



Benchlearning Initiative External Assessment

Summary report 2nd cycle – Belgium (Actiris)



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Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
Directorate B — Employment
Unit B.1 — Employment Strategy
Contact: Martina Winkler
E-mail: EMPL-PES-SECRETARIAT@ec.europa.eu
European Commission
B-1049 Brussels

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Actiris – the PES for the Brussels Capital Region of Belgium

Summary Report 2nd cycle

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1. INTRODUCTION

This report outlines the results of the second Benchlearning (BL) external assessment of the Public Employment Service (PES) in the Brussels Capital Region in Belgium (Actiris), conducted on June 26th and 27th, 2019. The team of external assessors had three peer PES staff (one Belgian from the French-speaking Walloon region, one French and one Luxembourger), two representatives from the European Commission (one of them as an observer) and one expert from ICON-Institut (the supporting contractor). The programme of the two-day visit included meetings with senior management from the Head Office and a discussion with front-line staff and managers from two local offices. The time and resources Actiris put into preparation for the Benchlearning visit, particularly its internal self-assessment, were crucial to the success of the visit.

Actiris is a self-managed public organisation, governed by a Management Committee made up of representatives from trade unions, employer associations, the Brussels Capital Region government and Actiris's general directorate. The Head Office has one general directorate and nine further directorates. The Head Office is responsible for the implementation of labour market policies and programmes, general management issues (including budgetary questions), the coordination of activities between the PES and other institutions and the provision of support for the local offices. The 18 local offices (one per city district) are responsible for the practical implementation of services. Actiris is operating on a five-year Management Contract closed between the Brussels Government and the Management Committee. The term of their current contract is from 2017 to 2022.

The situation on the labour market in the Brussel Capital Region is demanding. The unique nature of the region is characterised by a very high rate of jobs requiring higher education (90%) on the one hand, while on the other hand, there is a relatively large number of jobseekers whose skill levels do not match employers' demands. This leads to significant inequalities in the Brussels Capital Region. Moreover, the implementation of labour market policies is complicated because the political borders of the Region (i.e. the area of Actiris's operation) do not correspond to the economic borders and the labour market borders. Finally, the economic and social context is characterised by a significant demographic change leading – amongst other factors – to a constant need to improve the level of the residents' education.

In order to tackle the challenges of the regional labour market, Actiris offers a wide range of services to jobseekers, employers and employees through various channels (including face-to-face interviews, a call centre, websites, the Brussel information centre, e-mails etc.). This can range from career guidance and advice on how to apply for a job to vocational training and other active labour market policy measures. Actiris facilitates initial unemployment registration and since the Sixth State Reform, it has also monitored jobseekers' availability for work. This 'availability for work' function provides a challenge to PES staff who would have traditionally seen their role as providers of guidance for jobseekers, rather than recommending sanctions against them. Consequently, service delivery and proof of 'availability for employment' are organised in different departments.

Actiris is not responsible for the payment of unemployment and social benefits though it undertakes the initial registration and the on-going monitoring of people's eligibility for unemployment benefit. All unemployment benefit recipients must register with the PES.

The number of staff was about 1,250 in 2018, this is an overall increase of 8% compared with the situation two years earlier. Actiris's total expenditure was

€ 678 million in 2017. The principle source for funding is the government's budget, topped up by the European Social Fund (ESF).

2. SHORT SUMMARY OF THE CHANGE AGENDA

The previous Management Contract (2013–2017) had already introduced significant reforms to Actiris. The new contract for the 2017–2022 period was developed based on inputs from a quantitative evaluation of this previous contract, a participatory process that allowed staff and partners to express their ideas and recommendations that came out of the results of an external evaluation. The Management Contract is headlined "Guaranteeing quality for all" and it defines the role of Actiris as a public employment service that, firstly, implements every Brussels resident's right to work, and, secondly, supports the economic and financial health and social cohesion of the region by increasing the employment rate among residents.

