However, the younger age also raises different issues of attitudes towards learning and different teaching methodologies. Moreover, in the focus group discussions it was mentioned that increasingly more early school leavers with a general education track background are entering second chance education. An explanation that was offered stated that mainstream education sometimes deliberately refers these pupils to second chance education without knowing the possibilities or consequences of enrolment in these courses. As the composition of the participants is changing – e.g. the inflow of early school leavers from special education – it changes the traditional context of second chance learning, which is sometimes felt to be a problem by the teachers in second-chance education.

Nevertheless, the major advantages put forward by those enrolled in CVO's are the flexibility of learning and the possibility to combine it with work and family responsibilities (Flemish Parliament 2010). The trajectory is constructed to be more modular and tailor-made, which is important in tackling ESL, as participants achieve certificates gradually and not only at the end of the year. These successful elements can also be implemented in mainstream education, as due to the inertness of the latter, second chance organisations are struggling with a new participant composition, while at the same time receiving no structural support from policy makers (focus group discussions in Antwerp and Ghent).

At the end of the millennium some experiments were set up in compulsory secondary education focusing on the modularization of, in particular, vocational education, to ensure a maximum of qualified school leavers (Flemish Parliament 1998; Klasse 1999). However, the experimental phase is still not finished after a decade, and a general modularization of secondary education – as advocated by some – is now said to depend on the overall restructuring of secondary education. Some actors stress that the phenomenon of truancy is sometimes related to specific courses, which shows that it does not concern a complete disinterest in education but only in specific courses. A modularization of learning – as is the case in second chance learning – could prevent these youngsters from becoming early school leavers (focus group discussions Antwerp and Ghent).

Some specific projects are set up in cities such as Antwerp, where the VDAB not only informs part-time education teachers about labour market possibilities, but where they also inform trajectory-mentors within VDAB about the possibilities in second chance learning. Experiments are set up to enrol job seekers into second chance learning situations while they await their specific vocational training within VDAB (focus group discussion Antwerp).

In order to further strengthen the partnerships, 'excellent partnerships' are designed where representatives from education and the labour market work together and develop new initiatives such as OKO-Trajectories (OKOT). In Antwerp OKOT is provided as a cooperation of the VDAB and the Centres for Adult Education. Those enrolled in OKOT could participate in adult education courses in combination with workplace learning opportunities organized by VDAB. Whereas initially the CVO provided subjects from general education for those in OKOT, the focus from the local CVOs for this target group is now redirected to vocational courses because the stakeholders presumed that those in training for more technical bottleneck professions would experience a broader education to attain the qualification through OKOT as an extra burden. Furthermore, those enrolled in a

VDAB training can obtain exemptions by doing exams in the Centres of Adult Education, and thereby mitigate the weight of a full-time VDAB training. Both the local VDAB and the partners from adult education pointed out that some further alignment between their services is needed.

C. Influence and role of European and international recommendations on reducing ESL in Flanders

Flemish policy makers to a large extent insert their policy actions into the broader strategies put forward by the EU and other transnational organisations like the OECD. The reduction of ESL rates is one of the top priorities and is also one of the main arguments to reform the Flemish educational system. Reference is often made to the targets set out by the EU 2020 program and Flanders' success or failure in achieving them. Flanders designed even stricter targets with respect to reducing ESL rates than the EU set out and wants to reduce ESL rates to 4,3% by 2020 (VLOR 2011). In recent documents, however, the Flemish government no longer refers to the benchmark of 4.3% early school leavers but to 5.2% early school leavers (Flemish Government 2013).

1. Influence of the EU2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth: translation into a Flemish Reform Program (2013)

In line with EU recommendations and directly building on and referring to the EU 2020 strategy, Flanders presented a Flemish Reform Program in 2012 and an updated version in 2013, in which a lot of attention is paid to early school leaving (Flemish Reform Program 2013). It is remarkable however that only EUROSTAT data are used in reporting the current ESL rate in Flanders, while other policy documents such as the Flemish Action Plan ESL also refer to data gathered by the Policy Research Centre for Study and School Careers (SSL) that used administrative data instead of the EUROSTAT Labour Force Survey (LFS) Data. The latter show a significantly higher ESL rate. The Flemish Government acknowledges that the target number for early school leavers has not been reached, but still targets an ambitious ESL rate of 5.2 % by 2020 (while the ESL rate in 2011 was 9.6%). Consequently, the Flemish government designed some actions to tackle ESL.

