

# **Education for refugees: warm welcome, smooth learning trajectory and sustainable future perspective**

*Report of a strategic exploration study*

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## *Perspectives for the debate (platform text)*

### **Introduction**

As a strategic advisory council for education and training policy, the Flemish Education Council (Vlor) has a long tradition of advisory work on reception education for non-Dutch-speaking newcomers. In 2015, Vlor issued recommendations on the urgent measures taken by the Flemish Government in response to the increased influx of refugees. This also prompted the more strategic thinking process of which this document is the outcome.

The purpose of the strategic exploratory study that started in 2017, was to reflect on how education could be beneficial to refugees in the longer term. How can the education system respond to the needs of refugees, which often go beyond what the education system is equipped for, contributing towards a sustainable future perspective, here or elsewhere? And vice versa: has the education system itself been changed by the arrival of refugees? What role can non-educational actors play? How do the countries around us deal with education for people fleeing their homes, and what can we learn from their experience?

A reflection group was set up to carry out the study, with representatives of the educational partners, socio-cultural associations, NGO's and other experts. It is intrinsic to how such a reflection group works on a strategic study that its members speak for themselves and not only on behalf of their organisation. Consequently, the study's outcome is not a set of policy recommendations from Vlor, unlike a recommendation. Instead, it is a document for Vlor, with perspectives for further debate.

In the first instance, the reflection group explored the matter at hand in greater depth and drew up nine underlying questions:

- 1 Who is the target group of the study? (What do we mean by 'refugees' and is the study solely about refugees?)
- 2 How do other countries tackle education for refugees?
- 3 What shapes reception education in Flanders? (distinction between education for children and young people under 18 and adults over 18)
- 4 How can newcomers' competences best be screened?
- 5 What is the best way to deal with language? (Dutch and other languages)
- 6 How does trauma impact on the learning process and how can the education system deal with it?
- 7 What is the role of actors outside the education system?
- 8 What does the arrival of refugees mean for themselves and the host society?
- 9 How can education benefit people whose right to stay is limited?

These questions were submitted to experts and analysed in the light of many Flemish and international reports published on the subject recently. This enabled the reflection group to conduct a thorough analysis of the state of education for refugees. We found that a great deal of effort is being made in and outside the education system but also that there are many weaknesses and challenges. On this basis, we developed a vision for the future.

The following document sets out that vision for the future in the form of perspectives for debate and policy. We highlight where there is room for improvement, point to paths worth exploring and pitfalls to be avoided. The aim is not so much to provide ready-made or operational answers, but rather to set out areas for reflection that can feed into and guide the debate we must have.<sup>1</sup>

The premisses the reflection group sets out are the following:

- In the future, Flanders will continue to be confronted with refugees. This prospect requires clear policy choices from a human (see 1.1) and economic (1.2) perspective.
- The challenges for education of refugees also have an impact on other policy areas (1.3).
- It is essential that the expertise built up in the wake of 2015's increased influx be sustainably anchored at all levels to retain it for future challenges (1.4).
- Reflecting on education for refugees contributes to strengthening education as a whole in the longer term. We advocate an inclusive rather than a categorical policy (2.1), and do not distinguish between groups of refugees or newcomers based on their reasons for fleeing or coming to Belgium.
- Education for refugees must meet all the usual quality requirements of education and must guarantee a warm welcome (2.2), a smooth learning trajectory (2.3) and a sustainable future perspective for all refugees (2.4). This vision is based on an ability-oriented view on refugees and ambition and commitment by the education system and society.
- Integrating newcomers is not a matter solely for the education system. We see wider society as a source of solidarity and learning (3).

## 1 General policy

### 1.1 The right to education

The right of all children and young people to a quality education is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Belgium is a signatory.<sup>2</sup> The European Convention on the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which emulates the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, states that no one should be denied the right to education.<sup>3</sup>

The provisions of these treaties are not in question and therefore constitute a clear duty for society and the education system, and guide the reflection process on the role of education and other actors in relation to refugees.

Refugee children and young people should be able to rely on easy access to a school of their choice for compulsory education. This principle is safeguarded in Flanders. In this regard, we are

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<sup>1</sup> This document is part of a larger whole (in Dutch) that discusses all of the sources consulted, including references. The references are not included in this document and can be consulted at <https://www.vlor.be/vluchtelingen> (parts 1 and 2 of the publication).

