



LITERACY IN BELGIUM (FLANDERS)

COUNTRY REPORT
SHORT VERSION

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1 Introduction

This report on the state of literacy in Belgium (Flanders) is one of a series produced in 2015 and 2016 by ELINET, the European Literacy Policy Network. ELINET was founded in February 2014 and has 78 partner organisations in 28 European countries¹. ELINET aims to improve literacy policies in its member countries in order to reduce the number of children, young people and adults with low literacy skills. One major tool to achieve this aim is to produce a set of reliable, up-to-date and comprehensive reports on the state of literacy in each country where ELINET has one or more partners, and to provide guidance towards improving literacy policies in those countries. The reports are based (wherever possible) on available, internationally comparable performance data, as well as reliable national data provided (and translated) by our partners.

ELINET continues the work of the European Union High Level Group of Experts on Literacy (HLG) which was established by the European Commission in January 2011 and reported in September 2012². All country reports produced by ELINET use a common theoretical framework which is described here: "ELINET Country Reports – Frame of Reference"³.

The Country Reports are organised around the three recommendations of the HLG's literacy report:

- Creating a literate environment
- Improving the quality of teaching
- Increasing participation, inclusion (and equity⁴).

Within its two-year funding period ELINET has completed Literacy Country Reports for all 30 ELINET member countries. In most cases we published separate **Long Reports** for specific age groups (Children / Adolescents and Adults), in some cases comprehensive reports covering all age groups. Additionally, for all 30 countries, we published **Short Reports** covering all age groups, containing the summary of performance data and policy messages of the Long Reports. These reports are accompanied by a collection of good practice examples which cover all age groups and policy areas as well. These examples refer to the **European Framework of Good Practice in Raising Literacy Levels**; both are to be found in the section "Good Practice"⁵.

¹ For more information about the network and its activities see: www.eli-net.eu.

² In the following, the final report of the EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy is referenced as "HLG report". This report can be downloaded under the following link: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/doc/literacy-report_en.pdf.

³ See: <http://www.eli-net.eu/research/country-reports/>.

⁴ "Equity" was added by ELINET.

⁵ See: <http://www.eli-net.eu/good-practice/>.

2 General Information about the Belgian (Flemish) Education System

Belgium is a Federal State with three official languages: Dutch, French and German. In 1989, the Education Department was transferred from the federal government to the Flemish, French and German Communities defined on a linguistic and cultural basis. There are also three Regions defined on geographical basis: the Flemish region, Wallonia region and Brussels capital.

Competence for education in Belgium has been transferred to the communities. Only the determination of the starting and finishing ages for compulsory education, minimum requirements for diploma conferrals and the pension system are still federal matters. In the Flemish Community, the Department for Education and Training takes care of policy preparation and four internal autonomous agencies are responsible for policy implementation. Together, they form the Flemish ministry of Education and Training.

The Flemish Education Council (VLOR) is the strategic advice council for the policy domain of Education and Training. The Child and Family agency directs formal child care, including pre-school as well as out-of-school care of children up to the age of 12. Educational provision, recognised, financed/subsidised and inspected by the public authorities, is organised by different (public and private) school boards/governing bodies on the basis of freedom of education.

Children can enter preschools at the age of two and a half year-olds. The vast majority of children regularly attend preschool. Pre-primary education is well developed and free of charge. Compulsory schooling starts at age 6 and ends at 18. Integrated primary education is a cooperation between mainstream education and special needs education. It implies that children with a disability take classes or activities in a mainstream school. In this process they receive support from special needs education.

At the end of primary education children who have obtained all goals from the curriculum take a certificate of primary education. Also, in special needs education, children may in certain cases obtain a certificate which has the same value as the one from mainstream education.

Primary education lasts 6 years (grade 1 to 6), as does secondary education (grade 7 to 12). Between the ages of 15 and 18 years, students can follow part-time schooling.

