

# Living together in diversity – Linguistic integration in Flanders



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## **1. Civic integration**

### ***1.1 Living together in diversity***

In 2004, a Flemish minister was, for the first time, explicitly made responsible for the civic integration policy towards newcomers in Flemish society. The chapter in the coalition agreement concerning this policy was given the title ‘Living together in diversity’.

It could no longer be denied that Flemish society is a diverse society. This diversity has become unmistakable and irreversible.

The integration policy ‘Living together in diversity’ is aimed at achieving one shared society, where people with different backgrounds can live together without abandoning their own cultural and religious values and customs.

Living together in diversity, however, is only possible when it is based on a common set of standards and values. These standards and values are the cornerstone of Flemish society: democratic law, equality of all people, equality between men and women, separation of religion and state and freedom of speech.

Immigrants are invited to be active citizens in Flemish society. They are given every possible opportunity to participate in and integrate society, but it is their responsibility, as individuals, to do so. In other words, acceptance of the invitation to participate in society and become active citizens is a duty.

Living together in diversity is based on active and shared citizenship with opportunities and responsibilities for all the participants – old and new Flemings.

## 1.2 Civic integration programme

One of the most important tools for achieving the participation and integration of immigrants in Flemish society is the civic integration programme. This programme is aimed at adult immigrants<sup>1</sup> who come to stay in Flanders for a longer period of time.

Three categories can be identified:

- Newcomers: immigrants who have recently arrived in Belgium (Flanders). It is important that they get to know their new society as soon as possible and learn how to speak Dutch;
- Old comers: immigrants who have been living in Belgium (Flanders) for more than one year. Not everyone speaks Dutch or is already familiar with the standards and values of Flemish society;
- Ministers of official religions: as leaders of a religious community they are role models for the members of their community. It is therefore very important that they speak the language of the society they live in and understand how this society functions.

The integration programme is compulsory for everyone within these categories, if this is not in breach of European and international regulations<sup>2</sup>. In general, the civic integration programme is compulsory for newcomers and ministers of official religions. Everyone within these three categories has a right to an integration programme, even if it is not compulsory.

The civic integration programme consists of three parts:

- A language course: Dutch as a second language (D2)  
This is an elementary language course at level A1 of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR)<sup>3</sup>. This course lasts between 80 and 240 hours, depending on the participant's level of schooling.
- A social orientation course  
This course gives an introduction to Flemish society. The themes addressed in the social orientation course are mobility, social security, housing, employment, citizenship, health service, education, standards and values. This course lasts 60 hours.
- A career orientation course  
In the career orientation course, the participant is helped to determine the next stage in his life and career: entering the labour market, continuing education or participating in socio-cultural schemes or volunteer work. This course lasts 20 hours.

Participants in the civic integration programme (referred to as the primary integration programme) are given individual guidance throughout. After finishing this programme, immigrants can continue their training and education in a more regular manner.

For newcomers and ministers of official religions, the civic integration programme starts – almost immediately after their arrival in Flanders. The programme has to be completed

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<sup>1</sup> There are specific programmes for young immigrants.

<sup>2</sup> For example citizens from within the EU can, but are not obliged to follow the integration programme, neither newcomers living in Brussels (see below)

<sup>3</sup> Council of Europe. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. 2001, CUP. Available online [www.coe.int/lang](http://www.coe.int/lang)

within one year. Owing to the institutional character of the Brussels-Capital Region, newcomers living in Brussels are not obliged to participate in a civic integration programme.

Every participant – compulsory or non-compulsory – signs an integration contract. If the training programme is regularly attended<sup>4</sup>, the participant receives an integration certificate.

When an immigrant who is obliged to participate refuses, or when a participant who has made an integration contract does not attend regularly, an administrative fine is imposed.

### **1.3 Shared responsibility**

Implementation of the integration policy and the organisation of the civic integration programmes is a multilevel responsibility and involves a multitude of stakeholders and actors.

The competencies and responsibilities for the integration of immigrants are attributed to different levels of government:

- At national level (Belgium), the Federal authorities are responsible for access to the territory, residence, settlement and the removal of foreigners;
- At regional level, the Flemish authorities are responsible for integration policy;
- At local level, the municipalities are responsible for distributing information concerning the civic integration programme.

This means that participation in the civic integration programme has no link with obtaining access to or residence in Flanders or elsewhere in Belgium. The Flemish authorities can only apply administrative sanctions in the event of non-participation or non-attendance.

In the Flemish government, three policy areas are directly related to the three parts of the civic integration programme, namely Interior (domestic governance), Education and Work.

At the executive level, a partnership has been established between the welcome offices, the Dutch Language Houses and the Centres for Professional Orientation and Training.