<sup>2</sup> See Articles 28 and 29 at <https://www.kinderrechtencommissariaat.be/verdrag-en-protocollen-kinderrechtenverdrag>

<sup>3</sup> Article 2 of the Protocol to the Convention on the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1952): *No person shall be denied the right to education*. The generally accepted interpretation of this provision is that the right to education applies to all, regardless of a person's status.

ahead of our neighbours. However, capacity remains insufficient. The government has taken steps to provide the necessary capacity but this does not always translate into easy access in practice. Having a central information hub could help to detect a shortage of places or surplus capacity quickly. Furthermore, schools should be encouraged to allow pupils who have completed the first phase of reception education to move on to the area of study of their choice, even if this requires additional support measures.

For adult newcomers, the right to education entails providing easier access to higher or adult education, first and foremost by removing any barriers they currently face: the educational perspective should play a more central role in the integration process, starting with a wide-ranging and forward-looking mapping, diplomas and abilities acquired previously should be recognised more readily, and structural measures should be taken to eliminate financial and social barriers. These measures should aim to attract more people into higher and adult education with a view to a sustainable future perspective.

## **1.2 The importance of swift and successful integration of refugees**

A sustainable future perspective is essential for the individual and for society as a whole. It means a great deal to refugees, who have already experienced loss, to have the opportunity to draw on their past education and realise that they can contribute to society. This can help them to gradually recover from the trauma of war and flight, and to build a new life here or elsewhere.

For society, it is essential to engage with newcomers about their potential to contribute to Flanders' success as full partners. Flanders has a knowledge-based economy characterised by many shortage professions and a difficult labour market for the low-skilled. Moreover, an ageing population is generating significant social pressure. From this perspective, it is essential to recognise newcomers' competences, to tap into their previous education or to provide suitable (further) training. Newcomers can be highly valuable to Flanders if, in time, they can play an active role on the labour market.

In light of the changes over the last 50 years, it is hard to dispute that Flanders can only remain prosperous through openness. This contrasts with the view that refugees and other migrants constitute a threat to the welfare state. Doing a cost-benefit analysis is no easy task. But one thing is clear: the more newcomers contribute to social security by working, the lower the additional costs. This is where the education system can play a role.

## **1.3 Education as a link in a network for integration: many actors and roles**

### **1.3.1 Aligning policy logic and focusing on the educational perspective**

In the wake of 2015's influx of refugees we are more aware than ever that the steps taken to welcome and integrate newcomers immediately after their arrival in Belgium have a major impact on their future perspective. It is thus essential that all actors involved in this first phase understand the importance of education to newcomers' future. Recent years have shown that the education system wants to play its full part but it cannot do so in isolation.

There is significant potential to improve the guidance into education. That is why we propose a number of principles for reception and integration policy. This is primarily the responsibility of the

federal policy area Asylum and Migration, but other actors are also involved. It is essential to better coordinate the policy logic across all the policy levels and fields involved, at both the central (federal/Flemish) and decentralised (regional/local) levels, to ensure newcomers start the reception and education process as quickly as possible. Coordination should lead to an **integrated and multidisciplinary approach** for refugees.

Given the important role of education for integration, social participation and the recovery from migration and refugee experiences, and in light the importance of the educational and professional perspective, the educational logic should always be prioritised. This means that the educational perspective must be central from the outset and that the education and training choices of all family members should influence which other measures (establishment, financial assistance ...) are taken. Particular attention should be paid to unaccompanied minor refugees and to coordinating their reception and educational perspective.

### **1.3.2 Guaranteeing quality everywhere**

From the perspective of integration and inclusion we see many advantages in the model of local reception initiatives rolled out in 2015. This model is based on central control and calls on the decentralised level to take in newcomers and provide them with support. There are a number of potential risks to sharing the burden in this way, including the risk of reduced availability of expertise and facilities, and dependence on decisions made by local services.

Consequently, the model should incorporate assurances regarding expertise and facilities. Wherever newcomers are placed they must be assured quality reception and support, and an integration process with a sustainable perspective. This is necessary to avoid newcomers opting to settle, in due course, in locations where they have easier access to facilities, as this would lead to concentration, putting pressure on the absorption capacity of the services in those preferred locations. The central government can manage and stimulate quality everywhere, and also gather and anchor expertise and data with a view to future deployment. After all, capacity and commitment at the local level are highly dependent on the fluctuations that are typical of refugee flows. The central level should have the ability at any time to put the available know-how to use and to scale up capacity.

Decentralised reception is usually coordinated at the city or municipal level. It is positive that the **role of director will be given to local services** as we have seen that this is where the envisaged integrated approach can best be shaped. However, it may not be realistic for every municipality to make its own arrangements autonomously. In any case, the contact point and the process support should be close enough for newcomers to access them easily.