In secondary education, the largest part of the curriculum in the first stage is dedicated to basic competences. From the second stage onwards four different types of education are offered:

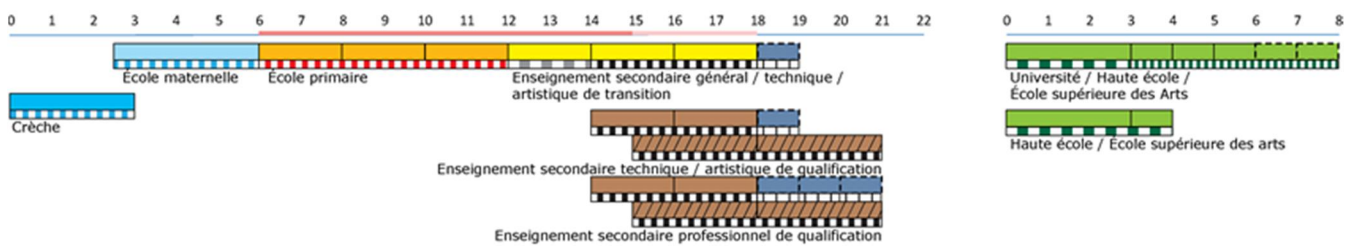
- *General secondary education (gse)*, which focuses on broad general education. It does not prepare pupils for a specific profession, but rather lays a firm foundation for higher education.
- *In technical secondary education (tse)* attention goes in particular to general and technical-theoretical subjects. After tse, a youngster may practise a profession or transfer to higher education. This type of education also contains practical training.

- *Secondary education in the arts* combines a broad general education with an active practice of art. After secondary education in the arts a youngster may practise a profession or transfer to higher education.
- *Vocational secondary education (vse)* is a practically-oriented type of education in which the youngster receives general education but where the focus primarily lies on learning a specific profession.

A pupil chooses one of these forms of education for one particular course of study.

A pupil obtains the certificate of secondary education after he/she has successfully ended the sixth grade of gse, tse or secondary education in the arts or the seventh grade of vse. With a certificate of secondary education a youngster is granted unrestricted access to higher education. As well as full-time secondary education, there is qualification-stream dual vocational secondary education and training and, in some institutions, post-secondary non-tertiary education.

Figure 1: Structure of the Belgian School System⁶



⁶ See Structure of European education systems: http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/facts_and_figures_en.php#diagram.

3 Literacy Performance Data

Flemish-speaking Belgium participated in OECD's PISA (15 year-olds' reading literacy) since 2000, and in OECD's PIAAC (adults' reading literacy) in 2012. This means it is possible to describe the changes over time in average reading proficiency, according to different characteristics of the readers, and to compare relative reading levels of proficiencies for 15 year-olds and adults. Flemish-speaking Belgium took part in PIRLS 2006 only; no trends can be reported in this case.

In PISA 2012, the Flemish Community of Belgium performed well above the EU's average (518 vs 489 EU-average). However, despite this good relative performance, a small decline has been observed between 2000 and the last two PISA cycles (2009 and 2012) (- 15 score points between 2000 and 2012).

A limited proportion of 15 year-olds (14%) can be considered as low performing readers. This is less than the average across EU countries (20%). These students can read simple texts, retrieve explicit information, or make straightforward inferences, but they are not able to deal with longer or more complex texts, and are unable to interpret beyond what is explicitly stated in the text. The proportion of top-performing readers is higher than in EU countries on average (13% vs 7%). However, the proportion of low-performing readers has slightly increased (by 2.1%) in the Flemish Community between 2000 and 2012.

In PISA 2009, the gap according to the pupils' socioeconomic background was higher than the EU average (100 vs 89 on average). Moreover, the gap between native students and students with a migrant background was much higher than in EU countries on average (69 vs 38 in EU). The mean score difference between those who always spoke the test language at home, and those who spoke another language was much lower (17 vs 54), but it is widely due to the fact that students speaking a dialect have reported that they do not speak the language of instruction at home. The proportion of students speaking another language is unexpectedly high (25%) (see below adults).

In Flemish-speaking Belgium, the gender gap (in favour of girls) was lower in PISA than in EU countries on average (28 vs 44). The gender difference in Flemish-speaking Belgium was somewhat higher in PISA 2000 (35) than in 2012 (29).

In conclusion, Flemish-speaking Belgium has a highly performing education system: 15 year-olds perform better than in EU countries on average; the proportion of low-performing readers is much lower, and the proportion of top-performing readers is higher than in the EU countries on average. However, the gap according to socioeconomic status and migration background is respectively higher or much higher than in the EU on average. Flemish-speaking Belgium is then more effective, but also less equitable than EU countries on average.