To implement this mission, the Contract has **three strands** which are made concrete by **ten strategic objectives**, monitored by sixteen indicators:

First Strand: Actiris at the service of jobseekers and employers

1. Ensures high quality support for all jobseekers.
2. Has a sufficient number of appropriate solutions that lead to sustainable employment.
3. Ensures access to 'solutions for all'.

Second Strand: Actiris, an actor in an efficient, effective and intelligent ecosystem

4. Achieves the technological leap and application break-through that will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of its services.
5. Strengthens the Employment Training Education alliance.
6. Innovates with the public, non-market partners and private partners to facilitate both jobseekers' pathways and employers' pathways.
7. Improves its own monitoring, evaluation, initiative-taking and innovation-led abilities.

Third Strand: Actiris working to become an exemplary organisation

8. Ensure the transversality of the services with the aim of enhancing the experience of clients.
9. Invests in well-being at work and develops and values the skills of its staff.
10. Improves satisfaction and pride among its staff, fosters innovation and improves the quality of its services by making participatory management a priority.

To achieve these objectives and priorities, the Management Contract has come up with 84 so-called 'conditions for success' to guide the change processes and orientate the reform agenda. For operational implementation of the strategic objectives, a three-year operational plan was established. This plan is currently broken down into 21 quantitative operational objectives, which for their part are managed through 70 operational indicators established on an annual basis.

Within this operational plan, the Annual Development Plans (ADP) sets out concrete measures and actions in the framework of the reform projects. 2018 was characterised by the development of many new large-scale projects, as it was the first year of the new Management Contract. The 2018 ADP therefore had 35 pro-

jects, including 13 new ones. Finally, all the individual departments work to specific action plans based on the ADP that is in place at the time.

The current reform agenda (2018–2019), based on the priorities of the 2018 ADP, has seven major reform projects:

1. A review of the support framework for jobseekers and the implementation of the 'guaranteed solution'. Based on the positive experiences of the Youth Guarantee, this approach was extended by guaranteeing a solution within twelve months (employment, an internship or training) to all those who register with Actiris for the first time, or for any jobseeker who requests it.
2. Improving the 'cross-cutting' (holistic so customers get a unified service) approach and the quality of services by improving the customer experience (the customer satisfaction rate). Ten 'Customer Touch Points' (CTPs) are the first step in this regard. The improvement cycle (PDCA) is planned for the CTPs. After evaluation, this methodology will become the standard process for continuous improvement.
3. One single file as the main support tool for each client. The single jobseeker file should allow automatic matching based on the up-to-date skills of jobseekers. It is the first step in Actiris's digital transformation and it will enable a 'phygital' (physical and digital) approach, giving jobseekers with the necessary skills more independence and freeing up more time for counsellors to devote to the weakest jobseekers who are most in need of face-to-face support.
4. The simplification of the dashboard for the main strategic indicators.
5. Digitisation and the provision of self-service access. Actiris aims to improve the efficiency and the effectiveness of its services, for instance through applications allowing easy access to services, management tools that focus on the core business, the efficient monitoring of actions and changes to a paperless system. This reform is currently suspended.
6. The establishment of an Actiris Academy to improve the quality of continuous training. Actiris wants to retain the talent of people recruited into its organisation and increase staff employability and motivation. Currently, the main target groups are front-line counsellors, managers and project leaders. The opening of this Academy should help external partners as well as Actiris's own staff to improve and standardise the quality of services.
7. The prevention and reduction of absenteeism through investing in well-being at work. The organisation is working on the development of a cross-department and coordinated policy of well-being at work including, in particular, the integrated management of absenteeism.

Actiris is currently in the middle of an ambitious reform process which has various strands and projects linked to it. This leads to crucial questions about how its change process can be managed effectively and what the factors for success are.

3. RELEVANCE, COHERENCE AND CONSISTENCY OF THE REFORM AGENDA

The external assessors support the way the decision to reform Actiris was clearly and strongly evidence-based. An analysis of the previous Management Contract, together with internal and external assessments of the performance and discussions with staff and stakeholders using the participatory management approach, formed the basis of the decision to reform it.

