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Welcoming refugees through education

An example from
the Flemish Community of Belgium

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Outline of the presentation

- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Flemish education in the context of migration
- ▶ The refugee crisis of 2015
- ▶ General policy response: School education, Adult education, Higher education
- ▶ Conclusion and remaining challenges



Introduction: interest of Flanders (Belgium) in quality language training to refugees

- Dec. 2016: the Flemish Government decides to dedicate its biannual contribution to the COE to actions for the integration of refugees, notably:
 - LIAM Toolkit for refugees
 - Actions geared at a better recognition of higher education qualifications of refugees
- LIAM toolkit corresponds with the vision adopted in Flanders in addressing migrant adults' needs: no one-size fits all, but targetted approach + focus on the quality of language training.



Flemish education in the context of migration

- ▶ Flemish education = schools in Flemish Region + schools with Dutch as instruction language in Brussels Capital Region
- ▶ Demography: rapidly growing multicultural diversity + high birth rates (especially in urban areas)
⇒ pressure on capacity of school infrastructure
- ▶ High diversity among migrants in terms of nationalities, cultural capital and socio-economic status (significant number of low-skilled immigrants)
=> School funding system takes account of presence of students with migrant and disadvantaged background (more operational budget/staff budget) since 2002

Refugee crisis of 2015

- ▶ 2015: more massive influx than waves of refugees in last decades
- ▶ Summer of 2015: more than 5000 new refugees in 4 months after constant influx of thousands of refugees since 2014
 - Most Syrians and Iraqi
 - More than 50 % in company of family member(s)
 - 5 % unaccompanied children!



General policy response

- ▶ 4 Sept. 2015: Flemish Government established Inter-Ministerial Committee for Refugee and Asylum Crisis.
Consensus: duty of unconditional granting of fundamental rights to new-comers (housing, education, health care...)
⇒ Coordinated action of all policy domains
- Education: constitutional right for each child from age 2,5 to 18 to free education, regardless of status (legal/illegal)
- Rule that each child should receive education immediately after arrival + a definitive place in a school within 60 days (similar measures in higher and adult education)



School education (1)

- ▶ Avoid separate education of refugees – integration in mainstream schools – focus on linguistic integration
- ▶ Reinforcement of **existing** “reception education” measures for newly arrived immigrants not mastering the Dutch instruction language.
 - Extra language support/staff in primary education
 - Specific “welcoming classes” in secondary schools
 - Specific assistance from the centres of pupil guidance (educational and psycho-medical support)



School education (2)

► Extra measures:

- Extension of linguistic integration support (staff) to pre-primary + extra operational budget (€950/child)
- Emergency classes at asylum centres before allocation of place at school (short-term solution)
- Transportation of students from asylum centre to school
- Expansion of school capacity with temporary buildings (“container classes”)
- Extra provision for coaching and follow-up after completion of welcoming classes



Adult education

- ▶ Existing provision reinforced to accommodate new arrivals:
 - linguistic integration of adult migrants (tailor-made offer adapted to education level, degree of literacy...)
 - “integration tracks” for unemployed migrants (including language, general knowledge on Flemish society, preparation for labour market, assessment of competences in cooperation with Public Employment sector)



Higher education

- ▶ Consistent application of legislation adopted in 1990s on HE for refugees:
 - (unconditional) access to higher education
 - waving of tuition, Governmental study grant and access to social support by university or college
 - right to fair recognition of prior HE studies (according to art. 7 of the Unesco/COE Lisbon Recognition Convention) – avoid needless redemonstration of competences already assessed in education system of the country of origin

- ▶ Extra measure: reinforcement of the National Academic Recognition Centre (NARIC)



Conclusion & remaining challenges

- ▶ While inclusion of newcomers is the task of society as a whole, the Flemish practice reflects the trust of policy-makers as well as education practitioners in the school and learning environment as privileged starting point for integration
- ▶ Short-term evaluation:
 - system seems to have passed the test; good opportunity to refine and adjust the framework to serve all those in need

Conclusion & remaining challenges

Mid- and long term challenges remain:

- follow-up of study and professional career in the coming years?
- how can locals and newly arrived migrant live together as equals in a culturally diverse society?
- Importance of COE instruments and tools: apart from the new LIAM toolkit, also European reference frameworks for Languages and or competences for a democratic culture (RFCDC)



Thank you for your attention



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