Based on what appears to work well in practice, **three principles must be guaranteed** in local support: the 'one-stop expert shop' principle, (longer) customised process support, embedded in a strong network of multiple local actors. The one-stop shop is an expertise hub that all newcomers should have access to for as long as needed. This principle should not be dependent on a 'crisis' or temporary initiative. It should be permanent. Process support should not be time-limited either. This support is customised and aims to bridge the gap between newcomers and the many new situations they encounter. A bridge figure could considerably speed up this process, especially if he or she is backed by a network of local actors. Multidisciplinary networks

of this kind, if given sufficient resources, could respond to newcomers' wide-ranging needs, including those who are mistakenly transferred to education at present. The government should invest in this sort of network, both in terms of sharing expertise and making resources available. This would help ensure that newcomers find suitable training courses and settle into their new communities more quickly.

Where networks already exist, they could be strengthened. Otherwise, they will need to be built up from scratch. One issue requiring attention is regional demarcation. At present, some facilities are provided at city or municipal level, others at provincial level. In order to provide a clear and coordinated service it will probably be necessary to break down the existing divisions of powers. The need for multidisciplinary collaboration should not cause delays either.

Besides the focus on decentralised reception, the large numbers of newcomers in central reception centres should not simply be forgotten. The people housed in these centres are more likely to be alone, unaccompanied minors or those with limited prospects of being awarded residency. Efforts should also be made for this group to ensure their time in the reception centre is spent meaningfully, where possible through education and training if they are ready.

### **1.3.3 Principles for the initial phase**

The initial phase, preferably before the newcomers settle in a local area, should include an initial mapping, a **broad screening and exploration of the expectations and possibilities** for the whole family, including trying to find a match with what Flanders has to offer. A great deal of thought and development work is still required to ensure the predetermined criteria for the screening and exploration (broad, future-oriented, standardised, useful in many contexts, not dependent on language knowledge, etc.) are met. A group of (experience-)experts could tackle this, based i.e. on the screening tools created in the European context, but also on current practice. This should also include optimising the administrative procedures for recognition and validation of previously acquired competences and qualifications. Furthermore, the role of 'learning shops' should also be (re)considered in terms of education guidance for adults.

We view the principle of **language courtesy** as a common thread running through this phase. For those with a longer-term perspective of staying in Flanders it is logical that the goal should be to learn Dutch. However, at this stage it is necessary to prioritise good understanding in communication and thus to use other languages. To this end, a system of interpreting and teaching in other languages must be sufficiently developed.

The principles set out above, based on the developments we have observed in policy and practice, are often already a reality. We advocate applying them **more generally and thoroughly**, as an interplay between a facilitating and stimulating central policy and local actors.

## **1.4 Time for sustainable policy**

Because the government, society and the education system were not prepared for 2015's increased influx, we saw a lot of crisis management and ad hoc policy. Now, as we look back, it is time to learn lessons to develop a sustainable policy for the future. Such a policy goes beyond simply responding to acute needs and aims to anchor expertise for the future. This requires different, but not less, investment: whereas in times of 'crisis' resources are mainly channelled to acute needs, in calmer times they can be used to develop expertise further, test it against quality

standards and document it. This necessitates the involvement of people who experienced the crisis. They can ensure that the expertise is properly anchored, enabling it to flow more easily to more people when demand rises again. This applies to the education system as well as to asylum and migration, integration, both at central and local levels. Now is the time to act.

## 2 Education

### 2.1 Education in super-diversity: striving for inclusion

It is not a good idea to develop 'categorical' education policies for refugees, i.e. policies that are limited to a certain group or limited in time. There are several reasons for this.

Diversity is already a reality in many places, and in time it will become a reality for society and the education system as a whole. Refugees are part of this, not separate from it. It is time to accept and harness this diversity.<sup>4</sup> Mindsets must change if we are to meet the **structural diversity challenge** and we view the arrival of refugees as an opportunity to do just that. This can be achieved through future-oriented and resilient education that adapts to fluctuations. Continuity in expertise is essential.

**Inclusive citizenship** can develop and take shape in classes of pupils from diverse backgrounds, where newcomers learn together with pupils born in Flanders or who have been here for longer. It is based on what connects individuals and on their specificities. Teachers and pupils decide together how they want to live together and what it takes. Consequently, this approach also requires awareness-raising among non-refugees in education. The new attainment targets for citizenship offer opportunities to anchor this within the curriculum for everyone.

