



Benchlearning Initiative External Assessment

Summary report 2nd cycle – Belgium (Flanders)



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VDAB – the PES for the Flanders 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) of the Flemish region of Belgium (VDAB - Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling en Beroepsopleiding), conducted between July 2nd and 4th, 2018. The team of seven external assessors had three peer PES staff (one Belgian from the French-speaking Walloon region of Belgium, one German and one Slovak), three representatives from the European Commission (one of them as an observer who joined the team at the beginning of the second day) and one expert from ICON-Institut (the supporting contractor). The programme of the three-day visit included meetings with senior management from the head office and a visit to the provincial office in Sint-Niklas. The time and resources VDAB put into preparation for the Benchlearning visit, particularly its internal self-assessment, were crucial to the success of the visit.

VDAB employment services offer a wide range of services to jobseekers, employers and employees through various channels (including face-to-face interviews, call centre, websites, video chats, e-mails and various apps). This can range from career guidance and advice on how to apply for a job, to vocational training which is provided in-house and also contracted out. In its self-defined role as 'conductor of the labour market' it works with a wide range of partners to jointly deliver services to jobseekers and employers. It facilitates initial unemployment registration and it monitors jobseekers' availability for work. In this regard, it now has a relatively recent extra task in that it applies 'conditionality' to jobseekers and reports non-compliance with an activation offer to the National Employment Office (RVA). The RVA in turn either pays their benefits or sanctions recipients in certain cases that have been flagged by VDAB. This application of conditionality provides a challenge to PES staff who would have traditionally seen their role as providers of guidance for jobseekers rather than recommending sanctioning. VDAB is also responsible for processing and paying compensation to employers, providing employment for disabled people and distributing allowances to jobseekers who take part in vocational training.

VDAB is an external and autonomous agency under the supervision of the Flanders Secretary for Work, managed by an independent executive board. More than 80% of its funding comes from the government budget with additional funds from the European Social Fund (the ESF) and other sources such as the organisation's own resources.

VDAB belongs to a minority of PES within the EU PES network in that it is also a training agency with a substantial number of training centres. VDAB consists of its Central Office, five provincial offices and roughly 80 local offices. Furthermore, there are also 60 vocational training centres at the local level. VDAB is embedded into a network of agencies, public bodies and non-profit-organisations within the complexity of the Belgian system. A main partner is the National Employment Office (RVA, see above) which is responsible for the payment of unemployment benefits.

Social partners are involved in its activities at all levels. Representatives of trade unions and employer organisations are included on its Board of Directors. Traditionally, there has been close cooperation with social partners and other actors at regional (Flanders), provincial and at the local levels. The social partners are members of several councils which can influence labour market policy at different levels, from the strategic to the operational.

The local level is formed by the municipalities and several local, mainly publicly funded, agencies. For example, 'one-stop job centres' are established at the local level, where VDAB and social assistance centres cooperate.

2. SHORT SUMMARY OF THE CHANGE AGENDA

VDAB has monitored developments in the labour market intensively for a long time. Labour market analyses revealed that the number of vacancies is increasing steadily as the labour market has become more and more demand driven. The currently available workforce in Flanders will not be able to satisfy the needs of employers for skilled employees in future. Simultaneously, a self-critical assessment of the PES's performance supported by the external Benchlearning assessment showed that the organisation is not ready to face the future challenges. Against this background, VDAB developed its so-called VLAM vision which was approved by the Board of Directors in 2016. The VLAM vision has three main ambitions of the PES:

1. Being an *innovative network director*, that basically leads the co-creation of services with partners and stakeholders.
2. Being an *excellent service provider* that helps each client on an individual basis.
3. Being a *leading brand* in the labour market.

