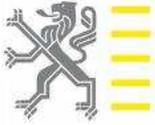


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**Lifelong Learning Strategies:
Progress & Setbacks
In
Institutional Practice in Flanders
The results of a EURASHE study**

By Adina Timofei

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PREAMBLE

INTRODUCTION

The present study represents a follow-up of the report published by EURASHE in January 2009, entitled "Lifelong Learning: Impediments and examples of good practice". This previous research study focused in detail on a number of general aspects concerning the implementation of lifelong learning at European level: the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), Employability and Lifelong Learning Strategies. While the present study is based on these previous findings, it adopts, however, a new approach. It will focus less on the development of lifelong learning at policy-making level, being instead, orientated towards its implementation within professional higher education institutions. We believe that the success of the Bologna objectives can only be properly measured at the institutional level and, while developments at policy-making level are necessary and important, they are, however, secondary to what is achieved in higher education institutions. In addition to focusing exclusively on the institutional level, EURASHE will be analysing two particular types of lifelong learning programmes: continuing education programmes and intermediate degree programmes.

Continuing education programmes refer, throughout this research study, to courses, programmes or organized learning, usually taken after a degree, designed primarily for adult students. The term excludes all Bachelor, Master or Ph.D. programmes, but includes all 'bachelor after bachelor programmes', 'master after master programmes', all postgraduate certificates or other sort of programmes not leading to a degree.

Intermediate degree programmes refer to vocationally-focused courses at level 5 EQF, offered by universities or higher education/further education colleges. They normally take one or two years of full-time study to complete. After completion, graduates may choose to progress to further professional or academic qualifications. The term is generally known under the name of 'short-cycle higher education'.

The decision to focus on these two types of programmes was influenced, to a great extent, by the recommendations that followed the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Ministerial Conference (April 2009). In relation to Lifelong Learning, the Communiqué declares:

“Lifelong Learning involves obtaining qualifications, extending knowledge and understanding, gaining new skills and competences, or extending personal growth. Lifelong Learning implies that qualifications may be obtained through flexible learning paths, including part-time studies, as well as work-based routes”.

In line with the recommendations above, therefore, one of the main topics of our study are continuing education programmes (“gaining new skills and competences”) obtained through part-time/evening learning (“flexible learning paths”), where recognition of prior learning applies (“work-based routes”). Intermediate degree programmes, in addition to being a part of the “flexible learning paths mentioned above”, are very much in line with the current focus of EURASHE on lifelong learning provisions, more details of which will be given below.

THE PURPOSE

The time for completing this study could not have been more appropriate. EURASHE is currently the coordinator of a project that focuses exclusively on the implementation and current situation of short-cycle (EQF Level 5) education across a range of European countries. The project, recently approved for funding by the European Commission and due to start in November 2009, will make a detailed analysis of short cycle higher education in a number of the Bologna signatory countries (focusing on 32 countries).

Apart from coordinating the above mentioned project, EURASHE will be involved, as a partner, in another large scale project (due to start also in November 2009), coordinated by a Belgian University College (KH Leuven) and which will focus on the impact of lifelong-learning strategies on professional higher education. The intention of the project consortium is to move away from the analysis of lifelong learning strategies at a policy-making level and, instead,

focus entirely on their development and the challenges they might pose at an institutional level. In this respect, the current research study can and undoubtedly will offer a solid (though limited to the analysis of only one country) background on which the future project may develop its own findings.

The present study is not, however, linked only to future projects, but also to current and future events. EURASHE has initiated a tradition of setting up, on an annual basis, seminars specifically devoted to lifelong learning, in which the focus falls on different stakeholders. The Lifelong-Learning seminar, taking place on 15-16 October 2009, in Bled (Slovenia), was laying the focus on the "New learner" and the different methods and strategies used by professional higher education institutions to attract this new category of learners and provide them with appropriate study programmes. The current research study (whose preliminary findings were presented during this event) is well grounded into this topic, focusing on 'unconventional' categories of learners (short cycle higher education students, and students of after degree programmes) instead of the typical categories of 'classic' Bachelor, Master or Ph.D. programmes.

The timing of this research study, months following the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Ministerial Conference (April 2009), also allowed us to base our enquiries on the recommendations of the ministers of higher education of the Bologna countries.

WORDS OF THANKS

This second publication on lifelong learning commissioned by the Department of Education and Training of the Flemish Community of Belgium came immediately after the previous paper "Lifelong Learning: impediments and examples of good practice" was presented to its principals, which we would venture to interpret as a sign of recognition of the usefulness ('fit-for-purpose') of the first publication and of the quality of the work produced.

We are therefore confident that this piece of work may also contribute to one of the themes of the upcoming Belgian Presidency of the European Union in the second half of 2010, namely 'Innovation in higher education', focusing on student-centred learning.

To the Institutions that took part in the project

I would also like to thank the numerous institutions that took part in our study by providing replies to our different surveys. Their support was invaluable and allowed us to draw the current picture of lifelong learning provisions both in Flemish (professional) higher education (two Flemish Universities and the Flemish Hogescholen – ‘University Colleges’) and in a selection of Adult Learning Centres in the Flemish Community of Belgium. The institutions participating in the survey (through their lecturers, administrators, students and learners), are cited on the last page of this publication.

To the Flemish Community of Belgium:

We would like to express our gratitude to the Department of Education and Training of the Flemish Community of Belgium for yet another assignment, on a very relevant theme for EURASHE, as one of the main proponents of ‘Lifelong Learning’ in the Bologna Process, and from which we are convinced that also other countries will benefit.

To the writer

The writer of the paper, Ms Adina Timofej, a one-time researcher from the EURASHE Secretariat, with this pilot study made complete our first cycle of publications on LLL (Selected topics of current practice on LLL), thus laying the foundations for further, more ‘country-specific’ research. Again, there was the opportunity for her to present intermediate results in a Lifelong Learning seminar (in this instance the seminar of EURASHE in Bled, 14-15 October last), with valuable inputs from other contributors (Slovenia, Ireland, the UK, ...).

We congratulate her on the achieved result, and thank her once more for completing so well this and related assignments during her stay at the Secretariat in Brussels.