The arrival of the refugees was, as it were, a 'stress test' for the education system. The shared aim of providing good reception education to this group helped to identify both strengths and weaknesses. These weaknesses existed before and not only for refugees, but also for other groups whose chances of successful education are threatened one way or another. Working on those weaknesses to provide the quality education to which everyone is entitled will thus ensure more groups benefit from the education system. Refugees bring the challenges that already existed in education into sharper focus. In this regard, they can be very meaningful for the education system.

A common fear is that the influx of 'difficult' target groups and providing an education that meets their needs, will lower standards. That is by no means what we have in mind here. Quality education sets the bar high for everyone while taking account of different starting positions and building in structural support for this purpose.

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<sup>4</sup> At the Vlor kick-off on 25 September 2014, the managers of all the organisations involved in education in Flanders signed a new commitment declaration '[Diversity as an added value](#)'. This was a reaffirmation of their moral commitment to continue working to improve the educational opportunities of all pupils, regardless of their background. By signing the declaration, they showed that, both as individuals and on behalf of the organisations they lead, they want to contribute towards a society free of discrimination, exclusion or racism, and continue to work towards a climate of tolerance, openness and respect.

The 'Quality of Education Reference Framework', a framework for all schools and educational actors in Flanders, contains the quality expectations for an education system that works towards equal educational opportunities for all pupils. This is based on the conviction that everyone has the ability and capacity to grow: i.e. a growth mindset and an **ability-oriented vision**.

Striving for inclusion in the context of education for refugees also fits with current moves towards inclusive education for pupils with special educational needs, i.e. pupils who were previously channelled to special education. There are likely to be parallels in terms of approach and support as well.

At the same time, we must be aware of the impact this has on schools and teachers. The introduction of the M-Decree<sup>5</sup> has consequences for support, as does the arrival of newcomers at a school. A tailored approach is necessary and there are high expectations of those involved in education. At the same time, some people are wondering when we will hit the limits of what is feasible. Expectations and their implications should be debated more thoroughly.

It is clear that calls for inclusive education, including for refugees, are also calls for government action. To achieve inclusion in education will require well-considered and increased investment in monitoring and professional training; keeping a watchful eye on capacity, development of a vision of the organisation and how to future-proof the education system. This is how we should frame the debate on education for refugees within the broader education debate. Conversely, within this broader debate, e.g. in the context of educational innovations and reforms (modernisation of secondary education, dual learning, M-Decree, Inspection 2.0, pupil support, ...), we would expect refugees/newcomers always to receive specific attention, precisely because they bring challenges into sharp focus. The reality in the classroom is the litmus test to assess whether policy developments lead to more inclusive education.

## 2.2 A warm welcome

If the education system is given the tools it needs, it can fulfil its mission, i.e. to guarantee a warm welcome, a smooth learning trajectory and a sustainable future perspective for newcomers.

Having a decentralised reception model (see 1.3) means that, early in their stay in Belgium, newcomers may end up in a place in education with little experience of newcomers. Still, this first experience should be as **barrier-free as possible**: access should be guaranteed and the welcome for pupils and their parents, for learners and students, etc. must be warm and conscientious, so that they feel welcome and receive all the information they need in an accessible manner.

Because 2015's influx of refugees was so abrupt it was not always easy to guarantee that warm welcome. Such problems could be avoided in the future by providing schools, training centres and institutions with a roadmap together with a service they contact for support during the initial reception. Anyone receiving refugees at school or an institution for the first time must be able to quickly tap into efficient expertise about Do's and Don'ts for the initial contact and the first few days, both in terms of very practical issues (language, documents, etc.), how to approach the situation sensitively, and how to prepare the rest of the school community (colleagues, classmates, and so on). The expertise of highly-experienced reception offices and schools could

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<sup>5</sup> 'M' stands for measures necessary to include pupils with special needs in regular education.

clearly be used to draw up a **roadmap** covering all of these points to ensure their expertise is available to everyone whenever it is needed. This **service** could be provided by local or regional networks for reception and reception education. Such a service should include suitable provision of interpreters: a warm welcome and proper communication of information is only possible if newcomers can be addressed in their own language or a language they understand well.

A warm welcome also requires an integrated approach to both the newcomer's reception and the start of their education. By **integrated approach** we mean an approach where all aspects of the learner's development are taken into account. Such an approach should start from the outcome of the mapping exercise and build from there. The focus should not be on what newcomers cannot do yet but on their learning potential. After all, this sort of deficit thinking could lead to a fragmented approach.

