

Skills anticipation in Belgium

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Summary

In Belgium the approach to skills anticipation can be described as both collaborative (in the sense that stakeholder involvement is relatively high), but also fragmented given its dispersal over several levels of governance with little co-ordination at the federal level.

Governance is devolved to three separate regions (Brussels, Wallonia and Flanders) and three language communities (French-, Flemish- and German-speaking). This is reflected in the multi-layered skills anticipation activities, as well. The large number of actors involved means, on the one hand, that there is a low level of cooperation, leading to a number of different forecasting and intelligence outputs and therefore making it difficult for target groups to extract relevant information, especially at a national level. On the other hand, there are also positive effects, as this allows regional stakeholders to focus on the specific challenges faced by different regions.

Skills anticipation outputs are mainly used by education and training providers, learners, students (and their families), unemployed people, workers looking for up-skilling or re-skilling and guidance counsellors (e.g. in the regional public employment services, [PES]). The extent to which skills anticipation outputs influence public policy is uncertain. There is no evidence that skills anticipation intelligence is used in policy making at national level, but it is used to develop regional training strategies, and education and training offers at regional and provider levels.

The following types of skills anticipation activities are found in Belgium:

- Skills assessments (quantitative and qualitative studies on skills supply and demand) are undertaken at the federal level by the [Federal Planning Bureau](#) (FPB) and at the regional level by regional statistics and research authorities and the respective PES;
- Forecast activities are mainly carried out by the FPB at the federal level, or at regional level through regional statistics offices coordinated by the FPB;
- Foresight activities are undertaken at regional level by the respective PES, e.g. *'metiers d'avenir'* in Wallonia;
- Other activities, including evaluations of skills-related policies and programmes, are undertaken at regional level.

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Overview of the Belgian approach

Skills anticipation in Belgium



Key actors

Governance	National/federal level: Federal Planning Bureau (FPB)	Regional level: Regional statistics offices and PES			
Stakeholders	Public authorities (federal level)	Public authorities at regional level, in particular regional statistical offices	PES	Education and training providers	Social partners
Target groups	Policy makers	Employers	Workers and job seekers	Learners and their families	Education and training providers



Types of skills anticipation

Quantitative forecasting	Annual economic forecasts at regional and federal level	
Skills assessments	Studies at federal level by FPB	Regional lists of occupations in demand
Foresight	Foresight projects and studies at regional level (PES)	
Other	Evaluations of skills-related policies and programmes	



Dissemination

Channels	PES: publications, employment counsellors, websites	Regional statistics offices: website, publications	Federal entities (FPB, ONEM): website, publications
Use	Development of tailored education and training offer		

Description

As detailed above, skills anticipation in Belgium can be characterised as both collaborative and fragmented. Collaborative as it involves a large amount of stakeholder engagement; but also fragmented in the sense that skills anticipation activities sit within the remit of several authorities at different governance levels (namely the three regions and the three language communities), which share strategic and operational responsibilities for training and job matching services.

This 'regionalisation' of skills anticipation allows for greater flexibility and the creation of tailor-made solutions to better match regional/local needs. At the same time, however, the resulting fragmentation means that there are several 'sub-systems' working independently from one another rather than as a coherent, single system at national level.

The structure of the system can be summarised as follows.

- At federal level:
 - The FPB is a public agency which undertakes prospective studies and projections on economic and social policy issues (including the labour market) at the request of public authorities, parliament, and the social partners, or on its own initiative;
 - The [National Employment Office](#) (*Office National de l'Emploi*, ONEM) provides statistics and undertakes studies relating to the employment situation in the country;
 - Certain other public institutions such as the [National Social Security Office](#) (*L'Office national de sécurité sociale*, ONSS), the [Higher Council of Work](#) (*Conseil supérieur de l'emploi*) and the National Bank of Belgium (NBB) conduct research on employment-related issues.
- At regional level:
 - Regional authorities provide socio-economic data and undertake forward-looking analysis on relevant subjects such as the labour market, thus contributing to skills anticipation. The key organisations are:
 - In Flanders, [Statistiek Vlaanderen](#);
 - In Wallonia, [IWEPS](#) (*Institut wallon de l'évaluation, de la prospective et de la statistique*), which also hosts [the regional employment observatory](#) (*Observatoire wallon de l'emploi*);
 - In Brussels, [IBSA](#) (*Institut Bruxellois de Statistique et d'Analyse*) which covers labour market-related issues; and
 - For the German-speaking Community: [Das Statistikportal der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Beliens](#) (*Statistical office of the German-speaking Community*)
 - The regional public employment services are active both as providers and users of skills

anticipation:

- In Flanders: [VDAB](#) (*Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling*);
 - In Wallonia: Le [FOREM](#);
 - In Brussels: [ACTIRIS](#); and
 - For the German-speaking Community: [ADG](#) (*Arbeitsamt der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft*).
- [Skill Centres](#) (*Centres de Competences* in Wallonia) were established to match training with labour market needs at an operational level and to focus on specific skills and occupations. Their main objective is to provide training in line with learners' and employers' needs, but they also monitor labour market trends and provide guidance and information about job opportunities.

It is also important to note the activities of the [interregional employment observatory](#) (*Observatoire Interregional de l'Emploi, OIE*), which brings together actors involved in skills anticipation in the wider border region covering Belgium, France, Germany and Luxembourg.

Language barriers are historically the main obstacle to labour mobility in Belgium [\(1\)](#). The existence of three official languages, combined with great variation in the socio-economic situation between different regions/communities [\(2\)](#), is the justification for the division of responsibilities in the provision of skills anticipation activities. The different actors provide skills anticipation services in line with the needs of their regional (language) community. As a consequence, there is a risk of a 'silo effect': a lack of sufficient exchange of information between the different stakeholders. One example is the current use of different employment databases by the regional PES. To this end, cooperation agreements have been signed between the different regional PES with the aim of collating their data into one database and thereby improving the prospects for labour mobility [\(3\)](#).

Aims

In Belgium the main aims of skills anticipation are to provide support for:

- The FPB and ONEM at federal level, and regional authorities at regional level, by informing policymaking;
- The PES and Skill Centres, by providing information designed to support the study choices of prospective students; the up-skilling and re-skilling of workers and/or job-seekers; education and training provision; and job search activity.

Legal framework

There is no overall regulation at federal level specifically regarding the development, implementation, governance or use of skills anticipation. At federal level, the FPB was created in 1994 [\(4\)](#) to analyse and anticipate socio-economic developments, understand the factors influencing these developments and evaluate socio-economic policies. The FPB mandate thus implies a supporting role with respect to policymaking. Regional organisations are regulated by their respective regional governments (the Walloon, Flanders and Brussels Regions, as well as the German-speaking Community).

Governance

As mentioned previously (see section 1.1), Belgium's approach to skills anticipation involves several levels of governance. At the federal level, the FPB is the leading authority. At the regional level, each authority is responsible for the main skills anticipation activities and dissemination of relevant results.

The role of stakeholders

Stakeholders, such as various public authorities, education and training institutions, and experts/academics, play an active role in skills anticipation and are engaged in a wide range of relevant activities:

- At federal level, public authorities, social partners and experts are involved in the skills anticipation activities of the FPB (for example, the FPB works with technical experts and universities in its research projects);
- At regional level, stakeholders play a key role in some activities, such as those of the Skill Centres ('Centres de Competences') in Wallonia. Examples of these include professional federations, social partners, regional PES, and public authorities. In addition to providing input with regard to their priorities and needs, relevant stakeholders may also be involved in specific projects aimed at reinforcing and diversifying training provision, supporting up-skilling, etc.

Stakeholder co-ordination on skills anticipation is particularly visible when focusing on career and vocational guidance. For example, regional PES list hard-to-fill jobs that require particular attention and then develop strategies to avoid skills shortages arising in the future. This is the case for example in Brussels, where the identification of those occupations facing a shortage feeds into the Brussels employment strategy (*Strategie 2025*) (5). This is carried out through collaboration between regional authorities, sector associations, experts and academics. Through this work with various stakeholders, it is possible to obtain a better understanding of specific sectoral needs set in a regional context. By understanding these factors better, the PES can subsequently develop their services (e.g. by providing training courses to assist unemployed people in finding work and supporting associations involved in guiding students in their careers).