The welcome offices are responsible for the organisation of the civic integration programme. There are eight welcome offices: in addition to those in Ghent, Antwerp and Brussels, there is one in each of the five Flemish provinces. They have to serve all the municipalities in their operational area. The welcome offices play a co-ordinating role, distribute information to the immigrants, provide the social orientation course and the individual guidance, draft the integration contracts and deliver the integration certificates.

The Dutch Language Houses are responsible for offering information on Dutch language courses and orientation of the participants to the most appropriate language course according to their needs (see 2.4. Dutch Language Houses).

Immigrants are often anxious to find employment as soon as possible. The Centres for Professional Orientation and Training offer them career guidance and professional training.

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<sup>4</sup> This means 80% attendancy per part (language course, social integration course and career orientation course).

## **2. Second language learning**

### **2.1 Target group**

The target group for Dutch language courses is larger than the target group for the civic integration programme: every foreign-language speaking adult who wants to learn Dutch can attend a language course suited to his or her specific needs.

### **2.2 Three providers**

Dutch language courses are not organised by separate institutions, but are the responsibility of providers of (adult) education. This means that the teachers are all professional, qualified trainers and that the quality of the language courses is assured by the education inspectorate.

There are three main providers of Dutch language courses, each with a specific target group and a specific programme:

- the Centre for Basic Education offers language courses on a basic level<sup>5</sup> for illiterate and poorly skilled adults;
- the Centre for Adult Education offers language courses for highly skilled adults at basic level, a more advanced level or at a level of specialisation.
- the University Language Centre offers language courses for very highly skilled adults with an academic perspective at basic and advanced level and prepare them for enrolment in academic studies.

### **2.3 Wide variety of language courses**

Dutch language courses are based on the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*. Over the last couple of years, the offer has been greatly expanded at different levels: the total volume of language courses has increased substantially and with the use of a common framework the quality has improved. There are day and evening classes, intensive and less intensive courses, literacy courses, general or specialised courses, shorter or extended courses, and so on.

For immigrants taking part in a civic integration programme, there is no enrolment fee for Dutch language courses. Other participants in languages courses benefit from a reduced enrolment fee.

### **2.4 Dutch Language Houses**

Dutch language courses come in a wide variety: multiple providers and multiple types of language courses. It was not always easy for the immigrants to choose the right language course according to their individual level of schooling and learning needs.

Since 2005, there have been eight Dutch Language Houses in Flanders. As with the welcome offices, they are to be found in the cities of Antwerp, Ghent and Brussels and in each of the five Flemish provinces. As indicated above, the Dutch Language Houses and the welcome offices work closely together in organising the integration programme.

The Dutch Language Houses are responsible for promoting participation in Dutch language courses and spreading information to foreign-language speaking adults who want to learn Dutch. Their core business is testing and orienting all candidates for languages courses at a basic level. They supervise the offer and demand of language courses and indicate problems of shortage or particular needs expressed by participants or providers.

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<sup>5</sup> Level A1 and level A2 of the CEFR (see note 3).

### **3. Case studies**

#### **3.1 Civic Integration Day**

In 2007, a Civic Integration Day was established to be celebrated every year in December. On this day, immigrants who have completed the civic integration programme and received an integration certificate are honoured.

Civic Integration Day is an expression of appreciation by Flemish society of the immigrants' commitment to integrate their new society. Civic Integration Day is also designed to increase the social value of the integration certificate. Integration can only be completed when every Fleming, government and organisation recognises the effort made by the immigrants.

#### **3.2 Evaluation of the integration policy**

The integration policy has been implemented since April 2004. Every three years the integration policy will be evaluated. The first evaluation for the period 2004-2006 has already taken place. This extensive evaluation can be considered as a starting point for further evaluation.

Meanwhile, the integration act has been under revision, but some of the findings and conclusions of this first evaluation are still worth mentioning:

1. 58% of the newcomers that started a civic integration programme in 2005 obtained an integration certificate – at that time only newcomers were targeted by the integration policy;
2. 80% of the newcomers that participated in an integration programme during 2004-2006 were satisfied with the courses provided;
3. The range was very limited at the start of the integration policy: only 38% of the newcomers visited the welcome offices and only 10% of the newcomers obtained an integration certificate;
4. The drop-out rate was very high: 41,5% of the newcomers who signed an integration contract did not finish the programme;
5. Co-operation between the different partners – welcome offices, Dutch Language Houses and Centres for Professional Orientation and Training –improved during the period of evaluation (2004 to 2006);
6. The offer of courses – social orientation, Dutch language courses and career orientation – was sufficient. On the other hand, the courses should be more diverse to meet the specific needs of the different participants;
7. Learning to speak Dutch is considered very important by most of the newcomers. Even if they do not finish the entire integration programme, they still attend a language course;
8. Because the focus is mainly on attendance and not on results during the integration programme, finishing the programme does not mean the newcomer is indeed integrated in Flemish society;
9. Organisation of the integration programme varies greatly from one welcome office to another.