An integrated approach also incorporates structural attention and support for **psychosocial and emotional well-being**. Teachers and management could take on this task, paying attention to such matters and picking up on the relevant signals, provided they receive suitable professional training. In this respect, adding trauma psychologists to the CLBs was a positive step for compulsory education. As a rule, CLBs are easy to approach and close to school teams. However, the practice needs to be generalised across all levels of education and be guaranteed over the longer term, for as long as necessary and as often as necessary.

Education can indeed play a frontline role in detecting and dealing skilfully with traumas. School should be a safe space *and* an actor in the refugee recovery process. This includes working on positive intercultural relationships. Providing specialised support to traumatised children, young people and adults is the job of professionals in the health and welfare sector. The education system should always be able to rely on these services being sufficiently accessible, and on key know-how being available for this target group.

An integrated approach involves **parents** actively and as full partners in their children's educational experience, respecting their potential and their individuality. Just because parents are non-native speakers, are unfamiliar with the Flemish education system or participate less in the traditional forms of school-parent contact does not mean that they cannot play an important role in their child's educational experience. Parents are experts in their own child and have high expectations of them and the school. Schools can also turn to the parents. Involving parents in school life can ease the integration process. Furthermore, it gives them a natural way to get to know the organisation and ways of the education system more gradually.

## **2.3 A smooth learning trajectory**

Once newcomers have entered education and training, they should be able to pursue their education with as few barriers as possible. Therefore it is important to be sufficiently aware of any barriers and ways of either avoiding them or helping newcomers to overcome them.

### **2.3.1 An integrated, flexible and tailored approach at all levels**

An integrated approach from the outset can resolve many of these barriers, combined with greater flexibility and customisation where necessary. In an integrated system, education is

organised in such a way that newcomers are embedded and supported in the regular system as much as possible. This does not mean ruling out separate streams on a temporary basis, but they should always be used with a view to swift reintegration.

The targeted integration covers a number of dimensions: organisational and pedagogical-didactical integration from the initial reception education into regular education; integration of the different objectives of reception education (learning Dutch and participating at school, in the workplace and society); integration of reception education in overarching policy of a school or institution; integration of measures for newcomers in all policy measures for education, work, etc. All of this is necessary to overcome the fact that reception education is often too isolated, and that the transition to subsequent education, training or the workplace is far from easy. In short: reception education should not be an island in education.

**Organisational integration** refers to the people involved in educating newcomers and how they are embedded in the educational institution as a whole, but also to the 'place' where their education takes place. Reception education should not take place in a physically separate space, away from the school's main buildings. The reception or starter class should be given a central location so that it is visibly part of the wider school these pupils will later join. This will also give newcomers the chance to interact with others from the outset and thus opportunities for integration and language learning. This is usually not a problem in nursery and primary education as newcomers are not put in separate classes, although newcomers sometimes have separate classes for part of the time at the very beginning.

In secondary education this is still a work in progress. We note in particular that reception classes for newcomers often take place in relative isolation from the rest of the school and that entire reception schools or departments have emerged, catering exclusively to newcomers. This is a far cry from the principle and expectation of swift integration. This age group, too, can overcome language and other barriers and disadvantages much more quickly if they are given the opportunity to participate actively in ordinary school life.

In higher and adult education the transition is even more difficult. There, reception education now usually takes place in complete isolation, essentially because the entire system assumes that people must first have sufficient command of the Dutch language before starting a specialised course of training. This trend could be reversed more easily by expanding alternatives such as Dutch at work or in training.

But integration goes further: broadening reception education and faster through-flow/integration in regular education is also necessary and possible from the **pedagogical-didactical** perspective. The double objective of reception education is to learn Dutch and prepare learners for participation. This is far easier to achieve if newcomers can play an effective part in community life. Language learning is a social process that is more effective when it takes place in an authentic context and if the language learner is given many opportunities to practice and receive useful feedback. Learning to participate is also easier in a real community than in an 'artificial' reception class context.

Moreover, it is not helpful to limit the **objectives** to just these two. Instead, consideration could be given to immediately involving newcomers in other areas of learning, potentially allowing them to build on education they received previously in their home country. The longer they stay outside

the regular curriculum, the more difficult it will be for them to join it later. Dutch language proficiency can be a barrier to learning in other areas. An obvious solution is to provide resources in other languages. This requires openness, not just as regards legislation but also in the minds. On the other hand, Dutch language proficiency will develop faster and be enriched if language acquisition is based on concrete content and motivating assignments.