Stefan Delplace
Secretary General of EURASHE

Ghent, December 2009

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

I. CONTINUING EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

The majority of **Continuing Education** programmes in Flanders are developed with the **aim** of contributing to regional development and satisfy demand for continuing education in the area. Students who enroll in this type of education are mostly attracted by improving their job prospects and the opportunity to be able to specialize in a new field, career benefits being the main reason for influencing the choices of most applicants when it comes to enrolling in a particular course.

The majority of students enrolled in continuing education programmes are mostly sponsored by their employers, the latter also being in charge of covering the **tuition fees**. **Funding** provided by the higher education institutions is scarce and is awarded to a very small number of learners.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) seems to have been solidly implemented within higher education institutions in Flanders and used thoroughly for the recognition of prior student experience (according to the replies received from teachers and administrators). The students admit to their prior experience being recognized, but, at the same time, seem to know very little of what RPL actually means, denoting a lack of familiarity with the terminology.

The challenges most often mentioned concerning the **management** of continuing education programmes included the combination of work and study, organizational aspects (classes taking place during the evenings and/or weekends) and financial difficulties in running the programme. To this has been added the different nature of the curriculum, a result of continuing education programmes being more labour market oriented. In this section of the study, while the teachers tend to stress the positive aspects of collaboration with the labour market and practical learning specific to continuing education, the administrators focus more on the challenges represented by practical obstacles such as the varying availability of staff or the flexible nature of the programme, both demanding a more intensive administrative workload than "regular" degree programmes.

The opinions received on the **future** of continuing education are optimistic: while there is a lot of demand for increased financial resources, most of the respondents believe that, ten years from now, most people in Europe will take advantage of lifelong learning opportunities, which, in turn, will become indispensable for employees and people who want to improve their job prospects.

II. INTERMEDIATE DEGREE PROGRAMMES

The main **reason** the students cited for enrolling in this type of programme was its capacity to improve their job prospects. In general, both the developers of intermediate programmes and the students themselves focus on the relevancy of such programmes for the labour market. Therefore, not only is the curriculum designed in such a way as to encourage employability, but the employers are regularly involved through meetings with the academics.

When it comes to **progression to Bachelor level** following completion of an intermediate degree, most of the respondents fear that graduates of intermediate degrees meet too many obstacles when they want to get their qualification recognized as part of a Bachelor degree programme. The majority of the administrators state that their institution recognizes the intermediate qualification for the purpose of exemption from parts of a study programme. When it comes, however, to stating how frequent the transfer from the intermediate degree to the Bachelor degree is in their institution, the respondent administrators admit that it does not take place very often.

Very few sources of **funding** are available to students of intermediate degrees. They are, however, very much needed, as the majority of these students are currently unemployed and hoping to get a better chance to integrate on the labour market through their course.

Among the aspects that make intermediate degrees more difficult to **manage**, the one that is cited by all the respondents is the difficulty, for adult students, to combine work, family and study. The combination of work and study often means that courses have to be arranged so as to suit varied individual schedules, which puts a supplementary strain on the administrative process.

Concerning **the future** of intermediate degrees, the picture painted by our respondents looks rather optimistic, with a majority of students believing that intermediate degrees will begin to occupy a central place in higher education. However, more facilities for student support are also needed, together with an increased cooperation with other educational centers, to facilitate the exchange of best practice.

METHODOLOGY

Questionnaires have been sent to higher education institutions and adult education centers in Flanders. A list of the participating institutions is attached at the end of this study. We have chosen to include adult education centers in our research study based on the fact that intermediate education degrees are currently offered particularly within this type of institution and not yet implemented in Flemish higher education institutions. The focus has been on two main issues of interest: continuing education programmes and intermediate degree programmes. Consequently, the three target groups to whom the questionnaires have been addressed are the students, the administrators and the teachers involved in one or both of these types of programmes. The answers to these questionnaires reflect exclusively the position of our respondents and are not meant in any way to fully cover the existing situation in a particular national context.

Apart from being an analysis of the answers to the surveys, this publication also sees itself as a continuation of the previous EURASHE study on Lifelong Learning, "Lifelong Learning: Impediments and Examples of Good Practice", published in January 2009. Its conclusions shall also be further developed during a 3 year EURASHE project, meant to start in 2010 and focusing on Lifelong Learning strategies in institutions of higher education.

Other sources and materials (websites, publications) used for finding information on a particular national context are referenced in the order in which they appear in the text.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE FLEMISH HE SYSTEM

The Flemish higher education system consists of two types of institutions, offering three types of degrees: universities and hogescholen or Higher Education Colleges (HECs), offering:

- Academic Bachelor degrees (universities and HECs)
- Master degrees (universities and HECs)
- Professional Bachelor degrees (HECs only).

Flemish universities are higher education institutions of the traditional academic type, which is why they will not make the object of focus for this current research study, oriented exclusively towards professional higher education. Flemish hogescholen (Higher Education Colleges) offer a mixture of degrees, both academically and professionally oriented, in a variety of fields.¹

Since 2005, developed policies regarding education, training and employment have been developed in Flanders, oriented towards stimulating lifelong learning and towards strengthening the link between education, training and non-formal education, on the one hand, and the labour market on the other hand. This encouraged the development of adult education, which now consists of adult basic education (organised by Centres for Adult Basic Education – CBEs), secondary adult education and higher vocational education (organised by Centres for Adult Education – CVOs). Oriented towards equipping the course participants with the knowledge, skills and attitudes required for personal and social development, this type of education focuses on supporting lifelong- and sustainable labour-market participation. According to a recent Eurydice study, this type of adult vocational education focuses on three pivotal objectives:

1. Stimulating, organising and enhancing the development and recognition of competences in job seekers, specifically through the establishment of competence centres, accreditation of prior learning and the organisation of training programmes.
2. Hosting, organising and facilitating vocational training and the accompanying guidance for job seekers and employees in training centres.