By headlining the Management Contract “Ensure Quality for All”, the reform’s slogan reform clearly indicates the basic principle of the reform process. It is underpinned by three watchwords - quality, effectiveness, and efficiency. These form the guidelines for each reform activity. The reform agenda is clearly structured through having various strands and underlying objectives, which are made concrete through the so-called ‘conditions for success’. Its translation into actions is broken down into a three-year plan and an annual development plan. Although the agenda seems to be comprehensive, up to the present moment, there is still no digitalisation strategy for the delivery of the service. Therefore there is no complete channel management in place. As IT tools are already in place, the “action follows strategy” principle is not entirely applied.

Further characteristic features of the reform process are the use of the participative management approach together with a strong focus on partners and staff. Additionally, Actiris takes on tasks in the framework of its Corporate Social Responsibility and its role in the overall ecosystem. Its “Become an exemplary organisation” strand expresses this explicitly. Furthermore, the change process obviously benefits from the overall openness to reform at all levels. Although some restrictions could be identified during the visit,¹ the assessors appreciate its comprehensive communication activities to inform staff and external bodies such as the social partners and other partners.

The current reform has several elements, which will help mould the service model into the desired direction of effectiveness, efficiency and quality. The comprehensive approach shows reform interventions directly related to core processes but also related to supporting processes. For both types of processes, some important changes which are crucial for the success of the reforms could be identified during the assessors’ visit:²

- The recently introduced ‘solution guarantee’ challenges the service model by shifting from service delivery approach to a result-oriented approach which promises solutions rather than ‘only’ activities. This requires the use of complementary steps from registration and profiling to segmentation, and following active labour market policy instruments. The external assessors observed that the service model itself shows some room for improvement. For instance, the link between profiling and segmentation is currently fragile and bears the risk of inconsistency. Furthermore, several tools are under development or not yet fully implemented such as the Individualised Action Plan.
- In regard to customer-oriented service delivery, the Cité des metier completes the portfolio of services by offering free information and learning opportunities to all citizens. Furthermore, the Customer Contact Points consequently implement a quality-driven approach putting the needs and interests of the customers in the centre of all its activities.
- The ‘unique file’ can potentially improve the job-seeking process in terms of giving more autonomy to jobseekers, speeding up the process and freeing up more counselling time for face-to-face sessions for those who are in need of a more intensive assistance.
- The establishment of its own staff Academy (which in future will also be available to Actiris’s partners) forms an important reform element to ensure high level qualifications among its staff, and also for the exchange of experiences. Currently the Academy supports the reform process by training the project leaders for their tasks in the reform projects.

¹ For further details, see next chapter.

² See section 7 below for further details.

- Actiris has recognised the importance of staff for the quality of service delivery. Therefore, a well-being at work strategy has been established and is explicitly stated as one of its strategic objectives (see chapter 2). This feature consequently is very rare amongst the strategic objectives of European PES.

Although some of the reform elements are still under construction or not yet completely rolled out, the assessors believe that the reform is an ambitious undertaking and appropriate for improving the performance of the organisation. Still, the external assessors see some areas for further improvement, having uncovered some 'suboptimal' developments. Besides the above-mentioned fragile link between profiling and segmentation, the assessors want to note some general aspects of the organisation:

- The ambitious and comprehensive reform risks overloading the organisation, and in particular its staff. Hence, the huge reform agenda might take up so many resources that the success of single reforms is jeopardised. Due to the lack of (human) resources, the digitalisation and provision of 'self-service access' is currently suspended.
- The strategic priorities run the risk of becoming unclear or even disappearing completely if the change management focuses solely on single projects, rather than on the reform as a coherent whole. The lack of prioritisation of targets according to their importance in achieving the strategic objectives of the Management Contract increases this risk. Consequently, steering a coherent reform progress through a systematic change management process remains a challenge. It is the key to prevent 'muddling through' daily problems and overcome obstacles within single projects.