The amount of education newcomers received in their home country determines, to a great extent, the school skills they possess and their needs before they can move on in their education here. Individual pupils can have widely different needs in this regard and the education system must be able to offset these differences. The school skills needed for further education can't be easily acquired. They must first be defined by educational actors so that newcomers can be screened for them. Here we think there is clearly a role for follow-up school coaches. They can promote targeted and long-term focus on school skills.

For higher education, English-language courses are an opportunity for newcomers to gain access and tap into their field of study more quickly, but this solution is not suitable for everyone. Courses in languages other than Dutch and English can be considered. The accessibility of academic language use for non-native speakers should be born in mind and extensive language support is certainly required. Fellow students can be approached for the latter, which may also spur newcomers' social integration.

This principle of integration therefore applies to both the approach and **what is being offered**. For teachers to achieve the objectives using a suitable approach, they need appropriate materials. These are not always available. Consequently, we advocate the professional development and publication of contemporary (digital) **materials** of relevance to the reality of newcomers of all ages, and for the creation of a dedicated digital **platform** both as a way of accessing and sharing existing material, and as a space where teachers can exchange ideas on approach and materials. Special attention should be paid to materials for illiterate young people and adults. It is also certainly worth exploring the role that new media can play.

The three-phase model put forward by researchers on reception education (OKANS) in their plea for swifter newcomer integration in regular education is an opportunity to debate the issue further. The three phases are: time-limited language immersion; a semi-integrated phase (also time-limited); full integration. The researchers note that this approach is possible within the current regulatory framework, but that it requires significant changes as regards the development of a vision for reception education, professional training of reception and regular teachers and cooperation within and outside schools.

**Flexible learning pathways** are one innovation that could be used more intensively. They offer excellent opportunities for newcomers at all levels. We therefore call for schools and institutions to be encouraged to make maximum use of the possibilities afforded in the regulations to expand the use of flexible learning pathways. This is essentially nothing more than a very advanced form of differentiation. Of course, this raises questions about the limits of what is feasible, taking into account the education system's human and other resources. However, these limits must be explored for the sake of learners whose chances of a successful education are highly precarious due to their starting position.

People who start out as newcomers remain newcomers throughout their (education) career, to a certain extent. There should be more widespread awareness of this reality. An (extended) reception process alone cannot close the gap entirely. Extensive support for and consideration of possible adjustments to the process are still required at all times. A succession of preparatory or transition trajectories can, however, lead to too much flexibility. This may leave the newcomer feeling unable to integrate into regular education. This is not desirable either and should therefore receive attention: the move to regular education should be made as quickly as possible to ensure newcomers are not left behind. After all, and while we are aware of the prevailing 'qualification obsession', the goal remains to achieve a qualification, preferably as complete as possible and at a level that gives access to further education and/or progression to the labour market. If it is not feasible to achieve complete qualifications, there should be the option of obtaining (partial) qualifications or having (incomplete) competences validated and thus put to use on the labour market. This is another form of flexibility.

Inherent in all of the above is a commitment to **high-quality educational guidance and orientation**. This should be provided to all pupils in compulsory education; for newcomers, a starting portfolio could be an opportunity for regular reviews during their educational experience, providing a chance for a desirable and realistic perspective for further education to emerge. Development orientation, ambition and ownership must come first.

For adults, this principle translates into the need for **learning trajectory guidance and a needs-oriented approach** in higher and adult education, rather than supply-driven action. A needs-oriented approach starts from the desired and realistic future perspective and guarantees a corresponding training trajectory. Hence, it is also **tailored**. Finding a good combination of the needs-oriented path and the newcomer's living arrangements is also part of this. These arrangements also determine the timing, intensity and location of the training. Forms of dual learning, in which learning takes place in both an educational and a (paid) work context, should be explored for this target group. The importance of lifelong learning and participation in education and training in the future is beyond dispute for all adults, including newcomers.

Finally, we argue that the policy on reception education for newcomers should be integrated into the **overarching policy** (quality policy, including diversity policy) in every school, school community, educational institution or association, *and* the government.

### **2.3.2 Particular focus on vulnerabilities**

The factors that make newcomers particularly vulnerable can be personal or social, but may also relate to their prior education and the moment when the newcomer enters our education system. Think, for example, of illiterate adolescents, severely traumatised children, people in their twenties whose basic education was interrupted years ago because of war, etc. All of these factors create additional barriers and thus require extra attention and debate.