Next to a general and structural reform of secondary education - discussed in section A - a specific Flemish Action Plan Early School Leaving will be presented to the public in the fall of 2013. However, in the meantime the Flemish Government wants to invest more in current actions to tackle ESL and youth unemployment, and to increase enrolment in tertiary education. The Flemish Reform Program refers to the Career Agreement and the Decree on Learning and Working (see section A; Flemish Reform Program 2013; See also Concept Note 'Moving Language Borders Together' 2011).

Specific attention in the Flemish Reform Program (2013) is also given to the reform of vocational training and the link between the education system and the labour market, in line with the EU recommendation for a EU Qualification Framework (see section A). The Flemish Government wants to invest more in alternative learning arenas such as Second Chance Learning, but also in flexible learning trajectories and modular learning within the compulsory education system by designing concrete partnerships between schools and the labour market.

The two most important advisory councils - The Flemish Education Council (VLOR) and The Socio-Economic Council of Flanders (SERV) - both discussed EU and Flemish ESL policy in several of their advisory documents towards the Flemish policy makers. In line with the Belgian presidency of the European Council, the VLOR (2011) issued a document with specific recommendations to strengthen the EU-strategy to tackle ESL with a focus on policy actions relating to the labour market, poverty reduction and equal opportunities and development of talents.

A first recommendation of the Flemish Education Council (VLOR) regarding EU initiatives to reduce ESL explicitly referred to the 10% benchmark for reducing ESL and expressed the necessity for action on a European level. While the LFS rates on ESL determined that Flanders did meet the 10% benchmark, the VLOR emphasised that the ESL figures of the Flemish Policy Research Centre for Educational and School Careers actually showed an increase to 14,7% in 2007. Furthermore, the VLOR refers to the Flemish Governments' objective that expressed targeting a decrease resulting in a 4,3% (now 5,2%) ESL rate based on the LFS data. In the context of Belgium's Presidency of the European Council in the second half of 2010, the VLOR requested to put reducing the ESL rate back on the forefront of EU's education policy. Furthermore, the VLOR gave specific recommendations about a range of topics regarding the reduction of ESL:

- A strategy to reduce ESL should work on the axes of developing talents and equal opportunities;
- The EU ESL indicators should be fine-tuned to avoid ambiguities about post-compulsory schooling and training (referring to the LFS indicator);
- A EU policy on reducing ESL should recognize the subsidiarity principle and allow strategies that fit the national/ regional context;
- A strategy on reducing ESL should incorporate references to pupils' well-being because of its links with pupils' engagement and risk of ESL;
- A strategy on ESL should have more linkage with other EU policy domains and targets, especially regarding youth and employment policies.

Ultimately, the VLOR (and the SERV) perceive the EU-strategy with respect to ESL as a good general framework leaving sufficient room for each member state to adjust it to their specific needs. The VLOR also refers to the OECD report 'Learning for jobs' focusing on increasing support for study courses and track choice with respect to future labour market opportunities.

The influence of the EU2020 strategy is also present when it comes to the implementation of the European Qualification Framework (see section A). In a similar vein, the discussion on the Accreditation of prior (experiential) learning skills also started in the beginning of 2000 (Flemish Parliament 2003) but is still on-going.

Influence from other transnational organisations

Next to the supranational political level of the European Union, Flanders also matches its education policy to educational systems in other developed countries by relying on the data collection and analysis provided by the OECD and its Programme for International Student Assessment or PISA . Also the TIMSS and PIRLS testing executed by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) help Flanders to monitor its pupils' achievements within an international perspective. Although not always directly concerning ESL, these international bench-

marks and recommendations help to set targets and develop regional strategies in educational policies and could therefore have effects on ESL rates.

An important example of the regional effects of international recommendations are OECD recommendations concerning the early tracking in secondary education. The OECD (2012) recommends to avoid tracking before upper secondary education because of its negative impact on students assigned to lower tracks and the fact that it exacerbates inequities, without ensuring an increase of average performance levels. (OECD 2012).

Considering the targets set in UN/ UNESCO conventions and declarations with regard to every child's right to a quality education, Flemish awareness of persistent social inequalities in educational outcomes and social stratification has grown (Lambrechts & Geurts 2008). The main factors that make pupils to be considered underprivileged are socio-economic poverty, an immigration background and a foreign mother language.

Evaluation of EU ESL initiatives and possible signs of resistance to change

With respect to European policies on education in general and more specifically on Early School Leaving, the Flemish Community can be seen as an early adopter trying to be in line with EU recommendations. In general, very little resistance towards EU recommendations on reducing ESL are articulated, although some stakeholders stress that Flanders does not unconditionally have to be the first of the class in adopting and implementing all education-related EU recommendations, in particular with respect to the European Qualifications framework.