Actiris is in the middle of its reform process and therefore a final conclusion on the results is not yet possible. Moreover, it must be noted, that the reform is absolutely fundamental because it applies to all areas and divisions within the organisation. It applies to the service model, the organisational processes, and the cultural behaviour and mind-set of managers and staff. This paradigm shift from an offer-driven to a customer-centric organisation requires a new perspective that very much focuses on the needs and interests of its customers. Furthermore, the change process takes external factors into account (such as the Sixth Belgian State Reform) and its relationship with social partners and other partners.

4. ASSESSMENT OF CHANGE MANAGEMENT

At the beginning of the change process, Actiris had already recognised the need for effective management of the reform process and a change management process was established in the first stage of the reform. The organisational structure is as follows:

- The Management Committee, which concluded the Management Contract with the Government, runs Actiris through implementing the government's regional policy. In the reform process, the Management Committee monitors the progress of projects and programmes at a strategic level and decides on basic corrective measures.
- The Executive Management coordinates the implementation of strategic decisions and the day-to-day management of the organisation. It also represents the view of the administration liaising between the point of view of the Minister and other stakeholders.
- The Strategic Executive Committee was established to structure the reform process. It defines Actiris's strategy by supporting the development and the update of the Management Contract, the three-year operational

plan and the strategic portfolio. The committee manages the implementation of Actiris's strategy. It develops the annual development plans, monitors the progress of implementation, validates the composition of the Project Steering Committees and prepares and supports the meetings of the Management Committee.

- Project Managers head the project teams and collaborate with the so-called 'sponsors' who are usually members of the Top Management. They are responsible for the implementation of the project. Project steering committees support the project teams by supplying information and making decisions. Furthermore, the steering committees approve the project deliverables.

Together with the Strategic Executive Committee, internal procedures were installed for the continuous identification and improvement of internal needs. The regulated flow of change follows a clearly defined procedure starting with the ideas for improvement coming from the political sphere, or from external partners, or from within the organisation. The unit responsible then sorts through the ideas and proposals with a strong focus on the customers' perspective, and it is the Strategic Executive Committee which then selects future projects from this pool of ideas. Afterwards, the idea and the business case are then transformed into change projects. The individual project sheets determine the makeup of the project steering committee and the project team, as well as the project's objectives, scope, potential risks and performance indicators. The progress of projects and programmes is monitored at different levels. Whilst the project steering committees observe the implementation of the projects, the Strategic Executive Committee bridges the monitoring at the project level with the strategic level, while the Management Committee oversees the reforms. Dashboards are developed, particularly for strategic monitoring.

The consequent use of the PDCA (Plan Do Check Act) cycle in the projects is an outstanding feature of Actiris's change management process. Furthermore, the use of external expertise for planning and monitoring the progress of projects and reforms is also a distinctive feature of Actiris's change management.

The external assessors saw a thorough and high level of commitment to change and innovation among managers and staff at all levels. Despite the large number of changes and their fundamental importance, the openness and the 'will to improve' form characteristic features of the organisation. However, it should be born in mind that the recognition and acceptance of transversal tasks shows some room for improvement. For instance, the newly established Quality Management department (SQT) is not accepted throughout the organisation and it faces various obstacles. More tailored information on the added value of Quality Management (QM) is required, accompanied and supported by further measures.³ However, the assessors appreciate that the cross-cutting and overarching organisation of the projects has already improved communication and exchange between departments.

Each individual reform is organised and steered through as a project. The necessary skills for project managers were part of specific training measures. All the projects of the operational plans are monitored and decided upon jointly via project-steering committees. In across-the-board projects, all the relevant departments are represented in the project steering committees. The different projects are well-structured and the implementation of larger projects is prepared and accompanied by specific communication plans. Notable features of Actiris's project

³ See also below in the context of information overflow.

management approach are the high quality monitoring tools, which are in place to identify deviations at an early stage and then re-act with corrective measures.