In PIRLS 2006, the Flemish Community of Belgium also performed above the EU's average (547 vs 535) and the proportion of low-performing readers was limited (10% only vs 20% in EU). The spread of achievement between top and low performers was lower than the EU-21 average difference (141 vs 177). Also, the gender gap, with 5 points difference, was lower than the EU average with 13. In Belgium (FL) more students had parents whose highest level of educational attainment was university or higher (31%) than on average across the EU-21 (25%), while fewer had parents whose highest level was lower secondary or below (Belgium: 12%; EU-21: 18%). Pupils in Belgium (FL) whose parents attained a University degree or higher had a mean score (572) some 61 points higher than students whose

parents completed lower secondary or below (511). The average difference across the EU-21 countries was 76, indicating a relatively weaker relationship between parents' educational achievement and students' reading achievement in Belgium (FL). Results regarding equity are then going in different directions in grade 4 and 15 year-olds.

As far as adults are concerned, Flemish-speaking Belgium performed slightly above the EU average (275 vs 271) in PIAAC 2012. It should be remembered that only 17 EU countries took part in PIAAC, so the comparison with PISA should be taken with caution. The spread of achievement – namely the gap between top and bottom performers - was the same in Flemish-speaking Belgium as in the EU-17 on average. In Flanders, the proportion of adults performing at or below level 1 is 14.8%, less than the EU-17 average (16.4%).

The gap according to parents' level of education is about the same as in the EU countries on average (43 vs 41). The gap according to the language spoken at home is higher (34 vs 28) than in the EU-17-average. It should be underlined that only 2% of adults reported that they do not speak the test language at home; in PISA, they were 25%. Even if there are some generational differences, this discrepancy supports the interpretation that 15 year-olds interpreted the question about language spoken at home in a different way as adults did. An interesting feature to underline in Flemish-speaking Belgium is that the proportion of low-performing readers is higher than in the EU countries for adults over 55, it becomes lower by 3 or 4% for adults under 55. To some extent, Flemish-speaking Belgium caught up on the other EU countries.

4 Key Literacy Policy Areas for Development (age-specific and across age-groups)

4.1 Creating a Literate Environment

4.1.1 Pre-primary years

Providing a supportive home environment: Since Belgium did not participate in PIRLS 2011, no data of a more recent date than 2006 are available regarding parental attitudes towards reading, and early literacy activities. With just under half the parents (49%) reporting a high attitude towards reading, and especially with 13% reporting a low attitude, Belgium (Flanders) is reporting rather low figures on attitude in comparison to other EU-21 countries, according to PIRLS 2006 data.

In Belgium (FL) and on average across the EU-21, similar proportions of students were categorised as having high educational resources at home (14% and 13% respectively), while 2% in Belgium (FL) and 5% across the EU-21 were categorised as having low resources. The difference in achievement between those with high and low resources is smaller (by just 8 score points) in Belgium (FL), compared to the EU-21.

A number of 8% of students in Belgium (FL) reported having 10 or fewer books at home. This is slightly lower than the EU-21 average of 11%. In Belgium (FL), 15% had 200 or more books, which is close to the EU-21 average of 16%. The mean reading score difference in favour of students with 200 books compared with those who had 10 or fewer books was 62.6 points in Belgium (FL), compared with an average of 76 points across the EU-21. Hence, the link between number of books and reading achievement in Belgium (FL) is weaker than on average across the EU-21.

There is a need for programmes to raise awareness of all parents that literacy is a key to learning and life chances and that the basis for good literacy achievement is laid in early childhood. In particular there is a need for more family literacy programmes with a focus on supporting migrant parents and care givers in understanding and fostering their children's literacy development.

4.1.2 Primary Children and Adolescents

Creating a literate environment in school: Although there are no recent research data available on aspects such as the number of school libraries in (pre-)primary education in Flanders, it is expected from every organiser of childcare that he or she stimulates the development of children in various domains (physically, cognitively, socially, emotionally, communication, creativeness and moral). 'Reading for pleasure' is not explicitly mentioned in the final requirements of the curricula in Flanders. Pursuant to the principle of educational freedom, decisions regarding teaching methods and teaching aids appertain to the freedom of the school board. Hence, there are no official guidelines for 'reading for pleasure', and this explains why this is not specifically mentioned in both primary and secondary education contexts. It is up to the initiatives of for instance the Flemish reading foundation 'Everybody Reads' to support schools and teachers in this matter.

