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Real Equality of Opportunity in Work and Education in the Immigration Society: the Challenge of a Decathlon

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For a number of years the Flemish government has invested in policies to improve the chances of socio-economic success for *'allochtonen'*. *'Allochtonen'* is the denomination used in Flanders for a rather loosely defined category; for the purpose of this paper we can best delineate it as non-European migrants of the first and second generation. Although socio-economic success is a precondition for social integration, it does not answer the question of what integration really means or whether society can cope with the cultural diversity associated with immigration. The cultural issues which this raises are not addressed in this paper.¹

What then is needed for socio-economic success? In the first place, access to decent work generating income as well as self-respect and the respect of others. For young people in the migrant community success generally means upward social mobility: they have to do better than their parents. To make socio-economic success and upward mobility accessible to everyone, there must be close cooperation between all the actors responsible for employment and education. In 2004, they were brought under a single policy umbrella, i.e. under the responsibility of one minister, in a deliberate move to put real equality of opportunity higher on the agenda. In that move, the disadvantaged position of migrants was a matter of particular concern.

In a society which is both an immigration society and a knowledge society, education plays a crucial role because it determines people's place on the social ladder. The dynamics in education can lead to great inequality in society, as well as to emancipation. Employment policy is crucial too, since the disadvantaged position of migrants as a group is the result of a nexus of vicious circles in education and the labour market, whereby real deficits in qualifications and skills and existing prejudices reinforce each other. These vicious circles have to be broken through simultaneously and in different places in the labour market and in education. To do that effectively requires close collaboration between all those involved.

For five years the socio-economic disadvantages of migrants were high on the agenda, although we were under no illusion that there could be any *quick wins*. Social change needs perseverance and patience. Any improvements in early childhood education today will only affect educational qualifications and the labour market in 12 years' time at the earliest. Because the choices we make now only take effect in the long term, we must make sure that they are sufficiently ambitious. The question that we wish to pose in this paper is whether we have made the right choices.

A 'both-and' account that excludes simplistic explanations

Studies of school leavers who registered with the Flemish Public Employment and Vocational Training Service (VDAB) reveal that 44.7% of migrant school leavers were still looking for work a year after registration, while the figure for non-migrant school leavers was only 19.5%.² What can explain this difference? A simple exercise shows that migrant school leavers do less well in the labour market because of their orientation and relative lack of success in education, in combination with other inhibiting factors - a black box -, no doubt including a reluctance to recruit migrants and even outright discrimination. The percentage of migrant school leavers seeking work after a year would drop from 44.7% to 35% if they chose the same subjects and achieved the same grades as non-migrants, even if the other inhibiting factors remain unchanged. This percentage would drop from 44.7 to 27.7 if the educational differences were left unchanged but the other inhibiting factors were removed.

If we zoom in more closely on education, we see that the factors determining study orientation and level of success are again complex. The position of migrants in our system of compulsory education is clearly illustrated by the maths results for 15 year olds.³ In the Flemish Community the average mark achieved for mathematics in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) test was 543 points, compared with 500 in the OECD as a whole, but there was a wide gap between native pupils (pupils with at least one parent born in Belgium) who achieved an average of 551 points and pupils whose parents were born abroad who averaged about 100 points fewer. There is a whole range of factors common to migrants that help to explain this difference: migrant pupils often come from a lower social class, they do not speak Dutch at home, they attend schools where there are many students from lower class backgrounds and a disproportionate number of them end up in technical and vocational education. That list already indicates what actions must be taken to improve the educational position of migrants. Language is critical, as are the wide differences between general, vocational and technical education and the question whether they received proper 'pathway guidance'. In higher education the chances of success for migrants are reduced further by the fact that they have often taken inappropriate courses at secondary school, they lack information about higher education or fail to use it properly, there are few role models, etc.⁴

Breaking the vicious circles of disadvantage

The position of migrants in education and the labour market is characterised by vicious circles of objective lack of qualifications and skills, subjective prejudices and failure, all of which feed on each other. When graduate migrants sense that employers are prejudiced and that opportunities are being closed to them in spite of their qualifications and skills, which undeniably occurs, other young migrants can lose the motivation to study. Lack of motivation contributes to failure in education. Educational failure leads in turn to a lack of qualifications and skills which further confirms the prejudices of employers, though even without prejudice it reduces their chances of

success in the labour market. This gives rise to the feeling that employers 'never' want to employ migrants or that jobs for migrants simply do not exist. Thus the circle is complete and there is a danger of passing the problem down to future generations. For low socio-economic status and poorly educated parents constitute an additional handicap for children in terms of their educational choices and chances of success.