Based on the VLAM vision, VDAB has developed a strategic plan translating these three ambitions into several change programmes. The strategic transformation plan also sets out milestones and benchmarks for the organisation. The new strategy requires both for the organisation as a whole to change fundamentally (structural change) and for a change in outlook among the employees (cultural change). Furthermore, a new service model has to be developed. The strategic choices for the future delivery of services are:

- Career security for each citizen. 'Long-term career thinking' is of greater importance than focussing on job security. VDAB participates in a policy that makes citizens work for a longer period of time during their working life and with greater enthusiasm.
- A digital job market that offers fast, effective and efficient services.
- Collaboration with partners to improve its functioning in a transitional labour market.

Concrete objectives underlie VDAB's new role:

- Working together: reaching more customers, not only jobseekers but all the Flemish working population, and those able to work, as a whole. VDAB wants to become a trusted career advisor from school to retirement. Its customer reach should reflect the workforce.
- Available for work: offering effective and efficient services to fill more vacancies, empowering more jobseekers with new skills and getting more customers into training. Higher performance should be achieved with the same resources.
- Top team for work: every contact with VDAB should offer the same, uniform service at any time and in any place.

Furthermore, the strategic decision was taken to offer services in a 'digital first' manner. Based on these principles an adapted contact strategy was developed. The new contact strategy for jobseekers is structured in three stages:

1. 'Digital first' (online registration will be the norm and new digital tools have been developed, such as the digital 'vacancy dashboard' for jobseekers).

2. 'Human digital' (a 'Service Line' offered through a network of service centres). If the jobseeker does not contact the 'Service Line' himself or herself, he/she will then be contacted by the 'Service Line' after six weeks to estimate whether the jobseeker is self-reliant or in need for further assistance.
3. Face-to-face service, particularly for vulnerable groups. Jobseekers needing personal support will get an appointment with sectoral teams (see below) as soon as possible.

The new organisational model is based upon three principles:

1. Corporate: strong customer-focused coordination between mediation, training and collaboration with partners.
2. Sectoral: services will be provided according to six economic sectors¹ and one overall 'sector' for particularly vulnerable groups (the Intensive Service Cluster). Every counsellor and every team leader will work in one specific sector and they will work for all clients (jobseekers and employers) within their particular sector. Jobseekers that need intensive guidance will be referred to the Intensive Service Cluster. The sectoral approach means that counsellors are grouped into sectoral clusters, or teams, which must deliver all types of services for 'their' sector and must therefore have the expertise specific to all the services in their sector. This includes work and expertise on job vacancies, mediation, workplace learning, advice on Human Relations (HR), competence enhancement and collaboration with partners.
3. Flemish: aiming to ensure that all VDAB services offer a uniform quality service all over Flanders.

The further development and the implementation of the strategy has a timeline and action plans for the different levels. Its implementation is accompanied by a comprehensive communication plan which says in detail how staff and stakeholders should be informed in a transparent way. Members of staff can use different channels to express their opinions, such as through their intranet which includes discussion groups, interaction with their managers and team coaches (an open door policy) and also regular surveys among staff.

As an overview, the major changes in VDAB's reform process can be summed up as follows:

1. The change from an offer-driven to a demand-driven organisation should start from the clients' perspective and needs. This applies to:
 - Business process management (BPM).
 - Assessment and orientation through the service programmes.
 - Digital transformation.
 - Improving competencies.
 - Reinforcing VDAB as a conductor in the labour market.
 - Sectoral approaches.
2. VDAB has to consider externally instigated changes such as the 'sixth Belgian state reform', which affects the federal nature of the Belgian state (it

¹ The six sectors are (1) industry, (2) timber and construction, (3) transport and logistics, (4) health care and education, (5) business support, retail and ICT, and (6) services for people and companies.

includes giving VDAB its new responsibilities for monitoring the availability of jobseekers for the labour market mentioned above).

3. VDAB aims to fully take up its Corporate Social Responsibility duties and to become the Flemish government's most sustainable agency.

The implementation procedure started in the second half of 2016 with roadshows presenting the VLAM strategy to the staff in the provincial and the local offices. In preparation for the implementation of the new service model, new team leaders had to be appointed throughout the whole organisation, and the counsellors had to be assigned to the new sectoral teams. For this purpose, counsellors had three choices for the sector team they wanted to join. VDAB managed to ensure that 85% of counsellors got their first or second choices.