Offering digital literacy learning opportunities in schools: The Flemish Government has implemented a policy of promoting ICT in education since 1996. In this respect, the emphasis was and is on the educational use of the new media. The Government of Flanders currently applies an

implementation policy based on five focal points: curriculum support and competences development; infrastructure; digital learning resources policy; training and support; research and innovation. Although the digital landscape in Flanders is still developing positively with regard to internet access and pupil-device ratio, there is a need for updating the equipment used in the classrooms and for stimulating the use of computers during lessons by teachers. A little over 50% of primary school teachers report using the computer during lessons, and only 4% report never using the computer. Digital equipment in secondary schools in Flanders is satisfactory. All secondary schools in Flanders have internet access, but not all schools have an internal network or 100% broadband internet coverage, which would be the preferred situation. Development in this area appears to be lagging behind. Only 35% of secondary school teachers use the computer regularly in lessons. Students' frequency of use of computers during (reading) lessons should be encouraged through teacher professional development programmes in order to help students develop their digital reading skills. This need is observed both at primary and lower secondary school level.

Strengthening the role of public libraries: There are currently 313 public libraries in Flanders, until very recently fully funded and regulated by the Flemish department of Culture, Youth, Sports and Media. Public libraries play an important role in reading promotion in the broadest sense, in reaching out in many ways to (struggling) readers in all age groups via 'live' and online campaigns throughout the year. Adolescents seem to be the lesser supported group. Either the initiatives are rather general, or they target children more than adolescents. Adolescents are mainly supported through 'recommended reading' information.

The prolonged existence of public libraries in many (smaller) Flemish towns will be under severe pressure since government funding is no longer guaranteed to continue in 2016.

4.1.3 Adults

Fostering literacy provision for adults: Adult literacy provision in Flanders is provided by 13 Centres of Basic Education. These centres provide a range of free adult basic education courses, including, Dutch L1 (to improve literacy skills), basic maths (to improve numeracy skills), introduction to Belgian society, ICT, foreign languages, Dutch as second language and Dutch as second language for adults with poor literacy. The Centres for Basic Education are funded by the Ministry of Education and Training.

There is no statutory entitlement to literacy education for adults in Flanders. There are educational goals for reading and writing skills but no benchmarks, neither is there a system to monitor adults' progress in these skills. Instead, providers are expected to monitor the progress themselves, using their own method or system, meaning that there are a wide range of practices in literacy provision, and differences in quality.

4.2 Improving the Quality of Teaching

4.2.1 Pre-primary years

Improving the quality of preschool education: In Belgium (Flemish Community), pre-school teachers are trained at higher education institutes and undertake a three-year post-18 course. The minimum required level to become a qualified teacher is Bachelor level (ISCED 5).

In Flanders, developmental objectives are minimum objectives in respect of knowledge, insight, skills and attitudes the educational authorities deem desirable for a particular pupil population and which the school must strive to achieve in all its pupils by the end of nursery education. The developmental objectives form the common core curriculum. All schools must offer their pupils activities in all these areas of learning. In the course of its full inspections, the inspectorate checks whether the developmental objectives are pursued. Objectives and activities are set for all age groups in a continuous learning curve towards primary education.

Pursuant to the principle of educational freedom, decisions regarding teaching methods and teaching aids appertain to the freedom of the school board. Hence, there are no official guidelines.

In order to complete compulsory education with the highest chances of success, and in particular with a view to a fluent mastery of Dutch, Flanders wants to promote a maximal participation in pre-primary education. Specific attention is paid to the youngest children from the age of three onwards.

4.2.2 Primary children and adolescents

Improving the quality of literacy instruction: In order to enhance the literacy levels in compulsory education, the VLOR (the Flemish Education Council) is asking for a broad evaluation of the developmental goals and attainment targets in (primary and) secondary education. "It is the responsibility of those who develop the curricula and of the teachers to guarantee, from a development-oriented point of view, that the pupils acquire literacy skills during their complete school career. Pedagogical and didactical competences of teachers have to be reinforced."