The policy aimed to break through these vicious circles simultaneously at different instances. Because they all feed into each other, the objective causes of low achievement were tackled at the same time as subjective factors which were countered by positive examples and success stories designed to undermine myth and prejudice.

During the past five years our policies *de facto* invested significantly in creating more opportunity for migrants, sometimes explicitly but very often implicitly. We have been sparing with categorical government measures, i.e. targeted and exclusive measures creating specific conditions for migrants in the education system and the labour market. In the activation policy for job seekers (the so-called "comprehensive approach"), differences in qualifications and length of unemployment are already taken into account and it is intended to add linguistic knowledge to the list of criteria. However, no explicit distinction is made between migrant and native job seekers. In the education system the allocation of funding and teaching staff takes account of socio-economic background and the home language, but does not explicitly include 'migrant' as a parameter. This decision to adopt an implicit, non-categorical approach is based on our belief that the most important objective factors that disadvantage migrants - qualification, skills, language - are factors that also affect native Belgians. An exception to that principle is the relatively recent '*inwerkingsbeleid*' or 'integration-via-work', i.e. a policy of specific and compulsory integration paths in the labour market, which is linked to the '*inburgeringsbeleid*', i.e. compulsory civic integration courses. It is aimed at newcomers and gives them specific rights and obligations.

However, the main actors in the labour market have been asked to give deliberate *disproportional attention* to vulnerable groups, including migrants, though without treating individual migrants any differently from individual native nationals. Through 'management contracts' with public services such as VDAB and Syntra (a training organisation) and conventions with various business sectors, we have for instance asked that migrants be given relatively more attention than the unemployed as a whole. We have been building a system of 'positive action' into the Flemish labour market, not by dealing with migrants differently but by dealing with them relatively more than with others.

On the other hand, when it comes to raising awareness and stimulating positive examples, our approach has been very explicit. As we explain later, we are very gradually and cautiously making a transition from an incentive policy to 'soft law' concerning proportional participation of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. In addition, there is also 'hard law' which gives equal rights to enrolment in schools on the one hand, and outlaws discrimination in the labour market on the other. We are convinced that whenever discrimination is detected it should be firmly reined in, and at last this is now being done.

In our policy debates we have deliberately tried to avoid two pitfalls: on the one hand, always treating migrants as victims or on the other, constantly blaming them for their own lack of qualifications or skills. Equal opportunities require a culture of personal aspiration and social support, of responsibility for oneself and mutual solidarity.

A Decathlon for Equal Opportunities in Education

A first important step was taken with minister Marleen Vanderpoorten's decree on Equal Op-

portunities in Education in 2002. Primary schools in particular were provided with extra staff where there were pupils with weak socio-economic home backgrounds, further augmented where, moreover, the language at home was not Dutch. At the same time, parents were given the right to enrol in any school of their choice and registration procedures were formalised. This new registration regime reflected a rather liberal believe in the power of well-informed individual consumers of education. In 2004 we modified it to create more room for local consultation and to give greater freedom to schools to play a more active part in selecting from under-privileged, and indeed privileged, groups with an eye to greater social diversity within the school walls. Yet, a universal right to enrolment is but a formal step that does not guarantee real equality of educational opportunity.

After 2004 equal opportunity became the dominant theme for education policy as a whole. Higher education was called on to mobilise for a 'second wave of democratisation', focusing on untapped reservoirs of talent, particularly in the migrant community. This appeal was a part of what was later to become the 'Decathlon for Equal Opportunities in Education'.