¹ www.studyinlanders.be

3. Granting allowances (especially training vouchers) for training programmes.²

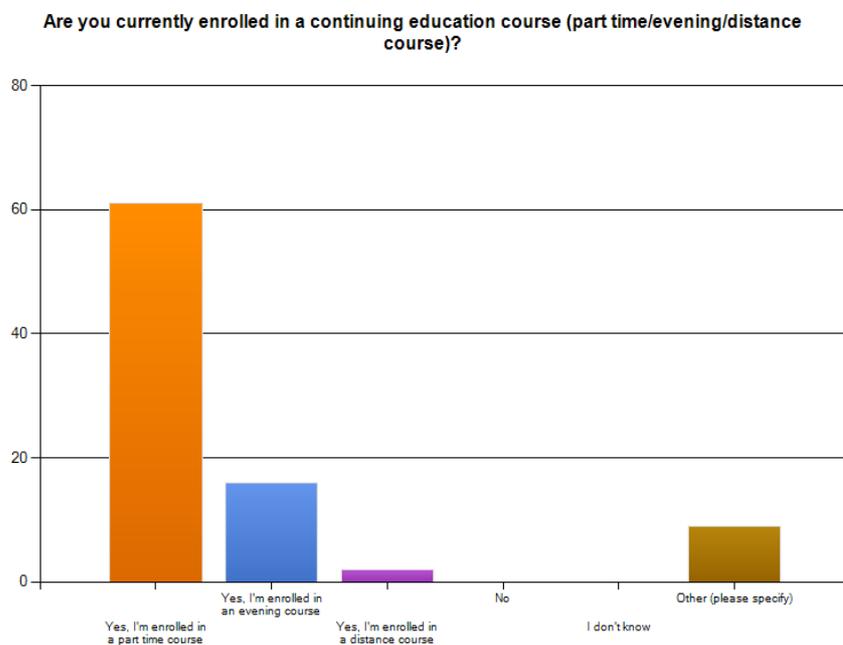
Continuing non-degree education programmes are offered by both Adult Education Centres and Higher Education Colleges, delivered in a variety of formats: part-time, evening or online learning. Intermediate degree programmes are not normally offered within Higher Education Colleges as yet, being delivered by Adult Education Centres. Their insertion into Higher Education Colleges is expected to take place soon though. At the end of 2007, the Minister for Education and Training presented a Green Paper which outlined the reorganisation of the courses offered between the 6th grade of secondary education and the Bachelor's and Master's programmes. This higher vocational-education system, HBO, which shall offer programmes and tie in with secondary education, are labour-market oriented and will result in a Level 5 qualifications of the European Qualifications Framework, ranging between 60 and 120 credits.³

² *Educational Structures and Education Systems for Vocational Training and Adult Education in Europe, Belgium – Flemish Community, 2009 (at http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/eurybase/structures/041_BN_EN.pdf)*

³ Idem

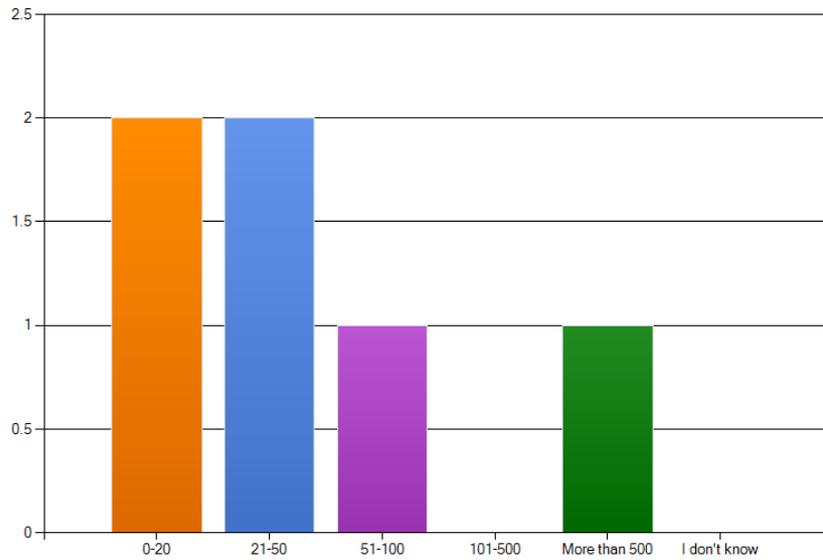
SECTION 1: CONTINUING EDUCATION

Questionnaires have been received by the students, administrators and teachers involved in continuing-education programmes at higher education institutions and adult education centres in Flanders. We have received replies from 88 students enrolled in continuing-education programmes in **Flanders**. The large majority of these (69.3%) are enrolled in a part-time programme, 18.2% in an evening course and 2.3% are enrolled in a distance course.



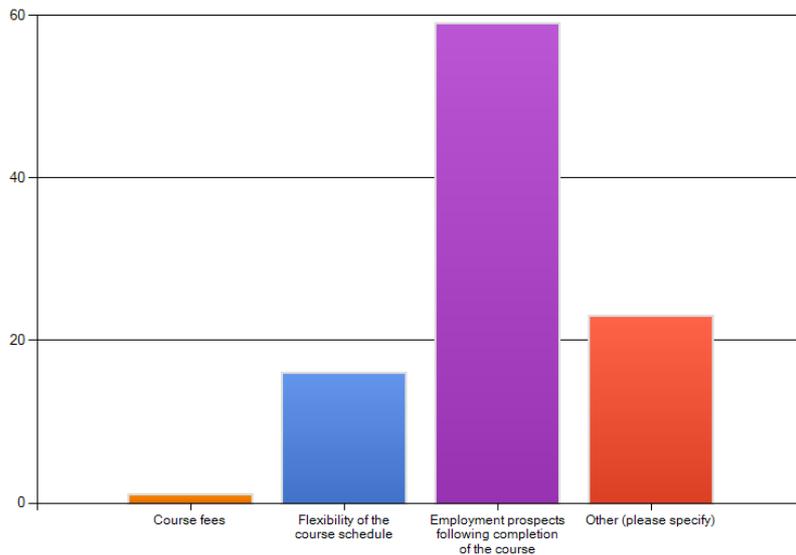
6 replies have been received from administrators involved in continuing-education programmes delivered by Flemish institutions. According to their replies, 66.6% of the professional higher education institutions in Flanders have between 0 and 50 students enrolled in their continuing-education programmes. 16.7% of them have between 51 and 100 students enrolled in continuing-education programmes and another 16.7% have more than 500 students enrolled in this type of programmes.

How many students are enrolled in continuing education programmes at your institution?



Concerning the teachers involved in continuing-education programmes, we have received 6 replies from Flanders, the majority of them teaching science, engineering & technology related subjects.