The Flemish Parliament started a broad societal debate on attainment targets in 2015. The debate, which continues until 2016, will address which basic curriculum every pupil in education must receive. Prior and parallel to this debate, the implementation of a major revision of secondary education in Flanders will influence the content, organisation and assessment of all major subjects, and eventually also to (digital) literacy and reading instruction⁷. Attention will be paid to the perspective of pupils in choosing learning pathways, to ensuring quality of basic education and to provide sufficient differentiation inside and outside the classroom, for all pupils.

Digital literacy as part of the curriculum for primary and secondary schools: The Flemish Government has implemented an ongoing policy of promoting ICT in education since 1996. This means that the government aims to encourage schools to integrate ICT in their class practice by means of information and awareness-raising campaigns, in-service training, infrastructure and project funding. In this respect, the emphasis is on the educational use of the new media and cross-curricular final objectives and developmental aims of ICT in education.

Early identification of and support for struggling literacy learners: Effective assessment tools upon entry to primary school will help teachers identify literacy skills from the very beginning of formal

⁷ See: <http://www.hervormingsecundair.be>.

education. Regular formative assessment throughout primary school will ensure that literacy problems do not continue to go unrecognised, and that students receive the support they need through education that matches their learning needs. This should prevent children leaving school with unrecognised literacy problems.

Standards as basis of assessment of reading difficulties: The Flemish government endorses the attainment targets and developmental objectives that together form the core curriculum. All schools are required to meet these attainment targets, which specify the knowledge, skills and attitudes that students should demonstrate by the end of primary education and the first, second and third stages of secondary education. In Flanders there are three educational networks that, based on these goals from the core curriculum, draw up their own curricula and timetables. They define more specific goals for each grade.

The language and reading curriculum does not prescribe assessment standards and methods, but the educational networks do provide assessment methods, as do the Centre for Diversity and Learning in Ghent and the Centre for Language and Education in Leuven. These two academic centres also developed two toolkits together to support primary and secondary schools in conducting broad evaluation of language learning.

To reinforce schools' policy powers on the basis of relevant information about pupils' development level and progress, the government is investing in the development of tests that can support schools in their internal quality assurance.

Improving the quality of in-service teacher training: Initiatives and research projects in the field of literacy in pre-service and in-service teacher training are quite rare in Belgium. Schools are required to draw up an in-service training plan every year, setting out in-service training needs. The legislation adopts a broad interpretation of in-service training, provided it can be demonstrated that the funded initiatives contribute to the professionalism of the teaching staff. Every year, the minister decides on a number of themes for in-service training projects which are needed to support the implementation of educational reforms. The selected projects are then offered free of charge and on a cross-network basis. Many in-service training initiatives are offered by the network-specific pedagogical counselling services, which receive an annual budget for this purpose from the government. In-service training is organised on a free market basis. Schools can refund teachers' transport costs and registration fees and also decide whether teachers can be released from their teaching duties for the training.

Further professional development and specialisation for teaching staff is also possible via various advanced Bachelor's programmes in education (e.g. for special education, or extending special needs provision in mainstream schools and remedial learning).

4.2.3 Adults

Monitoring the quality of adult literacy providers: The Flemish Inspectorate of Education monitors the quality of adult literacy providers once every 10 years, using the so-called DOI-method. The inspectorate analyses **D**ocuments, **O**bserves classroom practice and **I**nterviews the different stakeholders. The 'output' providers produce with their students is an important factor in the assessment of the quality of the education. The Flemish Parliament dictates the standards or targets that must be achieved. All adult literacy providers are expected to reach these targets with their students as one of the major conditions for financing the provider. Financing can be stopped if the

providers do not reach the intended educational goals with their students and if they do not have the capacity to improve the quality of the education provided.**Developing curricula for adult literacy**

There are national (Flemish) curricula approved by the Flemish Government for all courses in formal adult education provided in Centres of Basic Education and Centres for Adult Education. The objectives formulated in these curricula are based on the formal curricula of primary and secondary education.

Adult basic education centres are pluralist centres, established as not-for-profit organisations and choose which methodology they use to teach literacy to adults. In general, adult education centres offer modular courses where the subject matter is subdivided into a number of modules of varying lengths. The modules can be organised with all lessons taught in the centre, or part of the module can be taught in the classroom and another part studied autonomously by the students at home or in an open learning centre.