Focusing the whole education budget on equal opportunities

The first test in the decathlon turned on finance. Henceforth, four criteria would play a role in the distribution of operational funding between schools: 1. the educational level of the mother, 2. the language spoken at home, 3. the family income and 4. the area in which the pupil lived. These parameters have a substantial impact on school financing and subsidies and considerable sums of money are involved. For instance, for every pupil whose mother tongue is not Dutch a primary school receives an extra 188.29€ of funding. An catholic primary school receives 656.37€ for a pupil who meets none of the four criteria. However for a pupil who meets all of them it receives €1177.49. Increasing operational funding was combined with cost-limiting measures to prevent some schools from trying to attract wealthier parents by presenting a 'more expensive' profile than other schools. In higher education, institutions are rewarded if they contribute more than others to upward mobility, i.e. if they attract more scholarship students who go on to graduate successfully.

It's not just a question of money

However, budgets are only a precondition for creating equal opportunities. What really counts is what happens in the classroom, in the school or the university. Mediocre teaching will not create equal opportunities, as we have often said. So the remaining tests in the Decathlon all revolve around the quality of education. One of the tests involved the need to be more result-oriented, also when it comes to achieving equal opportunities. Another test had to do with early childhood education. Because there were indications that parents on lower incomes and mothers who were not Belgian or who spoke another language were less likely to send their children to infant schools, this became an important target for action. Together with local actors and those responsible for child welfare (the regional nursing staff of *Kind & Gezin* [Child & Family]) a campaign was conducted to persuade every parent who had not sent their children to early childhood education to do so. And from 1 September 2010 every child will have to attend a Dutch language school to benefit from early childhood education for at least one year before being allowed to enrol in a Dutch-language primary school.

Because contacts between schools and the most vulnerable families are often poor, we want to

involve all parents with their school by means of a 'declaration of commitment' consisting of a mutual agreement between the school and the parents. It covers such things as punctual attendance and cooperation in dealing with truancy. It also implies a commitment to attend meetings with teachers, to get pupils to individual coaching when necessary (e.g. remedial teaching, supervised homework) and to encourage pupils to learn Dutch. There are no hard sanctions or procedures: it is a signal, a matter of soft law.

Two of the ten Decathlon tests involve language. A whole battery of measures was developed in order to test the children's level of language (in particular schools but also in the school system at large), to clarify the objectives of language teaching, to spur schools on to develop a coherent language policy of their own, to focus the inspection on that issue and to improve the linguistic competence of new teachers. The linguistic challenge in Flanders is more complex than elsewhere because for many children, standard Dutch - the school language - is only spoken in the classroom. In popular culture and in the media Dutch is often pushed out by other languages; moreover, in Flanders the language spoken outside school is usually either a dialect or a mixture of standard Dutch and dialect. This is made even more complicated in Brussels and the surrounding area by the fact that it has been heavily 'frenchified'. In short, for very many children, school is their first and only true immersion in standard Dutch.

But however difficult it may be, there is no other option but to raise the children's command of standard Dutch to a high level since otherwise higher education would be closed to them. But an uncompromising approach to the learning of standard Dutch must clearly not be accompanied by a negative attitude towards other languages spoken in the home. It must be integrated into the pursuit of multilingualism. However, the arguments for multilingual immersion teaching - in which pupils are immersed in other languages as well as Dutch - have not so far answered the question how one can successfully make children from a weak socio-cultural background multilingual when Dutch is in many respects already a foreign language to them. Furthermore, if multilingual immersion education were to lead in practice to linguistic relativism - thus watering down the requirement to speak, understand and write good standard Dutch - equal opportunities would suffer seriously.

Another Decathlon test involved guidance and orientation in the choice of study, a subject with which educational policy continues to wrestle. Yet another of the Decathlon challenges pointed to the need to genuinely improve the educational ladder. Although we have embarked on a second wave of democratisation in higher education, we must not allow the policy to degenerate into 'everyone must have a master's or a bachelor's degree'. That is why a new framework was created to reorganise and upgrade post-secondary education, below the bachelor level. These extra rungs on the educational ladder create new and promising opportunities for young people who don't have the ambition or the ability for a bachelor or a master.