However, the assessors think that the high importance given to project management also has some risks such as the lack of an overarching governance in steering and managing the reforms as a coherent whole. Focussing on project management may go alongside the risk of lacking an overview of the different strands of the reform agenda, and of the inter-relationships between processes, programmes and activities.⁴ Therefore, the dominant project-focused approach should be completed by a more governance-oriented perspective to regain an overview on the transparency and the priority of each single part of the overall reform. Moreover, the assessors think that despite the use of the PDCA cycle in the project management, the risk management for each project, in particular at the strategic level, seems to be underdeveloped while an integrated risk management should also address the reform with its various projects as a whole.

There are clear communication mechanisms available for informing members of staff about the progress of the reforms. In return, there are also means available for staff to express or discuss their opinions and experiences. For transparent communication, the most important internal channels are the magazine for members of staff, the intranet and a YouTube channel. Despite all these different communication formats and the various channels, the external assessors got the impression that front-line staff could be informed in a more targeted and concise manner.

Further important elements of change management are gaining the support of staff, the management tools, the information sources and the coaching available to staff. Actiris offers a wide range of training and coaching to its staff.

A complex and basic reform produces an enormous amount of data and information. Therefore, Actiris is also faced with the risk of information overload, which in the opinion of the assessors is currently not sufficiently controlled. The ambitious reform agenda furthermore bears the risk of “too much – too fast” which may lead to staff overload perhaps causing either anxiety or resistance amongst staff. Fear of change can become a serious obstacle to the success of a reform. The assessors would like to stress the importance of this aspect because the fundamental changes mean serious challenges for staff in terms of understanding and accepting the reforms, carrying out new tasks, changing their own behaviour, working in different working environments, keeping up motivation and so on. This issue therefore should not only be a matter of communication activities but also a matter of training staff, the leadership offered by management (at all levels), the exchange of ‘best practices’ among colleagues, support and help from HR and so on. Therefore, an adequate and comprehensive change management strategy is of utmost importance.

All in all, the Actiris’s change management approach is based on a solid concept with all the necessary basics required for an adequate change management process. While the approach shows outstanding strengths not only in the use of the PDCA cycle and the monitoring of the progress of projects, it does also show some room for improvement such as in the overarching governance of the reforms, or in the risk of information overflow.

⁴ This risk is increased by the lack of weighted targets (see chapter 3 above).

5. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Firstly, the assessors would like to highlight how Actiris's current reform agenda means fundamental changes which will affect the administrative culture of the organisation. These reform processes therefore need to be well anchored and enough time should be allowed for the careful development of changes. As already mentioned, Actiris has already shown that it has a good basis on which to further develop its reform agenda, and also the concepts, tools and procedures for this. The assessors see Actiris as heading in the right direction, and they encourage the organisation to go forward purposefully on its reform path.

Although Actiris has already recognised some of the main risks arising from the demanding and complex transformation process, the assessors would like to point out some issues which are relevant to the success of the reform process:

- Measures to regain the overarching governance and management of the reform process are necessary such as prioritising the objectives including increasing transparency e.g. by drawing up a clear and precise roadmap. Furthermore, risk management could be improved.
- The ambitious reform process carries the risk of a "too much, too fast" overload for staff. This refers to the need for (more) preventive measures, the information and the involvement of staff could be more target-oriented, for instance.
- The service delivery should be further developed, including closing existing gaps, for example the profiling model or the link between profiling and segmentation.
- A digitalisation strategy and a complete channel management approach should be developed and rolled out in the near future.

For these reasons, careful change management is the key to the success of the reform process. This management approach incorporates a governance perspective that takes the reform processes as a coherent whole. In the following paragraphs, some ideas with references to other PES are presented which could improve the overarching change management process and the governance of the reforms.⁵

Strengthening governance and the overarching management of the reforms

There are several PES in Europe which are currently undergoing basic reforms. Besides a well-structured reform agenda, fundamental reforms need a comprehensive change management process if the reform affects the organisation's culture. This is also the case for Actiris, which has already developed and rolled out important elements of a fit-for-purpose change management programme. However, the assessors believe that the completion of the change management approach, bringing together the different reform strands and the individualised elements, might facilitate the success of the reform considerably.

