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Initial Vocational Training in Belgium

1. Introduction

Overview

The public system of initial vocational training (IVT):

- The Belgian IVT system and its legal framework 'are extremely complex' due to the complex political system and state structure of this country (Saint-Hubert et al. 2001: 97). There are, for example, 'seven different legislators, seven different governments and coexisting legislation which varies depending on the place' (Saint-Hubert et al. 2001: 97).
- The three communities – French, Flemish, and German – are the most important decision makers regarding education. The federal government only has a few competencies even though it actually finances most parts of education (Lejeune 2000: The education system in Belgium). Private authorities, such as the Catholic Church, also play a considerable role in education and training (Cotton 2001: 6).
- Secondary education in Belgium includes three two-year cycles: First, an initial or foundation cycle. Second, a cycle where education is organized in four different streams (see below). And a third two-years cycle (Cotton 2001: 13). Concerning vocational training, the four different streams of the second cycle are important (Lejeune 2000: The education system in Belgium):
 - general education (compulsory education and various optional courses);

- technical education (acquisition of general, technical and theoretical knowledge);
- vocational education (practical instruction in a specific occupation);
- and artistic education.
- In IVT, school leavers can choose whether they attend full-time training in technical and vocational schools (the more important pathway) or alternance education (Cotton 2001: 17-18). Alternance education means that training comprises alternating periods in a school or training centre and at the workplace. Unlike in an apprenticeship system, students are not contractually linked to the employer where they do their practice, nor do they generally receive remuneration (TVETipedia 2010). In Belgium, alternance education offers three pathways: the alternance education and training centers, the industrial apprenticeship contract, and the apprenticeship organized for the 'middle classes', i.e. self-employed occupations (Cotton 2001: 17-18).
- Hence, concerning the regulation of IVT, the social partners are clearly not in the forefront. In general, the role of social partners in vocational education is 'very limited': public authorities, private, religious and non-profit making associations are more important (Saint-Hubert et al. 2001: 100). However, Saint-Hubert et al. (2001: 100-101) also note, that today social partners play a 'paramount role' in training. They administer, for example, the Walloon service center for employment and vocational training (FOREM). Furthermore, they are involved in approving apprenticeship centers and in developing training in the occupational field. They are also involved in profiling occupations and drawing up the qualification profiles in order to develop the training profiles.
- Furthermore, social partners have the competence in each sector to organize apprenticeships (*Service public fédéral Emploi, Travail et Concertation sociale 2010*), even though the apprenticeships as well as other forms of initial training are, again, to some degree regulated by the state (*Loi du 19 juillet 1983 sur l'apprentissage de professions exercées par des travailleurs salariés*).
- It is important to note that the National Labor Council (*Conseil National Du Travail*, NAR) which is composed of representatives of employers' associations and trade unions as well as joint committees are the negotiating authorities for vocational education and training in Belgium (CESlfo 2007: 1). The NAR advises the Belgian government and parliament in general issues concerning employers and workers and is also allowed to conclude CLAs, which are binding on various branches of activity or all sectors of the economy.

The role of collective labor agreements (CLAs) in IVT:

- CLAs contain some content concerning IVT at the sectoral level as well as the intersectoral level (Claus 25.03.2010, interview).

- Historically, vocational training was completely outside the collective bargaining system because training was more regulated by individual contracts between the employers and the workers (Saint-Hubert et al. 2001: 100).
- There are several sectoral training funds for IVT and CVT in Belgium which have been established by the social partners based on CLAs. These funds should not be ignored in the domain of initial vocational training (CEDEFOP 2008: 31).
- In sum, at intersectoral level the social partners conclude multi-industry agreements with provisions that are related to IVT. The results of these negotiations may become generally binding with a Royal Decree. But actual regulation of IVT by the social partners is mostly done at sectoral level (Claus 25.03.2010, interview). Therefore, it seems that CLAs in IVT play a role that should be considered, even though they are not dominating the vocational training system.

Levels of Bargaining

- At national level: intersectoral agreements of the National Labor Council can have some content on vocational training (Illorens 1998; see also section 2 on important agreements).
- At sectoral level: CLAs are allowed to regulate vocational training (Claus 25.03.2010, interview). In fact, there are joint committees that conclude agreements which may again have some content on vocational training. Important examples are the sectoral training funds. Concerning these sectoral funds, it is important to note that some of them are only active at the province level of Belgium federalism, while others are also active at federal level (CEDEFOP 2008: 32).

Actors

As the National Labor Council is the central body of the social partners at federal level with the competence of concluding agreements in all areas, its members can be seen as the important actors of CLAs on initial vocational training (National Labor Council 2010: Membership).