Equal opportunities in the labour market

Tailored activation: the multi-staged model and its intensification

The systematic activation of job seekers is relatively new to Flanders: only since 2004 has a policy been adopted in which all job seekers are contacted and given guidance when necessary in order to avoid long-term unemployment, and where they are also required to make some effort in exchange for the help they are offered. Activation is done on the basis of a so-called 'multi-staged model' which means providing more rapid and more intense contact and guidance

to those with a relatively low level of training than to others. The further this form of activation progressed, the more we became aware of how important a differentiated approach to job seekers was. An early example of this was a pilot project involving low-skilled unemployed young people in thirteen cities and municipalities all of which suffered from endemic youth unemployment. Although the project did not focus specifically on migrants, the target group happened to consist largely of migrant youth. Even with a generic approach, which was not specifically aimed at these migrants, unemployment among low-skilled migrants fell in some municipalities by more than half during the project. In 2008 this highly intensive and firm approach was extended to the whole of Flanders. The economic slump in the second half of 2008 interrupted the positive results of this style of activation. Not surprisingly young people are the first victims in times of crisis. Unemployment among migrant youth of Maghreb and Turkish background rose about as steeply as among young people of Belgian descent.

We mentioned earlier that the Flemish Public Employment and Vocational Training Service (VDAB) is committed to 'positive action' which means that 40% more migrants should receive individual guidance than their percentage of the total unemployed might suggest.

Tackle the newcomers' linguistic deficiencies through 'integration-via-work'

In 2003 civic integration courses were introduced, which became compulsory in 2006 for virtually every newcomer who wants to settle in Flanders. As finding work is an important aspect of citizenship, unemployed newcomers, as well as some of those who entered earlier but are unemployed, are offered a so-called 'secondary civic integration path', focusing specifically on integration via employment, which appears to have been relatively successful. The VDAB also offers functional and specific language training. Although the evaluation of the citizenship policy since 2006 is not yet known, the global effect of the policy over the period 2003-2009 appears to have been very limited. The number of foreign language speakers following a compulsory course is fairly limited. Those who do follow a compulsory citizenship course often remain locked up in their own communities. Dutch is seldom if ever used and is therefore not practised.

A 'Competences Agenda'

In 2007 the so-called 'Competences Agenda' was approved by the government and the social partners (employers and unions) and subsequently underwritten by the education providers. 'Competences' stand for the combination of qualifications, skills and attitudes, whether they are acquired in formal education and training or not. Getting the labour market to recognise previously acquired competences was one of its spearhead objectives. One way to achieve this is by issuing 'Certificates of Experience'. They are not yet widespread, but the participation of migrants in this programme is relatively high. The recognition of competences acquired elsewhere will certainly become much more important after the expected wave of regularisations of illegal residents when the federal government's Regularisation Accord is implemented. As well as extending the scope of the Certificates of Experience (e.g. to include work for regional and local government) it is also important for migrants that skills obtained abroad should be validated through more rapid recognition procedures and shorter top-up courses.

Combating 'diploma fetishism' can appear to conflict with the emphasis on obtaining formal qualifications through education, but it is not. The Flemish Competences Agenda is intended to initiate a broader process in which industry and participants in the labour market will give

as many people as possible an opportunity for further self-development on the basis of their individual competences. Elsewhere in this volume Fons Leroy (pp.89-91) argues for a tailored approach for everyone, which will build on the competences that they possess or have acquired rather than an approach based on peoples' assumed group characteristics. Creating opportunities for migrants will be a major challenge.