The following PES may serve as sources for inspiration:

- The management approach of the Estonian PES is characterised by a clear and comprehensive action plan for bigger reforms. Its approach also has a communication plan for staff and stakeholders. The monitoring of the implementation of the different reform phases is clearly noted and the responsibilities are retained. Furthermore, the innovation process and the

⁵ For further information, see the comments, observations etc. in section 7.

involvement of staff are crucial features of its change management programme.

- Also, the French PES may give inspiration to Actiris in regard to its change management programme. The strong leadership of the French PES means that its change agenda and its core elements are systematically promoted throughout the organisation. Change projects are designed on the basis of clear principles, and the consequences for existing business processes are thoroughly thought through. Roadmaps are drafted and specific project plans exist, especially for larger projects like the implementation of its digital strategy.
- The objective of the Austrian 'Chances and Risk Management System'⁶ is to identify, assess and prioritise future issues that may affect the future successful operation of the PES. The System is a structured approach to managing the risk associated with the organisation. Important elements of the System are firstly Risk Workshops moderated by the PES Quality Manager, secondly the involvement of top management and staff, thirdly the identification of "risk owners" who are often simultaneously the process owners, and, fourthly, making the role of the "risk owners" clear.
- The experiences that Actiris's neighbour, the Flemish PES (VDAB), gained during its re-definition phase in terms of the 'proper re-definition' and the steering of processes, may be useful for Actiris. Furthermore, the precise and concise depiction of its strategic objectives through its 'Strategic House' is a clear and well-structured example.

The further development of the service delivery

When it comes to holistic profiling, there are several PES with advanced approaches which might be of interest to Actiris. Holistic profiling models including soft and transversal skills, and a strong link to the segmentation of the customers are used by, for example, the French and the German PES. Competence-based profiling systems including soft skills can be found in Flanders (VDAB) and Malta. With regard to statistical profiling several PES may serve as examples such as Austria, Croatia, Denmark, Ireland and the Netherlands.

With regard to Individual Action Plans (IAPs), the Estonian PES conducts quality checks for IAPs and achievements using the IAP in a customer-oriented way, which also might be of interest to Actiris.

The further digitalisation of tools and services

For the exchange of experiences with the digitalisation of services, in particular the digitalisation of the counselling and matching process, the Dutch and the Flemish PES may be valuable partners. Furthermore, VDAB, the Flemish PES, and Pôle emploi, the French PES, as mentioned above, both have advanced channel management strategies which are embedded in a comprehensive and integrated overall IT strategy.

The promotion of evidence-based information and balanced communication

Tailored and appropriate information could be used systematically in the organisation, and it could be disseminated internally and externally. This could be further developed by seeking inspiration from other PES. Knowledge about research studies and pilot projects, newly developed or adapted instruments and methods, and other evidence-based findings might also be further developed through 'pick-

⁶ See the practice at <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=20540&langId=en>.

ing the brains' of other PES. The French and the German PES both provide fact sheets for their staff, and Sweden may also have expertise to share with Actiris. The methods and procedures used in these countries may help to ensure that the expertise acquired by Actiris is made available at any time and at any place, both internally and externally.

In terms of improving the current communications system, the successful design of a balanced communication system can be studied in The Netherlands. The Dutch system clearly shows the advantages of such a system for the organisation as a whole and in particular for the staff.

The quality management system

The integration of a quality management system (QMS) into the steering arrangements of the general management at all levels effectively supports the delivery of high quality services and products. Notwithstanding this, the proper implementation and use of a good QMS presents a considerable challenge and this should not be underrated. An imperfect QMS is time-consuming, costly, and ultimately useless. However, the assessors think that within Actiris's current reform programme, the development and the establishment of its QM department (SQT) shows considerable progress, although its implementation is not yet thoroughly worked out and it needs further support from the management. Austria is a good example of the successful implementation of a comprehensive QMS, and Estonia also has a rigorous QMS.