Today there are no ready-made solutions for these groups and the teaching professionals who accompany them daily have serious concerns, but also much experience. With all the resources at their disposal, and often through trial and error, they have developed an approach that they believe and feel may benefit particularly vulnerable newcomers. They have often been exploring the limits of flexibility for years, including as regards the transition between educational levels. Based on this approach and the solutions that teachers and schools use in such cases, paths can be mapped out in dialogue with teachers, experts and policy makers. This will require **the**

**development of a vision, inventiveness and creativity**, but, with extra thought and measures, it has to be possible to offer a goal-oriented path to these 'more difficult' groups as well. They will likely require more time and certainly more support, and thus schools need to be suitably equipped, but if they combine their efforts, education could make a difference for these groups too. The ability-oriented view must always come first.

Suffering trauma before, during or after fleeing, leads to increased vulnerability. **Psychosocial well-being** should therefore remain a focus in the first phase of education and beyond, in the form of joint care (education and welfare) and continuous expertise development.

We also argue for particular attention to be paid to **information flows** in transitions between schools, educational levels and training contexts. This applies to the education system as a whole and to all pupils. But for vulnerable newcomers it is crucial that a secondary school or institution be as quickly and fully informed as possible of the work done by the previous institution so they have a clear overview of the starting point (mapping) and the path taken thus far. This prevents time being wasted and allows the education system to tailor its efforts.

### **2.3.3 Professional training and collaboration**

In order to guarantee a warm welcome and a smooth learning trajectory, all educational actors must play their role on the basis of expertise and good cooperation.

After all, the integral and integrated approach outlined above involves **many actors**. Think for example of reception teachers, regular teachers, follow-up school coaches, care coordinators, management, school boards, pedagogical guidance services (pbd), centres for pupil guidance (clb) ... for compulsory education; integration actors, teachers and coordinators of centres for basic education and adult education (cbe and cvo),, employment mediators, coaches on the work floor, ... for adult education; higher education institution employees, for example central services (study choice counselling, study grants, specific contact person for refugees, ...), mentors, teachers, fellow students, etc. They can make a success of the integrated approach if they all work together towards the same goal, i.e. providing newcomers with a quality education, while paying attention to care needs and an ambitious future perspective.

First of all, this cooperation requires **consultation and coordination** on a regular basis. Where this has not yet been institutionalised, or not sufficiently so, it should be encouraged. It goes without saying that those involved should be given the time and space required. A good example is secondary school follow-up coaches transferring and enhancing expertise among secondary school teachers. By making this a more explicit part of their job they could be encouraged to make it a focus, which can only increase the 'positive transfer' for the newcomers involved.

All actors involved should also be able to build up the expertise they need for their job. This could be guaranteed in the long run by structurally embedding the focus on newcomers in initial training, or perhaps even by developing a separate initial training for this purpose. However, the latter would not provide sufficient guarantees for peaks in the influx, such as in 2015, and for the challenges that such unpredictable peaks entail. **Instead, expertise should** be built up from a combination of a foundation laid during teacher training, with skills that all teachers need in a diverse context, and opportunities for further professional training during their career. This is the

only way for skills such as diversity sensitivity (or cultural sensitivity), trauma sensitivity, insight into learning Dutch as a second/foreign language, dealing with multilingualism, ... to be sustainably developed and expanded.

The **range of professional training available**, which we have deemed insufficient for teachers' current needs, must be re-examined. What is already provided by regular support services and other providers and what needs are not being met? What needs to be done for the professional training courses on offer to be effective and fit in with what teachers themselves see as effective?

A more structural development of **professional learning communities or learning networks**, in which teachers and coordinators from different schools work through an identification and learning process together, occasionally with inspiration from an external expert, is certainly worth considering. This model of experience and expertise development appears to work for teachers of newcomers as a challenging target group, for whom the results of research are often felt to be less useful in practice. Moreover, it strengthens the participants' position and enables them to take the expertise they build up within the privacy of the network and gradually disseminate it to the team they work with at school. It goes without saying that teachers should have the opportunity to participate in such networks.

This is part of the broader debate about the importance of space for professional training in their overall work at school, but pays specific attention to teachers, who, particularly in secondary education, are often somewhat isolated in a school team. In primary education, consideration should be given to the possibility of organising professional training along the same lines as in secondary education, so that networks can be created at the school community level, for example. This would require a great deal of flexibility, but above all it would offer many opportunities to develop expertise and for the benefit to be felt throughout the team in terms of the care that all teachers must provide to (former) newcomers.