The new service model was implemented throughout the whole organisation in September 2018 and this forms an essential part of the first milestone of the new strategy. VDAB aimed to achieve several objectives through achieving this milestone:

- An increased sense of responsibility felt by the jobseekers.
- More user-friendly online tools to support jobseekers.
- The proactive detection of those jobseekers that are most in need of VDAB's help.
- Faster assessment when jobseekers need new services through the call centre 'Service Line' (with a 6 week maximum wait).
- Monitoring self-reliant jobseekers through the 'Service Line' mediators every 3 months.
- The 'warm transfer'² of the jobseeker to provincial, sectoral operations where necessary (with appointments within 2 weeks).
- The provincial face-to-face service is fully organised on a sectoral basis, it works by appointment and it offers space for services with greater added value for both jobseekers and employers.
- Accompanying measures are in place for jobseekers with limited digital skills and non-native speakers.

VDAB expects the first milestone to have an impact on the entire organisation, at the level of 'bricks, bytes and behaviour':

- Impact on bricks: the provincial and the 'cluster' managements had to determine where the different services will be offered in Flanders in future. This was clarified before the end of summer 2018.
- Impact on bytes: business management and IT units created a common roadmap that on the one hand innovates and on the other hand gradually replaces the outdated systems. Every development passed the 'service design techniques' test.
- Impact on behaviour: everyone in the organisation was confronted with change. By September 2018, each manager and facilitator/instructor in the services sector had taken on responsibility for their sector. Supporting processes were set up by the internal training service ('Spoor 21') and the expert network prepared the mediators/instructors for new tasks and responsibilities in their package.

² This includes, for example, telephone calls between the counsellors to discuss a particular jobseeker's situation.

Further milestones will be prepared dealing with the future focal points of the strategy which are (1) lifelong learning, (2) employer services, and (3), looking outside the employment world, the positioning of VDAB in the overall ecological system.

3. RELEVANCE, COHERENCE AND CONSISTENCY OF THE REFORM AGENDA

Already the report of the VDAB's first Benchlearning assessment approved VDAB as being a mature organisation open for innovation and further development. VDAB has carefully observed developments in the labour market and it has also monitored its own performance and potentials. This has resulted in two general findings, firstly that the "labour market is on fire" and secondly that a fundamental reform of VDAB will be necessary to face up-coming challenges from the labour market, and further external challenges such as 'the sixth Belgian state reform. Two years ago, a decision on a basic reform of the organisation was taken and the VLAM vision was approved. The developed transformation plan contains milestones and benchmarks for the reform process. It will mean nothing less than a structural change within VDAB.

The external assessors support the way the decision to reform was clearly and strongly evidence-based.³ Labour market analyses, together with internal and external assessments of the performance and discussions with stakeholders, formed the basis for the reform decision. Furthermore, the assessors respect the ability of VDAB's leadership to initialise such a fundamental reform process and to overcome the concerns and the resistance of actors and stakeholders (from trade unions for example). In this context, the paradigm shift from an offer-driven to a demand-driven organisation is noteworthy, especially because this shift is closely connected with a new perspective that very much focuses on the needs and interests of customers, in particular employers' interests.

The reform is absolutely fundamental because it applies to all areas and divisions within VDAB. It applies to the service model, the organisational structure and its processes, and the cultural behaviour and mind-set of managers and staff. Furthermore, the change process takes external factors into account (such as the sixth Belgian state reform) and also its relationship with social partners and other stakeholders. The reform also takes on Corporate Social Responsibility though VDAB aiming to become the most sustainable Flemish government agency. Finally, framework conditions are taken into account by positioning VDAB within the overall ecosystem.