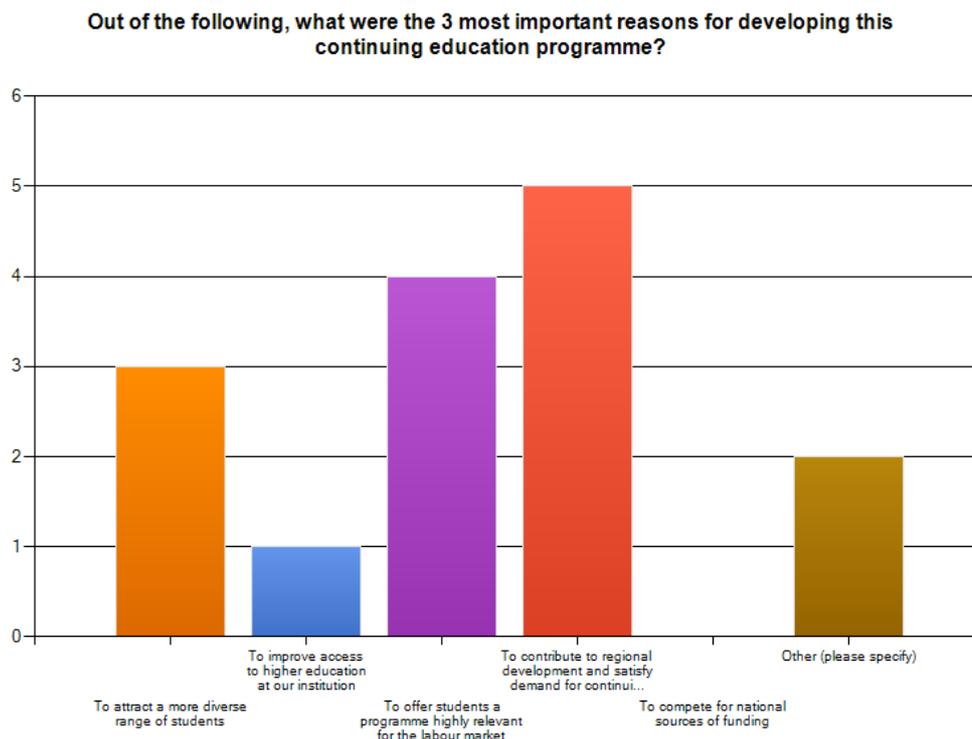
Which of these factors has influenced your decision to enroll on a particular course?



REASONS

A. REASONS FOR DEVELOPING CONTINUING EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

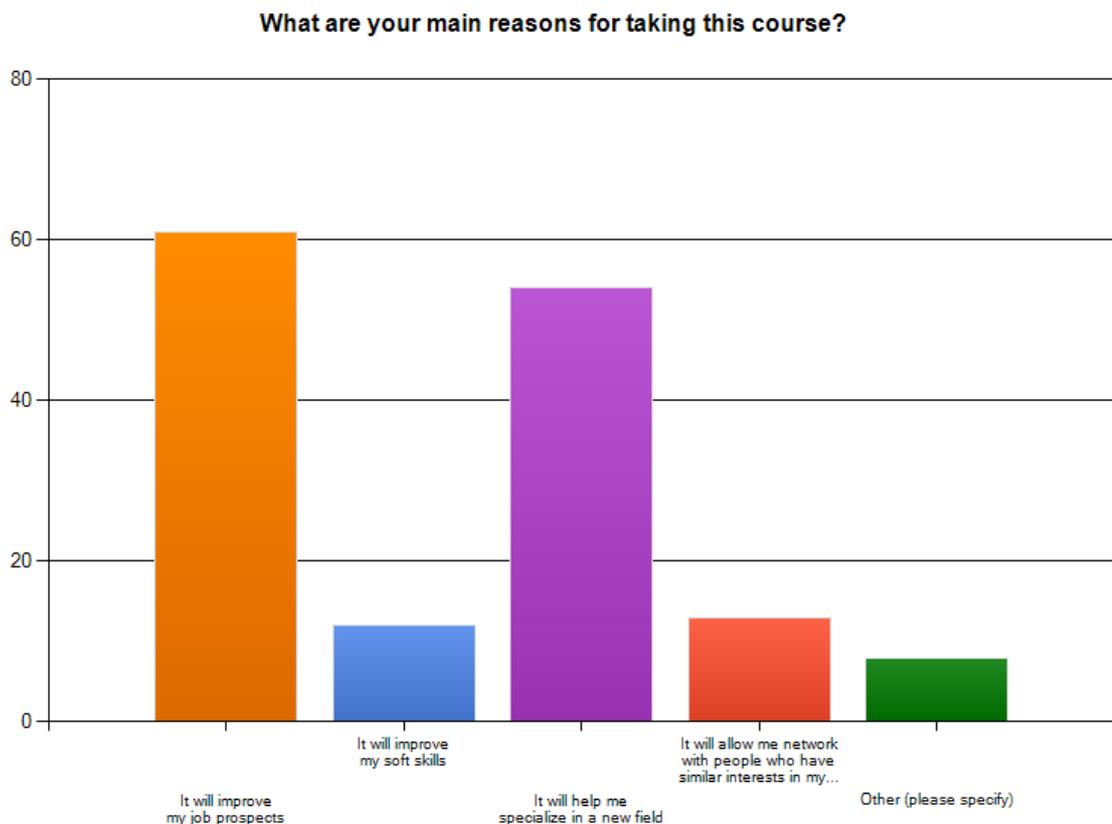
We have asked the teachers involved in the implementation and development of continuing education programmes their main reasons for developing a particular type of programme, with the possibility of choosing more than one option. The absolute majority (100%) informed us that, by developing a particular programme, they aim at contributing to regional development and satisfy demand for continuing education in their area. 80% of the respondents wished to offer students a programme that is highly relevant for the labour market, while 60% of them were aiming at attracting a more diverse range of students (see the chart below).



None of the respondents, however, stated 'to compete for national sources of funding' as an option to this question. However, since we asked for only '**the most important** reason for setting up this programme', it is not very clear whether funding sources constitute a reason for the development of a certain programme, albeit not the most important one.

