

Executive summary

Flanders emerged from the global financial crisis in a relatively healthy position with stable unemployment levels compared to the OECD average. However, certain groups of individuals, such as youth and older workers face significant barriers to successful labour force participation. Creating quality jobs and developing relevant skills will be an important priority to continue growing the economy.

The OECD Local Economic and Employment Development Programme (LEED) has developed an international comparative project to examine the capacity of local employment services and training providers to contribute to a long-term strategy which strengthens the resiliency of the local economy, increases skills levels and improves job quality. In Flanders, the review has looked at the range of institutions and bodies involved in employment and skills policies. In-depth work was undertaken in the Antwerp and Limburg regions.

It is encouraging that VDAB (the agency for public employment services) has moved towards a flexible management model, however more needs to be done to explore how to combine actions locally across employment, skills, and economic development portfolios. Another important policy imperative is to develop data sharing platforms across local providers and organisations, which can be used to provide actionable and real time information on gaps in the supply and demand of skills. By sharing information across organisations, local actors can ensure they are successfully meeting the needs of employers, who are a critical source of job creation.

Efforts to reduce skills mismatches and shortages require stronger engagement with employers in the facilitation of workplace training opportunities. While there are good examples of collaboration through the sectoral training funds, more can be done to articulate the benefits of training to employers and alert them to the opportunities available through these programmes. Employers and workers have a joint role to play in this by supporting a culture of workplace learning. It is important to build on good bottom up collaboration and networks that already exist.

While there are some initiatives undertaken at the local level, particularly in the Limburg region, skills utilisation efforts are not comprehensively supported across Flanders. The Flemish government should encourage closer working with employers to stimulate demand side initiatives under a mantra of Corporate Social Responsibility, which recognises the public and private benefits of encouraging and promoting quality jobs. The Talent Houses in Antwerp are working well to match skills to certain sectors; however, much of their focus is on supply side initiatives. There is an opportunity for them to shift efforts towards how to stimulate the demand for skills, which would create higher quality jobs and thereby attract higher skilled people into the city and region, which has broader economic development benefits.

To ensure that the supply of skills adequately meets labour market demand, it is important to strengthen the linkages between the education system and employment, and training agencies. Schools should work more closely with the public employment service and vocational education system to create clearer, simpler and more recognised pathways into training as well as the labour market. In particular, it is important that more out-reach is conducted by VDAB with secondary schools to ensure that youth at-risk can be identified early and adequate supports and interventions can be put in place to reduce early school leavers and the number of NEETs. At the local level, addressing youth unemployment is a clear policy priority in both Antwerp and Limburg. A number of comprehensive programmes and policies have been put in place, which aim to provide work experience opportunities and develop long-term labour market attachment.

Another critical lever in stimulating job creation locally is creating a culture of entrepreneurship. This is particularly important for local areas, which are experiencing structural adjustments, such as the Limburg region, where the Ford factory is set to close, resulting in significant direct and indirect job losses for the community. Entrepreneurship skills can assist individuals in developing successful businesses and creating jobs. Therefore, the vocational and higher education system should ensure that course curriculum includes an adequate focus on building these types of skills.

Key recommendations

Better aligning programmes and policies to local economic development

- Build on the high level of flexibility within employment services and continue to build partnerships and horizontal accountability mechanisms, which promote growth and employment. This can be done by identifying the best collaboration models which have led to strong policy integration and co-ordination.
- Continue to collect and share information and data about “what works” locally, including effective approaches to respond to the hiring needs of employers.

Adding value through skills

- Proceed with the reform of the apprenticeship system to make it a more attractive vocational educational pathway and foster more opportunities for work-based training.
- Promote stronger engagement with employers in the design and implementation of employment and training programmes to create a culture of lifelong learning. Encourage network formation among employers who can take a lead role in the delivery of employment and skills policies.
- Ensure career guidance and information systems are well-targeted to youth and individuals who are unemployed or at-risk of adjustment to support labour force attachment, as well as career progression and advancement.

Targeting policy to local employment sectors and investing in quality jobs

- Stimulate overall productivity and job quality through policies which promote the better utilisation of skills. Encourage the Talent Houses to focus on working with employers to stimulate overall demand for skills to boost local growth and competitiveness.
- Build stronger entrepreneurship skills for youth and adults to stimulate overall demand and job creation. This can be done by promoting entrepreneurship as a viable career

option and providing comprehensive support and tools to individuals to help them start their own business.

Being inclusive

- Strengthen linkages between the education system and employment, and training agencies to reduce youth drop-outs. Continue to target early-school leavers and provide follow-up support while examining ways of involving youth more in programme design and delivery.



From:
**Employment and Skills Strategies in Flanders,
Belgium**

Access the complete publication at:
<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264228740-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2015), "Executive summary", in *Employment and Skills Strategies in Flanders, Belgium*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264228740-3-en>

This work is published under the responsibility of the Secretary-General of the OECD. The opinions expressed and arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of OECD member countries.

This document and any map included herein are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area.

You can copy, download or print OECD content for your own use, and you can include excerpts from OECD publications, databases and multimedia products in your own documents, presentations, blogs, websites and teaching materials, provided that suitable acknowledgment of OECD as source and copyright owner is given. All requests for public or commercial use and translation rights should be submitted to rights@oecd.org. Requests for permission to photocopy portions of this material for public or commercial use shall be addressed directly to the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) at info@copyright.com or the Centre français d'exploitation du droit de copie (CFC) at contact@cfcopies.com.