The external assessors confirm that the single elements of the reform strategy complement each other and form a concise whole. For instance, the "digital first" strategy requires all clients and staff to have adequate digital skills at their disposal. There are several precautionary measures for jobseekers with limited digital skills, or limited access to the internet, including free access to the 'Service Line', offices keeping their current 'registration phones', the availability of self-service desktop computers, and VDAB's staff offering assistance for using digital tools. The strategic approach shows almost no weaknesses with the exception of the transition from school to working life. The assessors fully understand that while the legal mandate of VDAB starts with the beginning of working life, choosing the right occupation is a difficult challenge for young people. The assessors are convinced that support in the choice of career is decisive in ensuring a successful transition from school to vocational training or employment. Support and assistance should already be offered during schools visit to prepare students for

³ For further details see the tables in section 7.

their working lives. Although VDAB is already active in this field, the assessors see some room for improvement. This would be an excellent area where VDAB could play the conductor role, and orchestrate the relevant partners to contribute to the common objective of a smooth transition from school to further education, work etc.

As VDAB aims to be a lifelong career counsellor, it should have an early intervention approach aiming at seamless transitions from one job to the next job. The external assessors think that the service model could attach more importance to early intervention and job-to-job transitions.

In regard to the single elements of the reform, the assessors can see a few 'intersections' and they see a risk of gaps in the reform. For example, the new service model with its sectoral approach risks creating silos, where an individual jobseeker may get locked in. This particularly applies to the Intensive Service Cluster for vulnerable groups. Mobility and the opportunities to change between sectors should be clearly defined and ensured. A further example is the transfer of data between the three types of service delivery. Information on jobseekers (and in principle also information on vacancies) gained by digital services, telephone calls and face-to-face appointments should be structured such that this data is always completely available in particular during personal contacts. This requires the processing of mass data, including the identification and preparation of the relevant information for users (clients and counsellors). During their visit, the assessors saw that VDAB had already recognized these issues and that it is working on them. However, the assessors would like to stress the importance of these topics.

In the context of organisational change, it has to be mentioned that VDAB tries to establish a slim organisational structure with only few hierarchical levels and short communication lines between teams and services. This should help foster a transparent overview of the organisation and help to clarify people's roles and functions.

The change agenda is not only comprehensive but it is also well-structured and thoroughly planned in a timely way. A long period is foreseen for the development and the roll-out of the implementation plans. For the core elements of the reform, a period of about two years has been used to test and modify the components in three regions, including the provincial office of Sint Niklas which was visited by the assessors. Staff are recognized as the crucial factor in the success of the reform. A detailed communication plan has been developed and several assistance tools and sources for information and exchange are therefore available for staff.

4. ASSESSMENT OF CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Only a few PES in Europe have started their change management process in such a concise and systematic way as VDAB. 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 for improvement form a characteristic feature of the organisation. The top management has encouraged staff and managers to take on more responsibility not just for their individual working area but also for the organisation as a whole, and to develop more 'entrepreneurship' in their working places. The latter forms a part of the 'C-MOL' approach which demands that managers take on different roles: coach, manager, entrepreneur, and leader.

At the beginning of the change process, VDAB had already recognized the need for effective management of the reform process and change management was established in the first stage of the reform. Various internal procedures were in-

stalled 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 phase from ideas to business needs has several stages such as the validation of its necessity, developing it into a business case for change, and the assessment of its impact on IT systems, on staff and on the budget. Afterwards, the idea and business case are transformed into a change project which follows the requirements of the project management cycle. Furthermore, fitting it into the overall strategy forms an important part of the assessment.

VDAB decided to place the responsibility for the planning and implementation processes of change within management. A separate department O&O ('Organisatie and Ondersteuning' – organisation and support/development) offers support and expertise on change management. As part of its work supporting the changes, the O&O department regularly considers the impact on five fields: organisational structure, organisational processes and systems, competences, resources, and culture. The O&O department is also involved in the development and carrying out of pilot projects and innovation projects which always include the assessment of the relevance of the project. Some evaluations of reform projects are carried out by external experts, or with their assistance.