Trade unions:

- Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (*Confédération des Syndicats Chrétiens/Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond, CSC/ACV*),
- Belgian General Federation of Labour (*Fédération Générale du Travail de Belgique/Algemeen Belgisch Vakverbond, FGVB/ABVV*),
- Federation of Liberal Trade Unions of Belgium (*Centrale Générale des Syndicats Libéraux de Belgique/Algemene Centrale der Liberale Vakbonden van België, CGSLB/ACLVB*).

Employers' associations:

- Belgian Federation of Employers (*Fédération des Entreprises de Belgique/Verbond van Belgische Ondernemingen, FEB/VBO*),
- French-speaking Union of Self-Employed (*Union des Classes Moyennes, UCM*),
- Flemish Organisation of the Self-Employed (*Unie van Zelfstandige Ondernemers, UNIZO*),
- Federation of Belgian Farmers (*Fédération des Agriculteurs Belges/Belgische Boerenbond, BB*).

Critical Junctures

Definition: Critical junctures are years or time periods when important decisions on the development of the collectively negotiated IVT scheme were made.

- The 1988 intersectoral Agreement (see below) can be seen as the main critical juncture in the Belgium collectively negotiated IVT system. This agreement was of course followed by a law (Ilorens 1998). It was the starting point for the fast development of sectoral training funds (CEDEFOP 2008: 31-32). Since the 1988 agreement (with the exception of 1997/98) social partners have regularly concluded multi-sectoral agreements which contain provisions under which firms contribute a part of the wage sum for training of risk groups (Saint-Hubert et al. 2001: 125).

2. Important Collective Agreements (Examples)

- 1988 Intersectoral Agreement No. 43
 - The agreement was of course followed by a law (Ilorens 1998). However, it is the most important agreement for the acknowledgement of the importance of vocational training by social partners (Perin 2008).
 - An obligatory contribution for training by companies was introduced (Ilorens 1998).
 - In order to put this agreement into practice, sectoral training funds were founded. Where there are no sectoral funds, the contributions are transferred to the national employment fund (CEDEFOP 2008: 31-32).
- Multi-industry agreements of 1991/1992
 - It was regulated that a percentage of the wage bill (initially 0.25 per cent) is devoted to training and the promotion of employment, in particular for high-risk groups (Saint-Hubert et al. 2001: 109).

- 1997 Intersectoral Agreement No. 66
 - The social partners specify the organization and purpose of sectoral funds which may also be related to initial vocational training.

- In the 1999/2000 agreement the percentage for the high-risk groups was set at 0.10 per cent of the wage sum. However, Saint-Hubert et al. (2001: 125) view this agreement as a 'commitment that could substantially modify the vocational training landscape' because supplementary efforts were decided on as well as on an increase of the employers' contributions from 1.2 to 1.4 per cent.

3. Important Sectors

Sectoral training funds:

- CEDEFOP (2008: 31) provides a non-exhaustive list of sectors with training funds in 1996: Hotel/restaurants/bars, textile, garage/bodywork/metal, insurance, construction, food, confection, wood, electricity (installation and distribution), transport. What can be seen in this list is that there are funds in both white-collar as well as blue-collar sectors. However, following reports of the CEDEFOP (2008: 30), there is no overview in Belgium on the total number of these funds.
- Most sectoral training funds were founded after the 1988 agreement. However, several sectors already had an old tradition of training funds (CEDEFOP 2008: 31):
 - metal industry sector: since 1968,
 - building sector: since 1965,
 - banking sector: since 1968,
 - textile sector: since 1978.
- Two examples:
 - Sectoral Training Fund for Vocational Training in the Construction Sector (*Fonds voor Vakopleiding in de Bouwnijverheid*, FVB): In this sector, there are more than 159,000 blue-collar workers in more than 30,000 companies, hence, it is a very important sector for the Belgian economy (CEDEFOP 2008: 35). Unfortunately, there are no numbers on how many people actually receive initial training benefits from this fund (Claus 25.03.2010, interview).
 - Cevora (*Centrum voor Vorming van het Aanvullend Nationaal Paritair Comité voor Bedienden*, Sectoral Training Fund for White-Collar Employees): Cevora was founded by the social partners of the Complementary National Joint Committee (CEDEFOP

2008: 39). A very small amount of youngsters receive benefits from Cevora (Claus 25.03.2010, interview).

