

## PRESS RELEASE

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### Report to the Flemish Parliament Paid Educational Leave



*The Flemish Parliament has requested the Belgian Court of Audit to assess the system of paid educational leave and in particular accreditation of training courses. It has concluded that a coherent policy containing clear goals and accreditation criteria is lacking. According to the Court accreditation decisions are neither transparent, nor consistent. Moreover training quality supervision is inadequate.*

#### **Paid educational leave**

Paid educational leave (PEL) is a system which grants employees within the private sector the right to absent themselves from work with the purpose of taking accredited training courses without having to forego their pay. Employers may receive compensation from the Department for Work and Social Economy. In the school year of 2013-2014 employers in the Flemish Region thusly received 66 million euros' worth of compensation. The Flemish Parliament requested the Court of Audit to verify whether the accreditation procedures for training courses are conducted efficiently and effectively and whether they are adequately supervised.

#### **Policy goals**

There are, as of yet, no clear policy goals for paid educational leave. The Flemish Region subsumed the competence for PEL in Flanders on April 1, 2015, but has not yet enacted new legislation. Consequently, the rules set out by the federal government in 1985 remain in force. These rules do not contain any explicit policy goals.

#### **Accreditation criteria and assessment**

Certain general and professional training courses are automatically accredited within the system of PEL, for example those organized by educational institutions, the VDAB (the Flemish public employment service), Syntra Vlaanderen (the Flemish entrepreneurial training agency), employees' federations and youth or adult organizations. Other courses, however, require accreditation by a joint committee of employers and employees or by the Flemish accreditation organization, which is the governmental body that is charged with the monitoring of all training courses. However, the legislation makes no mention of accreditation criteria. Nor are there instructions on the assessment of applications. In practice, the accreditation organization uses an incomplete list of criteria, complemented with a number of provisional criteria. Those criteria are sometimes poorly founded and not always based firmly on the legislation. Moreover, they are not always workable due to the absence of goal values and can lead to obscure and incoherent decision-making. The joint committees only rarely even use criteria. Furthermore, the criteria used by joint commit-

tees are often vague and mutually divergent and do not always tally with the Flemish accreditation organization's criteria. Therefore, the joint committees' decision-making is just as obscure and incoherent. Besides, both the joint committees and the Flemish accreditation organization barely account for their decisions.

### **Number of accredited and rejected training courses**

The accreditation organization was unable to produce the exact number of training courses that had been accredited for PEL, since certain specific problems prevented the organization from submitting or reconstructing a complete overview of automatically accredited professional training courses. Additionally, in some cases the organization's *sectoral professional training courses* lists proved divergent from the lists maintained by the accrediting joint committees. As a matter of fact, those lists contain much overlap, repetition and aggregation. Finally, the accreditation organization does keep an account of its own accreditation decisions, but it does so in data files that are not yet technologically advanced enough for efficient monitoring purposes.

### **Supervision**

The Flemish accreditation organization and the department for Work and Social Economy are tasked with supervision. The department checks the accuracy of reimbursement applications, rather than the accreditation of training courses. The latter is supervised by the accreditation organization, which has the power to overrule or suspend all accreditations. The organization assesses the quality of the training it has accredited itself by means of an assessment form that is submitted to the applicants on a yearly basis. However, it is unclear how those forms are subsequently evaluated. The organization all but never monitors the other categories of training courses. It only responds to complaints and fails to systematically carry out check-ups on its own initiative. In fact, its monitoring policy has yielded very few results. Thus, the Court of Audit has concluded that the external quality assurance of training is lacking.

### **Response by the minister**

In his response, the Minister conveyed that he would take the Court's conclusions and recommendations into account for the upcoming training incentives reform, of which the groundwork will be laid in consultation with the social partners.

### **Information for the press**

The Court of Audit exerts an external control on the financial operations of the Federal State, the Communities, the Regions and the provinces. It contributes to improving public governance by transmitting to the parliamentary assemblies, to the managers and to the audited services any useful and reliable information resulting from a contradictory examination. As a collateral body of the Parliament, the Court performs its missions independently of the authorities it controls.

The audit report on the *Paid educational leave* has been sent to the Flemish Parliament. The full version and this press release can be found on the Court's website: [www.courttofaudit.be](http://www.courttofaudit.be).