The reform process is accompanied by a detailed communication plan. For members of staff, there are clear communication formats available for informing them about the progress of the reform. 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 newsletter for members of staff, the intranet, FAQs and a chatroom on Google+. Despite all the different communication formats and the various channels to express their opinion, the external assessors got the impression that front-line staff could be involved in the reform process in a more pro-active and systematic manner.

Further important elements of change management are the support of staff, the management tools, information sources and coaching. As mentioned above, all team leaders were recently appointed. Although the majority of the selected team leaders are experienced as leaders or managers because of their former positions, their tasks and responsibilities have fundamentally changed. Furthermore, there is a considerable number of "new" team leaders with no experience of managerial responsibilities. Several assisting tools and instruments are available such as the adjusted 'start to lead' programme and the so-called Teambox for team leaders.

VDAB offers a wide range of training and of coaching for its staff. Furthermore, various forms of assistance are available including internally or externally provided help, where the reform process causes individual problems such as psychosocial problems. The individual development of staff is supported and guided by personal development plans (Persoonlijke Ontwikkelingsplannen - 'POPs') set up by the managers. A POP is a tool to stimulate and shape individual development.

The improvement of existing tools and methods, and also the development of new tools and products, follows an evidence-based approach with a strong focus on the customers' perspective. For instance, the co-creation of new tools and products through working together with users (staff and customers) forms a noteworthy feature of the reform process which may serve as good practice for other PES. Furthermore, VDAB has developed several tools to visualise elements of this complex reform and its progress. For instance, the 'Strategic House' is a clear and well-structured tool to present single strategies or processes in a transparent way.

A complex and basic reform produces an enormous amount of data and information. Therefore, VDAB is also faced with the risk of information overflow so it has implemented several steps for data-processing and the distribution of information. However, the assessors got the impression that some of the expertise required – in particular external expertise – is not always easily available.

In regard to data processing, VDAB has gained a lot of experience processing the mass data which is needed for the digitalisation of services. The advanced IT-matching system is based on 'semantic searches' and matching processes using sophisticated data mining tools. Test cases for counsellors show a 80% rate of correct predictions.

5. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Firstly, the assessors would like to stress that the change process is very well organised. The change plan follows a clear vision, it is well-structured on the different tiers and it contains clearly defined procedures. Its comprehensive approach is completed by a detailed communication plan. Against this background, the assessors would therefore like to encourage the entire organisation to go forward sticking to its reform path. Although VDAB has already recognized the main risks arising from the complex transformation process, the assessors would like to point out some topics which are relevant to the success of the reform process: firstly, the sectoral approach should not lead to silos for customers, in particular, the long-term unemployed should not be 'locked into' the Intensive Service Cluster. Secondly, the ambitious reform process carries the risk of a "too much, too fast" overload for staff. Thirdly, staff should have easy and quick access to any internal or external expertise they need at any time. For these reasons, careful change management is the key to the success of the reform process. Assessors are, however, confident that VDAB is already aware of these challenges.

In the following paragraphs some ideas with references to other PES are presented which could improve service delivery which would support the reform process. The assessor team has only provided suggestions rather than recommendations in this case.

Transition from school to the labour market

Most Member States offer a wide range of support and assistance to young people. Austria, Estonia, Germany, and Malta may serve as useful examples for VDAB. The following suggestions are relatively extensive because the assessors believe that transition from school to the workplace is of special relevance for VDAB.⁴ The listing does not aim to provide a full picture, instead it is simply a source for ideas and further considerations.

The Austrian and the German approach is similar. The following offers to students and measures can therefore be described together:

- The Austrian and the German PES both run career information centres (Berufsinformationszentren) with several channels for information and further assistance such as the use of the different (digital) channels. Both PES offer online tools for students and other persons for information on occupations, careers, and job applications. Their online services also offer tools for self-profiling to ease the search for a suitable career. Although VDAB is already offering similar services, Austria and Germany may serve

⁴ As already mentioned, VDAB is already active in this field. But the assessors think, that the services in this area could be extended in particular for getting hold of the NEETs.

as an inspiration for completing the services and for promoting them to the Youth.