4. Structure, Organization, and Mode of Administration

Sectoral training funds:

- Better known as *sectorale opleidingsfondsen* and *fonds des formation professionnelle* (CEDEFOP 2008: 30). They play an important role within the Belgian vocational training market (CEDEFOP 2008: 31). They are important for continuing as well as for initial vocational training (CEDEFOP 2008: 33).
- The funds are jointly managed by employers' and employees' organizations and regulated by existing CLAs signed by the social partners (CEDEFOP 2008: 31). Currently, there are 128 joint committees that organize and manage these sectoral funds for vocational training (Perin 2008).
- Main bodies of the funds: board of directors and the general meeting. Both are composed of as many employees' as employers' representatives. Typically, the funds work with a full-time staff and with an additional staff of contracted people who provide the actual training (CEDEFOP 2008: 33).
- Besides these rather common general administrative aspects, it must be noted that the funds are actually organized in very different ways. Some funds are large and very much institutionalized, while others are small, based on sectoral initiatives and often working with volunteers. In addition, the organization of the funds may be shaped by the Belgian federalism: Some funds are working in the whole sector, others, however, are only covering employees on provincial level. In sum, it must again be said that, unfortunately, there is no overview at all on these funds in Belgium (CEDEFOP 2008: 30).

Joint committees and National Labor Council (NAR):

- They have several tasks in the field of vocational training. For example, they are the bodies where CLAs are concluded and they have the competencies to organize or implement apprenticeships (National Labor Council 2010: Competences; Saint-Hubert et al. 2001: 100-101; Service public fédéral Emploi, Travail et Concertation sociale 2010).
- There are permanent, government-organized joint committees set up between employees and employers in every sector of economic activity or public service. They are organized by the Federal Ministry of Employment and Labor, presided over by a mediator appointed by the government and under supervision of the Minister. Thus, these committees are actually not based on CLAs (CEDEFOP 2008: 32). However, the joint committees organize and manage the sectoral training funds that are based on collective agreements

(Perin 2008). And in general, through the joint committees, the Belgian social partners can define the Belgian social policy, including minimum wages, wage scales, employment conditions and vocational training issues (CEDEFOP 2008: 32). At the sectoral level, there are 123 joint committees where collective agreements on vocational training (continuing and initial) exist. In total, there are 172 joint committees and sub-joint committees (Perin 2008).

- The committees are composed of an equal number of representatives from employers' organizations and from the unions (CEDEFOP 2008: 32).
- They are organized by the Federal Ministry of Employment and Labour, presided over by a mediator appointed by the government and under supervision of the Minister (CEDEFOP 2008: 32).
- At the national level, CLAs are concluded in the National Labor Council. This institution is also based on law. Its main competences besides concluding CLAs are giving advice to the state and the settlement of disputes in joint committees (National Labor Council 2010: Introductory Text).

5. Role of the State: Financial Support, Legislation, and Extension Procedures

- With the Royal Decrees (*Arrêtés royal*) at national level, the state delegates competencies to the joint committees, also in initial training (for example: organization of apprenticeships, *Arrêté royal du 19 août 1998*).
- The mandatory parts of a collective agreement can be extended by Royal Decree. This means that the agreement will be binding for all employers within the jurisdiction of the joint committee which has concluded the agreement. The request for a Royal Decree is made by the sectoral joint committee or by an organisation of the corresponding committee. In fact, the extension of a collective agreement is relatively common (EIRO 2009: Industrial Relations).
- The state is not involved in the development of sectoral training funds (CEDEFOP 2008: 31). Yet, as the state is generally very important in the domain of initial vocational training, the funds work together with the different state levels (as well as with the private actors) (Perin 2008).

6. Financial Structure of the Collectively Negotiated Scheme

Sectoral training funds:

- They fund the training programs (Perin 2008).
- The funds are financed by social contributions (CEDEFOP 2008: 31).
- In the 1988 agreement, which has been very important for the foundation of the sectoral training funds, the funds are regulated as follows: employers and employees agreed to spend 0.18 per cent of the gross wage of all wage and income earners on training and employment support initiatives for specific risk groups, basically young and long-term unemployed with problematic professional qualifications. These contributions are to be collected by the National Office of Social Security (*Rijksdienst voor Sociale Zekerheid, Office National de Sécurité Sociale*) (CEDEFOP 2008: 31). In order to manage the levy, the sectoral funds were created. Today contributions to the funds are varying between 0.1 per cent and 0.6 per cent of the gross wage (CEDEFOP 2008: 31-32).
- Example (The FVB fund in the construction sector): The FVB is funded by mandatory contributions which are fixed by the social partners. At the moment, contributions are set at 0.55 per cent. However, the main part of these contributions is devoted to unemployed and for continuing training (CEDEFOP 2008: 36).