B. REASONS FOR ENROLLING IN CONTINUING EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

The main reason cited by Flemish students for enrolment in a particular continuing education programme is the opportunity this will give them to improve their job prospects (67.8%). This is closely followed by the opportunity to specialize in a new field (60%) and by 'networking with people who have similar interests in the community' (although this last reason was cited by only 14% of the respondents):



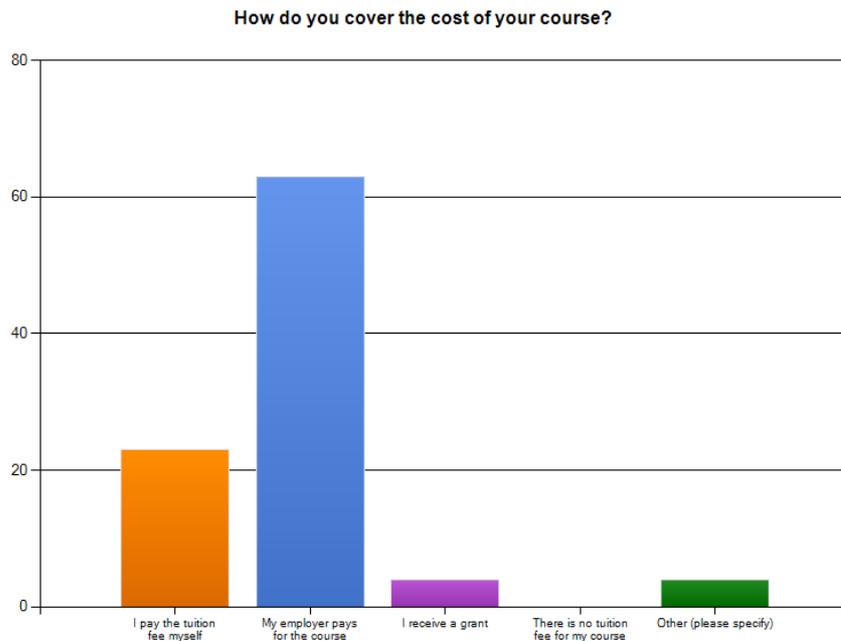
Career related benefits are, therefore, the reasons that influence the choices of most applicants when it comes to enrolling in a particular course. However, the large majority of the students who answered our survey are already in full time employment (87.6%), with only 2% of the respondents being currently unemployed. What can be understood from these results, therefore, is that continuing education is seen as an opportunity to progress in a particular career or even change career paths, and very little as just the means to secure a job.

These findings may imply that the segment of population most likely to enrol in continuing education is represented by people who already have the necessary qualifications to secure a job and not by those who would need a qualification in order to find work.

Following the same line of logic, what respondents cite as being the main factor that influenced their decision to enrol in a particular programme is 'employment prospects' following completion of the course (67.8%). Quite a few students (25% of those who answered the survey) cited their employer's requirement to follow a continuing education programme in order to be better prepared for the job: 'requirement of my new position', 'needed to carry out my job', 'a necessity to do the job', 'interesting for my job'. Flexibility of the course schedule was cited by 20% of the respondents as another factor that influenced their decision (also in line with respecting work commitments).

FUNDING

In line with the replies from the previous chapters, 70.8% of the respondents told us that it is the employer who pays for their continuing education programme. This is, indeed, the expected answer, since the large majority of the students are enrolled in a course at the request or suggestion of their employer. A smaller percentage of 25.8 are paying the tuition fee themselves and only a minority of 4.5% receive a grant from the study institution:



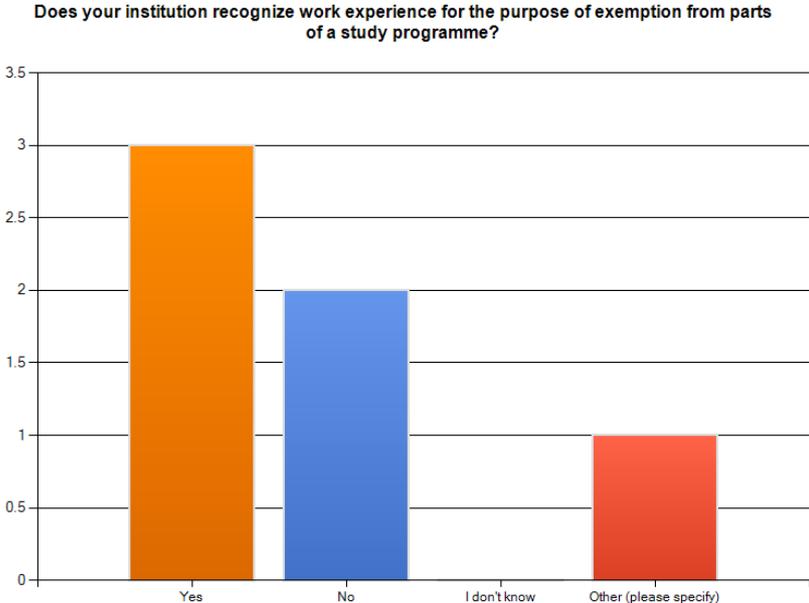
The small percentage of students receiving a grant from the study institution might be interpreted in two ways: either the students do not need financial help (highly unlikely) or the institution itself offers very little in terms of financial help. The same question has been put to the administrators involved in continuing education programmes: we wanted to know whether any financial support is available to students enrolled in continuing education programmes at their institution. Surprisingly, 50% of them mentioned the existence of study grants at their institution for this type of students. The other half cited other funding sources available, such as: 'tuition fee waivers', 'financial subsidies dependent on individual situations', 'training cheques'. These replies come as a natural consequence of the declared purpose, currently at 100% of the replying institutions, to increase student access and participation. Therefore, in this case, it is difficult to understand (and further research might need to be made on this topic) why there are so few students who actually benefit from this financial help provided by their education institution.

RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL)

According to the previous EURASHE study, "Lifelong Learning: Impediments & Examples of good practice", considerable progress has been made in Flanders concerning institutional progress in developing and using RPL

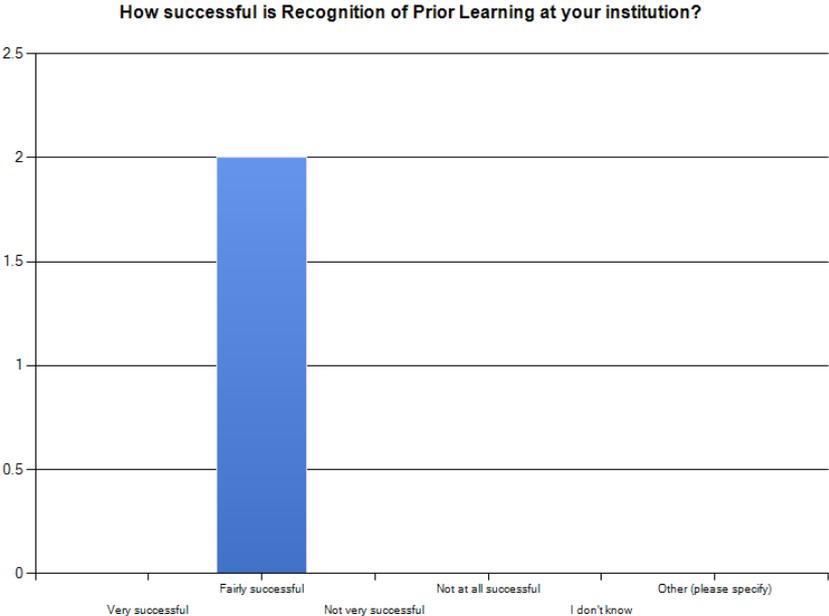
(Recognition of Prior Learning). From the replies we received to our first survey (targeted at policy-makers), it turned out that a majority, if not all of the Flemish higher-education institutions, are using RPL as a means to establish the competences and skills acquired by post-school age/working students prior to their enrolment in higher education. Moreover, although RPL is not yet used as a mechanism for the accreditation of higher education institutions, its implementation receives full support from the Flemish government.

One of the purposes of the survey we have used for the current study was to investigate how the above-mentioned measures are perceived at the institutional level and whether the various target groups approached (administrators, students, teachers) share the same opinion as policy-makers concerning RPL, namely that such learning is a successfully implemented instrument already in Flemish higher-education institutions. We have asked the administrators involved in continuing-education programmes whether their institution recognizes work experience for the purpose of exemption from parts of a study programme. Half of the respondents (50%) answered 'yes' to this question, while only 30% claimed they did not incorporate RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) at their institution:

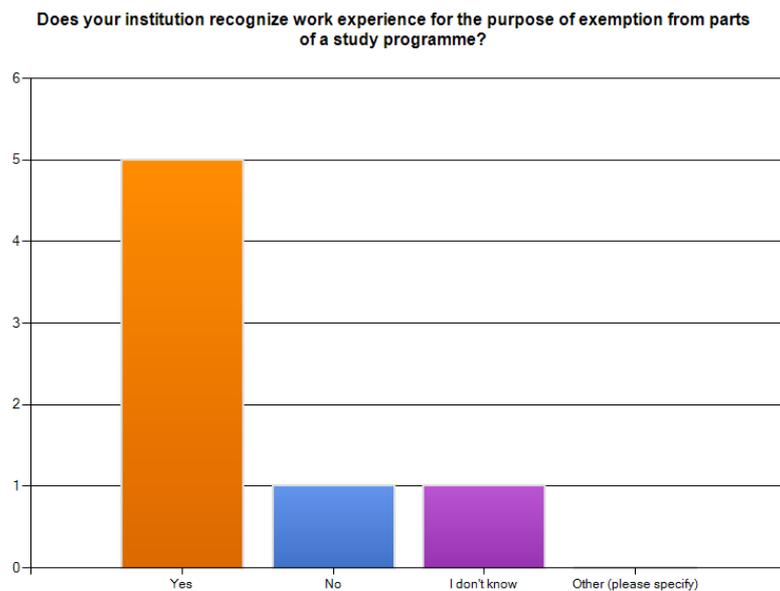


The administrators also mentioned that students are informed of the existence of RPL and the opportunity it offers to have their previous experience transformed into credits via the institution website - the institution and/or

programme brochure and through publishing, website information on the most recent educational regulations. According to the replies we received on this topic, a specific chapter in the education regulations describes the system and procedure of recognition and transfer of prior-learning activities or professional competences, functioning in the degree programme. Asked to comment on how successful the Recognition of Prior Learning is at their institution, all the respondent administrators (100%) replied by saying it was 'fairly successful':

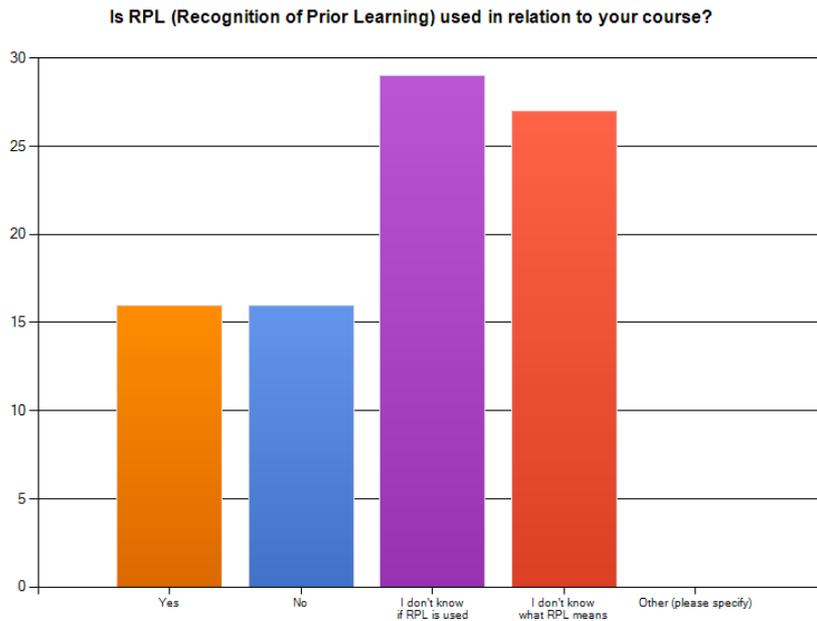


A similar question has been put to the teachers involved in continuing-education programmes, namely 'Does your institution recognize work experience for the purpose of exemption from parts of a study programme?'. More than 70% of the respondents have given a positive reply; only 15% said 'No':