Improving the qualification and status of teachers of adult literacy: Teachers of adult literacy (and basic education more generally) are required to have a higher degree and it is recommended that they have had teacher training. However there are no specialist qualification routes for adult literacy teachers. As education providers are required to draw up plans annually for in-service training, there will be continuing professional development opportunities open to adult literacy teachers in Flanders, but no information was available on course content or on the take-up of such training.

In general, the working conditions of staff in adult education are similar to those experienced by teachers in secondary education, and salaries are on the same scale (and dependent on qualifications status. However, teachers in the Centres for Adult Education generally start with temporary jobs (for a period of at least three years) before progressing to fixed positions. There are currently no fixed positions in the Centres for Basic Education.

4.3 Increasing Participation, Inclusion and Equity

4.3.1 Pre-primary years

Encouraging preschool attendance, especially for disadvantaged children: To boost infant participation, the Flemish Child and Family organisation has been called on. The Data Protection Authority gave permission to pass on the list of infants who have not been registered in education to Child and Family so that the parents can be contacted. During house calls the district nurse will try and find out why the child has not been registered and will point out the importance of infant participation to the parents.

In the childcare centres, childminding services and local community-oriented pre-primary childcare services recognised and subsidised by Child & Family, families pay a financial contribution according to their income. Families with more than one dependent child or with twins or multiples receive a discount.

4.3.2 Children and adolescents

Supporting children with special needs and migrant children and adolescents whose home language is not the language of school: The equal educational opportunities policy (GOK) has been developed particularly for disadvantaged children and young people (both native and from ethnic minorities). In both mainstream and special education, it ensures extra support and also guarantees these pupils the right to enroll in the school of their choice.

To facilitate Dutch language skills and the integration of non-Dutch-speaking newcomers in mainstream education, schools can be granted supplementary teaching periods/extra teacher hours and an extra operational allowance, so that they can organise OKATN/OKAN, reception education for non-Dutch-speaking newcomers.

Thanks to this reception education for non-Dutch-speaking newcomers, schools can receive supplementary teaching periods (primary education) and extra teacher hours (secondary education) and an extra operational allowance per non-Dutch-speaking newcomer. In elementary education only, a second year of reception education may also be provided. In secondary education, extra teacher hours are also allocated per schools community for the provision of support and guidance for pupils entering regular secondary education from reception education (follow-up school coaches).

In light of language policy aspects of the ongoing reforms in primary and secondary education, the government has laid down regulations for a compulsory language screening for pupils, entering from preschool into primary education, and from primary into secondary education. For those pupils whose Dutch language skills are insufficient upon first entry into primary education, a 'language bath' period can be offered, for a year at most.

Preventing early school leaving: According to Eurostat, in Belgium, the rate of early school leavers was 11.0% in 2013, down from 12% a year before. The target value of the early school leaving (ESL) rate set for 2020 is 9.5%.

In Flemish Belgium, in 2012, the government adopted an action plan on 'Truancy and other forms of anti-social behaviour'. The action plan aims at all students in compulsory education, but also focusses on pupils at-risk of ESL. The action plan addresses anti-social behaviour and truancy in a continuum of mapping the phenomenon, informing and sensitising, preventive work, guidance, and sanctioning. It aims to reduce truancy and other forms of behaviour leading to ESL.

4.3.3 Adults

Increasing offers for second-language learners: Within the formal education sector (funded by the Ministry of Education and Training), Centres of Basic Education and Centres of Adult Education offer Dutch as second language courses. The Centres of Basic Education provide courses only on lower levels: A1 and A2 of the European Qualification Framework (including special courses for illiterate adults with a focus on literacy skills). These courses are all free. The Centres for Adult Education provide courses on all levels: these are free for migrants with an assimilation/integration contract; other participants pay. The 'House of Dutch' is a region-wide service provision with local contact points where adults are tested on the Dutch language level and oriented towards the most suitable course (in either the Centres of Basic Education or Centres for Adult Education). Additionally, a wide range of other public funded provision (Ministry of Labour), private provision and provision in social-cultural sector (public funded) is available in both provides non-formal and informal second language education.

In the Centres of Basic Education the teaching staff comprises of educated teachers (educational bachelor degree) and other Bachelors or Masters (mostly in social sector, teacher degree desirable but not required). Teachers have pedagogical support from specialist organisations and within their institution. In the Centres for Adult Education most teachers in Dutch as second language courses have a Bachelor or Master degree together with a teacher degree, most of them in Dutch or foreign languages.

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