7. Benefits and Measures of the Collectively Negotiated Schemes

Apprenticeships:

- According to an Royal Decree, the social partners have the competence to organize apprenticeships in the National Labor Council and in the sectoral joint committees (*Arrêté royal du 19 août 1998 déterminant les ressorts des commissions et sous-commissions paritaires dans lesquels le Comité paritaire d'apprentissage du Conseil national du Travail est compétent pour organiser l'apprentissage de professions exercées par des travailleurs salariés*). However, they must respect what is already regulated by the state (*Loi du 19 juillet 1983 sur l'apprentissage de professions exercées par des travailleurs salariés*).

Sectoral training funds:

- Students are one target group of sectoral training funds (CEDEFOP 2008: 33).
- The funds organize information and promotion campaigns for students in which professions and training possibilities are presented (CEDEFOP 2008: 33).
- An indirect benefit for students is the fact that the funds organize special training for teachers in the vocational and technical education streams with the intention of

establishing a better fit between education and the needs of the companies (CEDEFOP 2008: 33).

- In some sectors, for example in the construction industry, the funds have agreements with the vocational school of secondary education. In this respect, the funds support initial training programs which concretely means that they do funding for the equipment and provide practical training (CEDEFOP 2008: 33).
- Example: There is an intersectoral training fund for white-collar workers called Cevora, set up by the Complementary National Joint Committee for Employees. The main focus of this fund is on continuing training. However, the fund develops industrial apprenticeship training with the focus on risk groups among youngsters. Furthermore, Cevora develops activities in order to guide young people from diploma courses to the sector (CEDEFOP 2008: 40-41).
- Example: One pillar of the FVB fund in the construction sector is information for students. Furthermore, it also cooperates with schools for formal training. About 16 per cent of the people that benefit from FVB are 15-24 years old. However, it is not clear how many of them are actually in initial training (CEDEFOP 2008: 35-38).

8. Coverage Rates of the Collectively Negotiated Schemes

- General numbers do not seem to be available, as there is no overview at all (CEDEFOP 2008: 30). Perin (2008) guesses that the sectoral funds cover 80 per cent of all workers. However, it is not clear, how many people in initial training are able to receive benefits from these funds. At least, in the case of Cevora, the fund for white-collar workers, it is known that only 186 youngsters benefitted from that fund in 2008. This is a very low number for a sector with 55,000 companies (merely SMEs) and 370,000 workers (Claus 25.03.2010, interview).

9. The Politics around the Collectively Negotiated Schemes

Linkages to Public Reform Policies

We have not found any evidence.

Linkages to Wage Agreements and Wage Policy (e.g. Wage Restraint, Tripartite Agreements) and Other Agreements

We have not found any evidence.

10. Recent Developments and Other Interesting Information

We have not found any evidence.

11. Contacted Experts

We thank the following expert and colleague for providing information and answering very specific questions:

- Claus, Michèle, 25.03.2010, Federation of Enterprises in Belgium (FEB), e-mail interview.

12. List of Abbreviations

- BB: *Fédération des Agriculteurs Belges/Belgische Boerenbond* (Federation of Belgian Farmers).
- CEDEFOP: European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
- CESifo: Research group containing of Center for Economic Studies (CES), *ifo Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung and CESifo GmbH (Münchener Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wirtschaftswissenschaften)*
- Cevora: *Centrum voor Vorming van het Aanvullend Nationaal Paritair Comité voor Bedienden* (Sectoral Training Fund for White-Collar Employees), training centre of the ANPCB (National Auxiliary Joint Committee for White-Collar Workers or Joint Committee no. 218, *Aanvullend Nationaal Paritair Comité voor Bedienden of paritair comité 218*).
- CGSLB/ACLVB : *Centrale Générale des Syndicats Libéraux de Belgique/Algemene Centrale der Liberale Vakbonden van België* (Federation of Liberal Trade Unions of Belgium)
- CLA : collective labor agreement
- CSC/ACV: *Confédération des Syndicats Chrétiens / Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond* (Confederation of Christian Trade Unions)
- EIRO: European Industry Relations Observatory
- FGTB/ABVV : *Fédération Générale du Travail de Belgique / Algemeen Belgisch Vakverbond Belgian* (General Federation of Labour)
- FEB/VBO : *Fédération des Entreprises de Belgique / Verbond van Belgische Ondernemingen* (Belgian Federation of Employers)

- FVB: *Fonds voor Vakopleiding in de Bouwnijverheid* (Sectoral Training Fund for Vocational Training in the Construction Sector)
- IVT : initial vocational training
- NAR: *Conseil National Du Travail* (National Labor Council)
- TVETipedia: internet portal where users can exchange information and share knowledge on Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) issues
- UCM: *Union des Classes Moyennes* (French-Speaking Union of Self-Employed)
- UNIZO: *Unie van Zelfstandige Ondernemers* (Flemish Organisation of the Self-Employed)

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