FOREM and Actiris – the Wallonia and Brussels PES respectively – work together with different regional authorities, sectoral organisations and education institutions to investigate skills shortages and publish an annual list of 'hard-to-fill jobs'. Both organisations provide information concerning studies and professions and can therefore be used to guide students towards 'jobs for the future' (occupations in which job shortages have been forecast). Another project, *Destination Metiers*, was established in 2012 to inform jobseekers in Brussels about occupations and training programmes according to their jobseeker profile. The [Carrefour Emploi Formation Orientation \(CEFO\)](#) of FOREM conducts individual and group sessions on jobs with a high level of demand in Wallonia.

Target groups

In line with the aims of the skills anticipation approach (listed in section 1.2), the main target groups for skills anticipation outputs are:

- Learners in upper secondary education and those looking to enter further studies in higher

- Learners in upper-secondary or tertiary education, and those looking to enter further studies in higher education and/or vocational education and training (VET) through careers guidance;
- Workers and jobseekers;
- Policymakers at regional/local level; and
- Education and training providers.

The main user of the skills anticipation findings are the various PES which, in turn, provide relevant information to their target groups (i.e. PES staff/employment counsellors and their users).

Funding and resources

Skills anticipation activity in Belgium is mainly implemented at regional level, with funding from the federal level through ONEM.

Methods and tools

Various skills anticipation activities take place at the federal and regional levels.

Skills assessment

At federal level the FPB undertakes qualitative studies(6) on the socio-economic situation in the country. One example is their research into the links between education and training and subsequent employment, including a 2015 study on the link between early school leaving and unemployment.

At the regional level two approaches have been identified in relation to skills assessments: 1) directories of occupations and qualifications and 2) identification of in-demand occupations.

Directories of occupations and qualifications, such as the [REM \(Répertoire Emploi Métier\)](#) in the French speaking community, provide a directory of occupational profiles and associated training profiles, thereby providing information on the demand and supply sides. In the Flemish-speaking community the '[Competent](#)' database carries out a similar function.

At a regional level, the respective statistics offices undertake skills assessment activities which contribute towards the identification of in-demand occupations, e.g. '[Baromètre Conjoncturel de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale](#)' in Brussels, which provides information on the evolution of employment with respect to, amongst other things, the characteristics of jobseekers. The regional PES also provide evidence that highlights skills shortage areas due to a lack of candidates with the skills required (e.g. 'métiers en pénurie') or occupations for which there are candidates but who lack the required level of skill (e.g. 'fonctions critiques'). Regional initiatives include 'Job Focus' ([liste des métiers porteurs](#))(7) in Wallonia, 'liste des fonctions critiques de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale' (8) in Brussels, and 'Knelpuntberoepen'(9) in Flanders. These initiatives also have a foresight dimension, as they result in a list of occupations for which a shortage is foreseen over the short term (see section 2.3 below).

Skills forecasts

In Belgium, there are no skills forecasts as such. At the federal level, the FPB is the leading institution for carrying out labour market projections. On a semi-annual basis, the FPB produces the 'Economic Budget', short run macroeconomic forecasts including quarterly estimates of the number of jobs that will be created over the forthcoming year. This exercise does not provide information on emerging skills needs or areas in which there are likely to be skills shortages. The latter equally holds for the short-run (national) macroeconomic forecasts that are produced respectively by the National Bank of Belgium (10) and by UCL-IRES (*Université catholique de Louvain - Institut de recherches économiques et sociales*) (11).

On a yearly basis, the FPB also produces medium-term (five-year period) macroeconomic perspectives which include an outlook for the labour market. Moreover, the federal (FPB) and regional (statistical offices) levels jointly publish a regional breakdown of these national perspectives under an initiative coordinated by FPB (the HERMREG project). Again these are employment rather than skills forecasts, but they do provide an industry breakdown of employment figures and – at the national level – estimates of future replacement demand and job openings in different industries.

IWEPS also produces short-run macroeconomic forecasts for Wallonia, including an estimate of aggregate employment growth (12).

Another key study undertaken at the regional level is the aforementioned 'Baromètre Conjoncturel de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale' which, in addition to providing information on the evolution of employment, also provides short-term forecasts of employment (13).