Experiencing success

Since 1998 Flanders has adopted a policy of promoting proportional labour participation by which business and industry are expected to develop good practices in encouraging diversity. The public face of this policy is seen in the *diversity plans* by which businesses, organisations and local authorities receive financial incentives to work on a strategic personnel and organisational policy that takes full advantage of the potential available through diversity in the market place. These plans focus significantly on disadvantaged groups, and always with special attention for the progression, training and retention of these groups. These diversity plans are now operative in about 10% of all businesses and organisations with more than 10 employees, representing more than 10% of employment.⁵

A vigorous version of this policy is the *Jobkanaal* [Job Channel] project run by the employers' organisations. They have set up an additional channel of vacancies and aim at 5000 placements each year for jobseekers from the special opportunity groups (migrants, the over-50s, those with handicaps). Job Channel was a sensitive project because its methods permit - with the agreement of the employer - a vacancy to be exclusively reserved for a short time for applicants from the disadvantaged groups. In 2007 and 2008, years of prosperity, an average of 3,687 people were placed of whom 58% were migrants. The data for the first half of 2009 show a sharp fall in the number of vacancies and placements.

The government must obviously set an example. It is important that various existing legislative barriers are removed to give all migrants greater access to government jobs. There are, for instance, limitations that prevent people with a Certificate of Experience from taking the selection tests for positions in government (diploma requirements). In the new Coalition Agreement it was agreed that the Flemish government would lead the way by including proportional participation of disadvantaged groups in the management agreements with and personal annual objectives of the leading civil servants.

This policy of encouragement must develop from being a voluntary commitment by pioneers into a form of 'soft law', i.e. a guideline with a real impact on the whole business world and government. The Flemish government's 'sector covenants' with business sectors can play a role in this. The current practice of proposing quantified sector targets for the number of diversity plans within the sector and of subjecting all relevant sectors' initiatives (such as training) to a 'diversity test', is slowly but surely bedding in. Eventually, 'soft pressure' at sector level and 'good examples' at company level can have a cascade effect and diversity on the shop floor may thus become the norm and lack of diversity an exception - albeit without any hard sanctions. To achieve this context of 'soft law', sector covenants must systematically include strong diversity clauses and they must be judged on their observance. There are also other routes to 'soft law'. With a view to the proportional participation of disadvantaged groups, unions and employers have committed themselves for the next three years to encourage their members to discuss diversity in the works councils. It has also been proposed in the government's Coalition Agreement that organisations in receipt of substantial subsidies or government contracts will have to develop diversity policies.

Punishing discrimination

At both the federal and the Flemish levels a legal framework has existed for some years designed to make it possible to rein in discrimination (on grounds of nationality, race, skin colour, descent, ethnic origins, etc.). The great challenge was to impose effective sanctions within this framework. Recently there have been some encouraging examples. Two employment agencies were obliged to change their practices under the threat of losing their licenses, and two companies were found guilty of discrimination by an industrial tribunal.

It is essential that there should be sound anti-discrimination legislation, but it is also important that victims of discrimination should be heard and have their complaints dealt with. That is why a complaints office has been set up for people to report employment-related discrimination. Furthermore, there are now accessible discrimination complaints centres in all the main cities.

Results

Can we report any results yet? In the case of education it is certainly too early to see any meaningful results because the policy needs a long time to become embedded. This argument applies less to the labour market, yet the assessment is not straightforward either. The answer to the question of how migrants are faring in the Flemish labour market depends on the definition of the challenge and the definition of the target group 'migrants'. The challenge of raising the level of employment is not the same as that of reducing unemployment. Moreover, interpretation is made more difficult by statistical problems.

In the last 10 years there has been a structural improvement in the employment rate of non-EU nationals in Flanders. Their employment rate has increased significantly and the gap between it and the general employment rate is becoming smaller. The lower limit of the objectives laid down in the Vilvoorde Pact between the government and the social partners (an annual increase of 2000 in work) has been achieved with an annual increase of 2,400 non-EU citizens finding work. However, we do not have figures for workers of foreign origin who possess Belgian or EU nationality. In the past ten years, Belgium has made naturalisation much easier and very many foreigners have taken up Belgian nationality. This makes interpretation more difficult.