- In both countries, PES counsellors visit schools and inform the students of the demands for a successful transition into the labour market (and also further education). Furthermore, specific counselling is offered in regard to the choice of a career or a particular occupation.

These services are completed through specific preparation and training schemes. For example, the following schemes in Germany may be of interest to VDAB:

- Vocational orientation measures (Berufsorientierungsmaßnahmen) are activities and events that provide secondary school students with vocational orientation and they help students choose a career. For four weeks during school holidays, students can get a detailed insight into various jobs, what those jobs require, and their prospects in their chosen career.
- Career entry mentoring (Berufseinstiegsbegleitung) is directed at weaker-performing school students who are at risk of not being able to gain a foothold in working life. The assistance aims to enable those students successful transition into vocational training, while students in general education schools are provided with career entry mentoring during their last two years before leaving school, and afterwards for up to six months into their vocational training.
- Young people who are unable to enter into vocational training for whatever reason can take part in vocational preparation schemes (Berufsvorbereitende Bildungsmaßnahmen). These serve the purposes of vocational orientation, career choice and targeted preparation for vocational training.

In Estonia, the PES offers career counselling and mediation of career information either individually or in groups. Using various channels all pupils of the relevant age groups respectively their parents are reached. The Estonian service model for career services may therefore offer some elements which are of interest for the Flemish PES.

In Malta, as part of the Youth Guarantee Scheme, which is the education-related and employment-related initiative for young people aged 15 to 25, the PES has set up the following activities, the first of which may be of special interest for VDAB:

- The NEET Activation Scheme provides young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs) with personal and professional training, mentoring and constant support, thereby facilitating their transition from education to gainful employment. The programme consists of two main phases: training and then work exposure or further education.
- 'Preventive' (revision) classes for exams: students receive assistance preparing themselves for their 'O level' exams which they usually sit aged 16. Students who fail the exams in 'core subjects' (such as maths and science) are then offered five weeks of free 'preventive' classes in preparation for their next exams.
- MCAST (Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology) offers Preventive Classes: students who fail one of the exams at MCAST are offered free revision classes in a variety of key skills and vocational subjects in preparation for their final assessments.
- ICT (Information and Communications Technology) Summer Courses: students are provided with an additional educational opportunity to acquire new and valuable ICT skills and knowledge.

Furthermore, the Job Bridge Training Centre delivers various information sessions to local educational institutes (both secondary and post-secondary) and various NGOs.

Job-to-job transition and early intervention

The assessors are convinced that the improvement of early intervention, and also job-to-job transition, should both receive more attention in VDAB's new service model. In this regard, the German system may be of interest to VDAB. In Germany, an employee is required to register at the employment agency as soon as he or she is informed that their current employment will come to an end, or at least three months before the employment is due to end. If the time between receiving the notice and the last day of work is less than three months, the individual must report to the employment agency not later than three days after receiving the notice. In consequence, the search for a new job in Germany starts during their current employment, and mediation services (and training measures, if needed) can start very early in order to avoid, or at least to shorten, periods of unemployment.

The promotion of evidence-based information

The systematic use and the internal and external dissemination of tailored and appropriate information 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 'picking the brains' of other PES. Denmark, which publishes its research results on the internet, France and Germany, both providing fact-sheets for their staff, and also Sweden, may have expertise to share with VDAB. The methods and procedures used in these countries may help to ensure that the expertise acquired by VDAB is made available at any time and any place, both internally and externally (with VDAB acting as a sort of "knowledge-broker" for its partners).

The empowerment of staff

For the staff, the new service model requires new competencies and their mind-sets need to be adapted. On this point, Sweden may be an interesting example, as the Swedish PES is also now undergoing a basic reform process and the empowerment of its staff forms an essential part of the Swedish reform strategy.