Skills foresight

At regional level there are examples of foresight research in the work undertaken by the regional PES. One example is the [Occupations for the Future project](#) (*Metiers d'avenir*) in Wallonia, commissioned by FOREM and commenced in 2013, with the aim of identifying and better understanding labour market trends over the following five-year period. The project sought to guide education policy in the region, as well as anticipating changes that will take place over the longer term. The first step of the project was a series of interviews with 300 experts from various sectors about future trends and their potential impact on the development of skills. These findings were then compiled into a database and used to identify key lessons learnt in each sector. The study identified occupations of the future and then looked at how training might meet the needs of some of those occupations. In 2016, the project focused on the impact of digitalisation on the labour market (14). Similar initiatives exist in Brussels and Flanders (see regional initiatives listed in section 2.1).

Other skills anticipation practices

At federal level ONEM evaluates policies related to skills. For example, since 2013 ONEM has evaluated training and other measures with the aim of helping unemployed people find a job, focusing specifically on whether the current measures are effective in helping individuals to search for jobs. These evaluations highlight skills gaps (*metier en penurie*) and help jobseekers to acquire the relevant skills to fill these gaps. Such evaluations shed light on the effectiveness of the skills-related initiatives and thus contribute to improving future skills anticipation work. Evaluations are also undertaken at regional level;

for example the 2014 IWEPS was concerned with assessing training for jobs where there were skills gaps.

The Flemish administrative department 'Werk en Sociale Economie' set up a system of skills anticipation (VLAMT (15)) in 2010, based on three pillars: quantitative projections of replacement demand and future job openings by industry (conducted by Steunpunt Werk (16)); matching of job supply and demand by VDAB (the PES); and financing of strategic studies that gauge future skills needs in specific industries.

Dissemination and use

Use of skills anticipation in policy

The use of skills anticipation in policy is listed as an objective of various skills anticipation activities (e.g. use of FPB's forecast activities in preparation of the federal budget and use of the shortage occupation list in the design of the *Brussels 2025* strategy). There is, however, no evidence that intelligence gathered by skills anticipation activities is used effectively in policymaking in Belgium at a federal level. Anticipation findings are used at regional level to develop skills-related policy and more importantly to develop training provision such that it matches the needs of learners to the skill needs of the labour market. Skills anticipation is mainly used at regional level by the PES and by education and training providers (see section 3.2 below).

With regard to dissemination, regional campaigns have been launched to raise awareness of jobs where there are shortages of people to fill them; for example, there has been a television advertisement which highlighted the shortage of medical staff in the Flemish speaking region. Actiris (the Brussels PES) has developed a website to provide information about the Brussels labour market allowing jobseekers to search for jobs by selecting critical occupations or other occupations in high demand.

Target groups' uses of skills anticipation outputs

PES

At regional level, the various PES are the main users of skills anticipation data, alongside training centres (17), public authorities, and citizens. The PES use data on skills shortages to develop their strategies to support jobseekers by highlighting possible 'jobs for the future' and skill shortages.

Specific cooperation agreements are also in place to expand the services of the regional PES outside of their area of origin in order to facilitate labour mobility between regions. To this end, Occupation Profiles and Training Profiles are produced by the SFMQ (*Service Francophone des Métiers et des Qualifications*) based on the REM and are used by education and training providers. The list of 'demand occupations' identified by the previously described process is accessible on the PES and ONEM's websites.

Jobseekers can search for information about the Brussels labour market and jobs through Actiris's dedicated website which includes information about critical occupations or other occupations in high demand.

Education and training providers

Each PES coordinates training provision in response to regional/local skills shortages. In Wallonia, this is undertaken through Skills Centres, which focus specifically on supplying workers with the required skills for occupations with a shortage (as identified by employers). These centres tend to involve collaboration between both public and private sector actors and work closely with businesses and sectoral funds to identify relevant areas. They are funded by a range of bodies (regional public authorities; the PES; sectoral funds run by social partners; and the European Social Fund), which all benefit from better alignment between training and labour market demand.

Another outcome of the skills anticipation intelligence is the [Bassins de l'Enseignement qualifiant Formation-Emploi](#). These institutes have been created with the objective of strengthening the 'structure and synergies' between education, training and employment. The aim is to bring stakeholders – including organisations representing education and training institutions and social partners – together in order to use skills anticipation data to identify priority sectors for employment and the relevant education and training pathways.

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