Nevertheless, in general, stakeholders in the domains of education and employment also endorse the EU2020 objective regarding reducing ESL – although they are not always aware of the specificities of this EU strategy – and most of them regard this as a top priority for Flanders in order to move forward in the 21st century knowledge society (see section A). Local authorities do not often refer to the EU2020 targets but are well aware of the necessity of reducing early school leaving, especially in the larger Flemish cities (see section B).

One recurring criticism, however, concerns the budget-neutral approach to the Flemish Action Plan on ESL, as for the restructuring of Flemish secondary education for that matter. Different partners from the education system and the labour market will have to implement new policy measures (which are still not agreed upon) without extra funding. This issue is particularly raised in the interviews with educational stakeholders (Focus group discussions in Ghent and Antwerp and consultations with educational stakeholders 2013).

Furthermore, another important form of resistance concerns the implementation of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). This discussion highlights to some extent the difference between an evolution of the educational system as a path towards a knowledge society or a knowledge economy.

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Annex – Interviews and focus group discussions

Next to an extensive document analyses, a limited amount of fieldwork was executed for this paper, mainly consisting of interviews and focus group discussions with policy makers, stakeholders and experts concerned with the issue of ESL. We conducted 8 in-depth interviews with representatives on various policy levels and conducted 4 focus group discussions at the local level in which a total of 38 respondents participated.

Interviews

1. Jelle Reynaerd, Permanent representative of Belgium in the EU, detached from the Flemish Department of Education and Training.
2. Elisabeth Meuleman, Member of the Flemish Parliament and the Commission of Education and Training, Groen! (Green party)
3. Fons Leroy, Director-General of Flemish Employment Agency (VDAB)
4. Chris Smits (secretary-general) and Christian Wyns (Staff Diversity & Equal Opportunities), The Catholic Governing Body/ for Secondary Education (VSKO/ VVKSO)
5. Valentijn Van Hooteghem (Chief Advisor), Andries Valcke (coordinator) and Evelyne Schoeters (Staff Diversity & Equal Opportunities), The Official Governing Body organized by the Flemish Government (GO!).
6. Jean-Marie Neven (Advisor), Umbrella organization of Governing Bodies of Cities and Municipalities (OVSG).
7. Claude Marinower - Alderman of Education in Antwerp, Open VLD (Liberal-democrats)
8. Elke Decruynaere - Alderwoman of Education in Ghent, Groen! (Green party)

Consultations

9. Kris Van Dijck, Member of the Flemish Parliament and the Commission of Education and Training, N-VA (Flemish Nationalists)
10. Lucas Brion, Carl Lamote, Debby Peeters, Marie Kruythoof, Katrien Bonneux, Anton Derks , Eva van de Gaer, Delegation of Department of Education and the Cabinet of the Minister of Education and Training

Focus group discussions

In both research areas two focus group discussions were organized, one with representatives from secondary education and one with representatives within the labour market and adult education. These representatives will be presented anonymized.

With respect to **Antwerp** it concerns the following focus groups:

- **8 local representatives** from labour market actors and adult education from the following organizations: RESOC-SERR Antwerpen; Unizo Antwerpen; ACV Antwerpen; Kamer van Koophandel Antwerpen; VDAB Antwerpen; VOL-ANT; CVO Tweedekansonderwijs Antwerpen; CVO Technicum Noord Antwerpen (TNA).
- **9 local representatives** related to compulsory secondary education from the following school communities and organizations: (Coordinating) directors from schools in VSKO, GO! and education organized by the City of Antwerp; Coordinator Central Registry Point for Youth at Risk, City of Antwerp; Elegast Time-out and SWAT Projects; Arktos Time-out and SWAT Projects.

With respect to **Ghent** it concerns the following focus groups:

- **13 local representatives** from labour market actors and adult education from the following organizations: RESOC-SERR Gent-Rondom-Gent; ACV Gent; Provincial Governance Oost-Vlaanderen; Representative of Alderman Coddens; Wonderwijs Consortium for CVO's; Gent stad in werking GSIW; De Stap vzw; VDAB Gent.
- **8 local representatives** related to compulsory secondary education from the following school communities and organizations: LOP-expert Secondary Education Ghent; Coordinating directors from schools in VSKO, GO! and education organized by the City of Ghent; On-a-Break² time-out project.