Building expertise is one thing. Being able to retain it in the long term is another. This is necessary precisely because this extremely vulnerable target group requires the greatest possible expertise, which must also be secured so it is in place for future refugee influxes. However, newcomer teachers often lack job security. This may be because they are not on a permanent contract yet or because the number of newcomers is difficult to predict. There should be a debate and measures taken to prevent such teachers leaving to find other work. If education for newcomers were seen in a more integrated way and the principle 'once a newcomer, always a newcomer' were more widely accepted, this could also lead to greater job security for teachers specialised in newcomers.

It is also worth exploring the possibility of developing a **network model** for teachers with expertise in the reception and education of newcomers. Such a network could be an anchor (local or regional), acting as a base that would deploy expert teachers and follow-up school coaches to where they are needed. Such a network could also share expertise with schools and teachers who are dealing with refugees for the first time. Furthermore, it could work on the roadmap for starting up and developing reception education.

Here we think there can be interplay with the support networks model within the framework of the M-Decree. It may be worth exploring whether they can be extended to the expertise garnered

from the educational needs of newcomers. This also fits in with our call for a sustainable policy whereby now, at a time of relative calm, the expertise that has been built up in previous school years can be anchored for the future: expert teachers and coordinators should train others and put their expertise to use for the long-term guidance of newcomers in follow-up trajectories.

## **2.4 Sustainable future perspective**

A warm welcome and a smooth learning trajectory form the basis for a sustainable future perspective. Throughout the entire training process, ambition is paramount but so are care and ongoing support, in order to guarantee that future perspective.

The question of where the newcomer may end up in the future should play no part in it. Naturally, the Flemish education and training system prepares children, young people and adults for a future in Flanders, in society and on the labour market. But if, for whatever reason, that proves not to be an option, education can still play an important role for those involved.

In order to fulfill this role, education itself must concentrate fully on doing what it has always done. But it should be able to lean on two principles of a humane asylum and return policy. These are not yet in place. First of all, people who cannot stay here in the long term should be given the opportunity **to complete a logically coherent training unit** so that it can be certified/validated. What that logically coherent unit may be remains to be seen, but examples could include: basic education, a vocational training, a module, a degree, etc. As a minimum, it should be possible to equip people for their future, wherever it may take them. This tracks with the core mission of education.

A second way of doing this is by offering **shorter training courses** that people, including adults, regardless of their status, can follow here during their temporary stay. Such courses and their promotion would have a significant impact on this group's future.

For children and young people with a realistic possibility of return, the option of providing education in their own language should be considered with a view to their **(re)joining the education system in their country of origin**. This task need not fall to the education system, which should logically focus on integration and thus on learning the Dutch language. The government could organise this through extracurricular activities, as is the case in other European countries.

## **3 Society: source of solidarity and learning opportunities**

Finally, in this study we draw attention to the fact that wider society can be a source of solidarity and learning opportunities for refugees. We have already highlighted the need for interaction between education and society. Education can be a catalyst for increased support for newcomers in society, but in turn, to be able to fulfil its mission, it needs positive reinforcement from the wider society.

The starting point for education should be each student's learning potential. A human and social image should be promoted, where everybody, refugees and non-refugees, learn together throughout their lives from interactions and daily experiences, in order to shape future

coexistence in the best possible way and involve every citizen. As we see it, equipping all learners with the skills and willingness to use and convey this perspective is one of the core tasks and main challenges of education.

There is no need to invent or roll out big new policy models for learning and living side-by-side in a super-diverse context. Small steps are a good start, with respect for everyone's individuality and consideration for what binds people together. A common goal or interest can form the basis for people to learn and work together and shape shared values. In this way we can gradually break through the 'us-versus-them mentality' so everyone can contribute to building a **future-proof model of society**.

We should all be engaged in ongoing debate about what this society should look like. This debate is about integration, legitimacy, a humane return policy, development collaboration and so on. Education, as a reflection of society and a training ground for democracy, certainly has a role to play here.

At the same time, the 'small' or 'ordinary' forms of coexistence offer many **extra learning opportunities** for newcomers, and they need them. Just think of the extra opportunities to learn Dutch. This non-formal or informal learning can reinforce more formal learning in the education system because it takes place in an authentic context where the newcomer is motivated to participate.

This interaction between education and society also offers **extra opportunities for interaction** between schools and parents, coordination with neighbourhood activities, getting involved in other leisure initiatives (sport, culture, etc.), and so on. By harnessing these opportunities, the social fabric around refugees can grow and refugees get the chance to work on group formation and recovery from loss and other refugee experiences. Furthermore, the small-scale nature of this sort of actions and projects is an added value. This should be the starting point for policies that aim to stimulate, support and remove barriers to such initiatives. There are still many underutilised opportunities in this area. As such, it is worth considering how to make greater use of them.

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