In the case of unemployment, we have partial information on origins, in particular for those of Maghreb and Turkish origin. The figures show a number of positive developments in recent years. But although they indicate successes, these are limited and do not appear to be structural. Summarised briefly, it can be said that migrant youth unemployment has developed slightly more favourably than the average youth unemployment (which is certainly a success, given the growing population of migrant youth who might have been unemployed), while global migrant unemployment has developed less favourably than average unemployment. Economic developments, however, have clearly played a role in this: because more migrants are employed in industry and in temporary contracts, they have now been hardest hit by the recession.

Challenges

As Fons Leroy writes in his contribution later on (pp.89-91), the labour market only provides curative remedies which are less efficient than the preventive remedies that education can offer. Breaking through the vicious circles of disadvantage, particularly when educational backwardness is so important, is a long-term project. So for the time being there is no disgrace in saying

that the jury is still out. In the meantime, what we need in education and the labour market is the equivalent of a four-wheel drive with an exceptional engine.

The relationship that was created between the spheres of education and work, now that they are back in separate ministerial hands, must not be lost and must be consolidated. Employment policy must continue to invest in a broad range of measures to help vulnerable groups, with employers organisations giving active support and taking greater responsibility, even when unemployment rises and the argument of “war for talent” seems to lose ground. *Secondly*, a more competence-oriented approach should be adopted everywhere. It is even more urgent, bearing in mind the numbers of previously illegal migrants who are about to be regularised. But there is also a wider challenge: although the concrete instruments dealing with migrant disadvantage in the labour market are not ‘categorical’, consultants are perhaps too inclined to see migrants as a category and overlook their individual potential of competences. *Thirdly*, building on what the pioneers have achieved, the policy of encouragement must be expanded into a universal ‘soft law’ applying to all enterprises and organisations. *Fourthly*, ‘hard law’, to which sanctions are attached, must be experienced as such and the sanctions should be imposed.

In any case, the demographic dynamic related to immigration will compel Flanders to make additional investments in education. Particularly in our bigger cities, a migrant baby boom is already taking place. This is promising for the dynamism of our society, but requires educational foresight. ‘More of the same’ will not suffice. We have to watch over the whole gamut of educational policy to ensure that the financial incentives in the new system of financing actually lead to real equality of opportunity in schools and classrooms, as described in the various tests of our Decathlon. Four challenges in particular come to the fore. *Firstly*, strengthening early childhood education, which will require better staffing and synergy with improved early childhood care. *Secondly*, zero tolerance of poor language skills at the end of primary education. The question whether schools and their pupils have actually cleared the language bar at the end of primary education must be posed more systematically and forcefully. Moreover, schools must have greater freedom to invest in their own language goals including such possibilities as extra teaching after school or on Wednesday afternoons. *Thirdly*, secondary education needs reform, which must do justice to the talents of migrant youth whether they are technological, practical or theoretical. *Fourthly*, the educational ladder must be complemented with a rung between secondary and higher education.

This multi-track policy will need a powerful engine and the driving must be shared by all the stakeholders: not only the educational institutions, employers and trade unions, but also the migrant community itself. Perhaps that is the most important challenge: how to share out aspiration and responsibility between all those involved? That also touches on the broader cultural dimensions which we were unable to consider in this contribution, since it raises the fundamental question: how can we all come to share the same dream of making a real success of diversity in our society?

Endnotes

1/ Although we discuss education in this paper, we shall not enter the debate over wearing the hijab, the head scarf, in school. It is explored elsewhere in this volume (Jan de Zutter, pp. 86-88).

2/ The figures were accumulated from four successive studies of school leavers by the VDAB carried out between 2003 and 2006.

3/ Jacobs D., e.a. (2009) *De sociale lift blijft steken. De prestaties van allochtone leerlingen in de Vlaamse Gemeenschap en in de Franse Gemeenschap*. Brussel, Koning Boudewijnstichting.

4/ *Allochtonen in het hoger onderwijs. Factoren van studiekeuze en studiesucces bij allochtone eerstejaarsstudenten*, KULeuven, VUB, March 2007.

5/ Department of Work, *Nota Evaluatie Impulsbeleid EAD*