The full report in Dutch can be downloaded from the website of the Flemish Ministry of the Interior. <http://binnenland.vlaanderen.be/inburgering/onderzoek.htm>

During the period of evaluation and later on – based on the findings and conclusions of the evaluation report – integration policy was revised. A second evaluation will take place in the period 2008-2009. The results will be available in the middle of 2009.

### **3.3 Evaluation of D2 in the Centres for Adult Education**

In the period 2007-2008, the education inspectorate evaluated the Dutch language courses provided by the Centre for Adult Education, the largest provider of language courses. The evaluation focused on the quality and efficiency of the courses and the degree of satisfaction of the participants.

The evaluation is being finalised at the moment and a full report is expected to be published in summer 2008.

However, some of the most important findings and conclusions can be mentioned here.

The average participant in a Dutch language course is 33 years old and speaks French or English. There are slightly more men than women participating. About 25% of the participants receive social welfare. Looking at the countries of origin, the immigrants of Morocco and Turkey are the largest group. Participants reside on average 8.25 years in Flanders and live mostly in or near the cities of Antwerp, Ghent and Brussels. About 25% of the participants belong to the target group of the integration policy. Most participants indicate they want to learn Dutch to improve their socio-economic situation.

Standardisation of the courses, for the most part due to use of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), has made the offer of language courses more transparent and uniform. However, standardisation and uniformity do not necessarily mean using identical materials and handbooks in all Centres for Adult Education. Flexibility is needed to adapt the materials to the specific needs and interests of the participants.

The offer is already diverse (see 2.3), but not all needs are being met. For instance:

1. Although in general there are no waiting lists for language courses, in some rural areas the offer is not sufficient;
2. It is not always easy to combine a job or a family with a language course. Courses during the weekend and summer holidays and distance learning would facilitate this;
3. To train verbal skills, conversation courses should be added to the offer;
4. Orientation, guidance and support throughout the language course should be increased;
5. The integration of professional training and language courses would shorten the total length of training. In this way, continuing education and training becomes more attractive;
6. The participation of persons with hearing and sight impairments should be facilitated.

The language courses are too general and theoretical. The relation between the content of the language course and the real life situations of the participants is in some cases unclear. Language courses need to be more learner centred. Language learning has to be a means of increasing participation in society, not a means in itself.

Co-operation between the Centres for Adult Education and the Dutch Language Houses has improved over the last five years. Co-operation between centres mutually on the other hand should be stimulated further in order to share and develop materials, methodology and good practices.

### **3.4 Activating Parents**

Foreign-language speaking parents do not always have the language skills required to understand fully the information given out by their children's school. The language used in a school context is often very specific and is rarely acquired by following a general language course – particularly at basic level. Indeed, schools tend to communicate in a way that is complex and inaccessible to foreign-language speaking parents.

Participating in yet another general language course does not solve the problem of communication between school and parents. A two-dimensional solution is needed: on the one hand, parents have to acquire the specific language skills they need to understand and respond to communication from the school, and on the other hand, schools have to simplify their communication and make it more accessible to parents.

In September 2008, a new project was launched in primary schools throughout Flanders: Dutch language courses are being organised for parents during the day time when the children are attending classes.

The language courses are situated at the basic level of the CEFR (A1), but all the materials used in the class are related to the school context. In addition to language learning, the parents also take part in a school project, for instance organising a school breakfast or a sports event.

Adding the school project to the language course makes it possible for the participants to use their acquired skills in real-life situations, come into contact with key figures in the school (teachers, head and other parents) and to interact with native speakers. In this way, not only are their language skills improved, but also social skills and self reliance.

A final element of this project consists of improving the accessibility of the school communication to parents. For instance, texts given out by the school are re-written by the participants and shown to the teachers and head. In this way the level of complexity of the original message is made clear and hints for improvement are given.

The project will be evaluated in June 2008, but already the positive effects of this project are clear: the attendance at parent-teacher meetings in the participating schools has increased and communication between parents and teachers has improved.

In autumn 2008 a conference on this specific topic will be held for all the stakeholders. An evaluation report will be published.

Further information in Dutch on this project is available for downloading at the following website: [http://www.steunpuntgok.be/volwassenen/materiaal/school\\_en\\_ouders/index.aspx](http://www.steunpuntgok.be/volwassenen/materiaal/school_en_ouders/index.aspx)