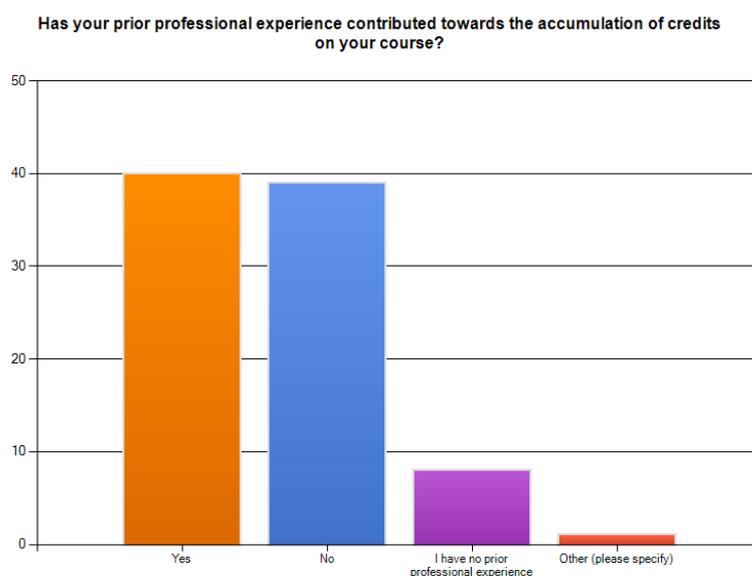


80% of the teachers also seem to agree with the policy makers regarding the amount of support RPL has received from the government to date. When being asked to choose one factor that, in their opinion, had a major influence on the adoption of RPL at their institution, a large majority (80%) have mentioned 'legislative requirements at national level', followed by 40% mentioning 'informal pressure from other stakeholders' (students, employers, educational organizations etc.) and 20% citing 'legislative requirements at institutional level'.

Until now, nothing contradicts the replies we received from policy-makers for the first part of our study. RPL seems to have been solidly implemented within higher-education institutions in Flanders and used thoroughly for the recognition of prior student experience. However, when asking the same RPL related questions to Flemish students enrolled in continuing education programmes, EURASHE received quite different replies from the ones given by the administrators. In answer to the question: 'Is RPL used in relation to your course?', 33% of the students chose the option: 'I don't know if RPL is used'; and 31% replied saying: 'I don't know what RPL means'. 18% answered 'No', and an equal 18% answered 'Yes':



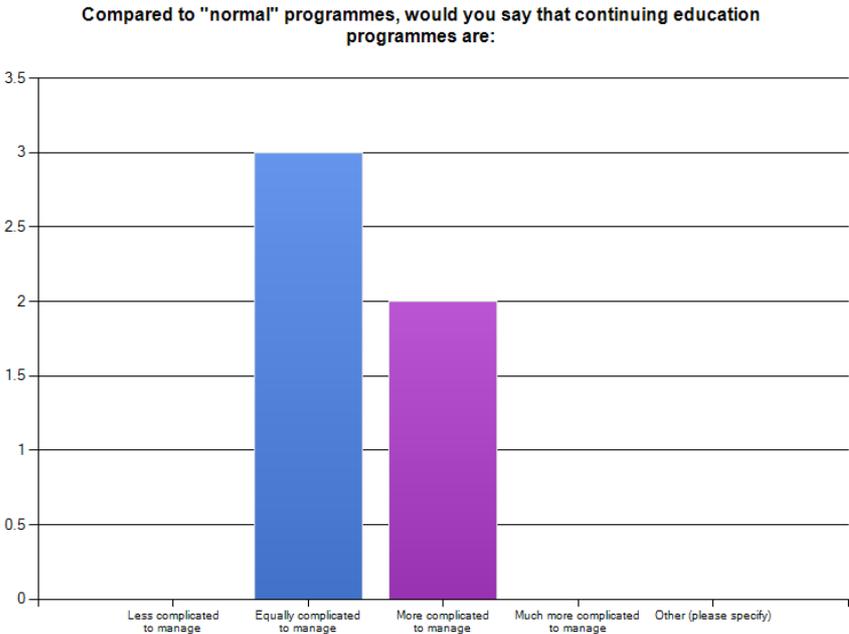
The quite elevated percentage of students who replied by saying they don't know what RPL is or whether it is used in relation to their course denotes a lack of communication between the school and the student in relation to this aspect. Although the administrators claimed to have published all the relevant information related to RPL on the institution website/in the institution brochure, the students do not seem to be aware of it. Another interesting aspect is related to the next question: 'Has your prior professional experience contributed towards the accumulation of credits on your course?'. Almost half of the respondent students (45%) have given a positive reply, while 44% gave a negative answer:



Taking into account the 45% of the respondents who answered this question in a positive way, we can conclude that the RPL is used on quite a large scale, but the students are either not aware of what RPL involves or they know the process; and are not familiar with the terminology. Either way, communication between the students and their institution needs to be improved if the necessary level of understanding the procedures in place is to be attained.

MANAGEMENT OF CONTINUING EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

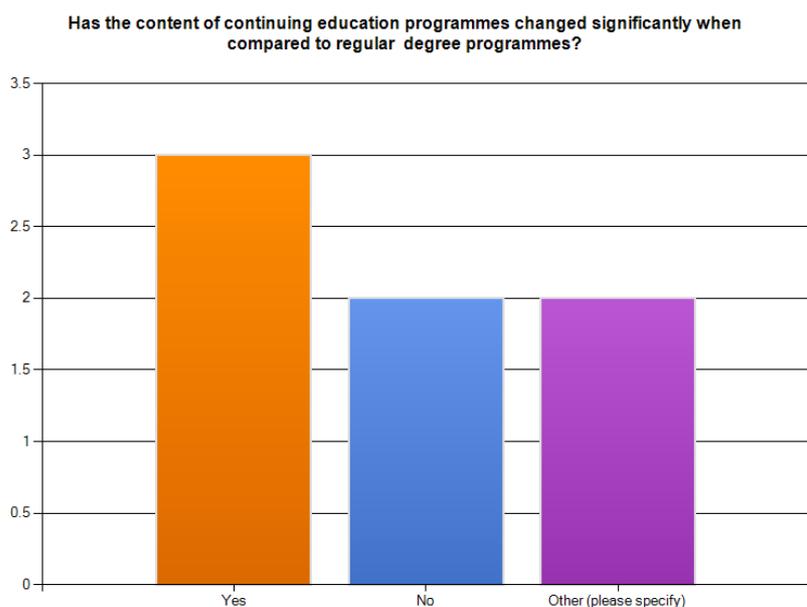
Concerning the management of continuing education programmes, we believe it would be interesting to find out how and in what way they differ, from an administrative point of view, from 'normal' programmes (Bachelor, Master, Ph.D.). According to the replies we have received from the administrators, a majority of 60% believes continuing education programmes to be just as complicated to manage as 'normal' ones:



40% of the respondents, however, maintained that continuing education programmes are 'more complicated to manage' than 'normal' ones. Although they do not represent the majority, the percentage of respondents to have chosen this answer is still quite significant, and they were asked what would be, in their experience, the most difficult aspect of continuing-education programmes management. This has been designed as an open question, giving the respondents the freedom to mention what they think would be the most relevant

aspect of continuing-education programmes' management. The received replies proved quite interesting, mentioning different challenges that managing these particular types of programmes implies: the combination of work and study, organizational aspects (classes taking places during the evenings and/or week-ends). Financial difficulties in running the programme have been cited by administrators as particular obstacles to be met in developing this type of programmes. Another aspect that has been mentioned and which puts continuing education programmes in a separate category when compared to 'normal' programmes is the different nature of the curriculum. What has been mentioned in relation to this was a particular concern regarding the definition of the quality standards for the curriculum. The reason for this is that these kind of programmes are often developed in new areas of expertise, enabling learners to keep pace with the new advances of technology. This also implies that often specialists in a particular area have to be found outside the institution (in various areas of industry, for example) and be brought in to teach a particular course according to the specialists' availability. This can also prove to be a challenging task for the administrators, since it involves organizing the whole study programme by taking into account the availability of staff hired for this particular type of programme.

A similar opinion, concerning the different nature of continuing education programmes - when compared to "normal" programmes - is shared by the teachers questioned in our survey, although, in their opinion, the difference between them comes from a different aspect:



According to the teachers, the main content-related differences between continuing education programmes and regular degree programmes at their institution come from the former being a lot more labour market oriented than the latter. The replies mentioned the increased number of practice hours in continuing education programmes (only one day per week being reserved for classroom-based learning, according to a few of our respondents) and the more direct links of these programmes with the labour market. 42% of the respondent teachers also see the development of continuing-education programmes as being very much encouraged by employers and as being more oriented towards the labour market than regular degree programmes. According to the replies we have received, this cooperation between higher education institutions and employers is encouraged by regular meetings between education representatives and representatives of the labour market, concerning the development and implementation of continuing education programmes.

We can conclude, therefore, that a significant difference between the content and nature of continuing education programmes and those of 'normal' programmes exists, although this tends to be seen from a different perspective by the separate target groups involved in our survey. While the teachers tend to stress the positive aspects of collaboration with the labour market and practical learning specific to continuing education, the administrators focus more on the challenges represented by practical obstacles such as the varying availability of

staff or the flexible nature of the programme, both demanding a more intensive administrative workload than 'regular' degree programmes.

THE FUTURE OF CONTINUING EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

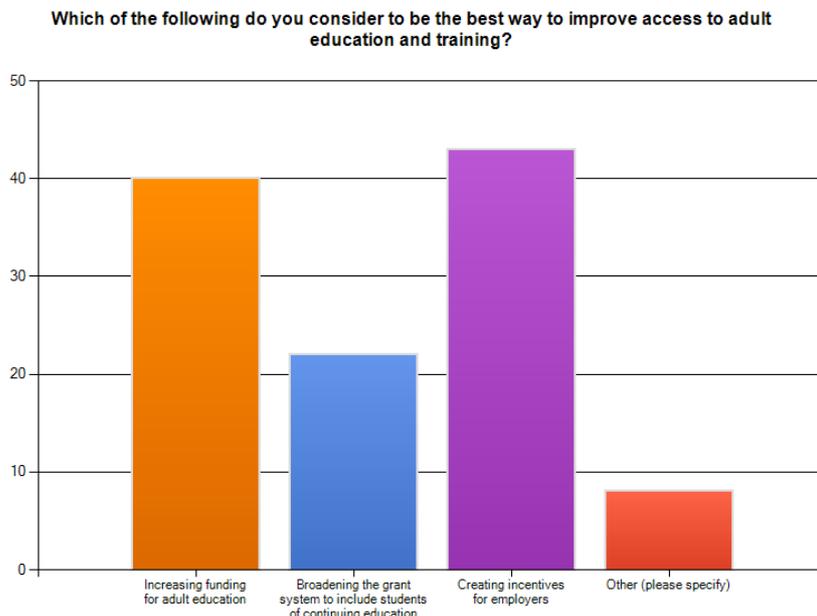
The picture presented so far concerning the state of continuing education within Flemish higher education institutions focuses exclusively on their present situation. While the conclusions drawn so far concerning various aspects of continuing education offer a quite interesting perspective on continuing education programmes, revealing some aspects that might serve as a basis for future policy initiatives in this field, we believe it is no less relevant to enquire how this picture might change in ten years' time and what our target groups feel are the most relevant issues that might improve or, on the contrary, endanger the development of continuing education programmes. Again, we have asked the teachers and the administrators involved in the survey similar questions concerning their opinion on the future evolution of this type of programmes. The respondent teachers feel that an increased level of government funding, together with increased participation from the employers' side would considerably help to improve the development of continuing education programmes. A few respondents also mentioned the necessity to increase the use of distant learning in the provision of continuing education and conduct research studies on what the skills needed by employers in the future will be.

Demand for increased financial resources also appears in the replies received from the administrators. More directives and governmental legislation that encourage the development of continuing education are equally part of the received replies.

Concerning the factors that might endanger the development of continuing education programmes, lack of funding is the first one cited by both teachers and administrators (same as above, only now the focus is on the 'lack' of financial resources). An interesting factor cited by a Flemish academic is the employers' reticence towards in-service training that should normally be offered to their employees. The lack of governmental legislation also appears quite often among the factors that might pose a threat to continuing education programmes.

A similar question has been put to students, namely which option (from the list provided) they consider to be the best way to improve access to adult

education and training. Creating incentives for employers occupies first place among the answers, followed by an increase in funding for adult education:



The students who chose the option 'Other' also provided us with some very interesting replies. Below is a brief list of the most relevant answers:

- Possibility to enroll in continuing education without the need for a university degree
- More evening/shorter programmes
- More possibilities to learn during the working hours
- More information about study opportunities.

To make a summary of the replies received on this topic, it is obvious that three issues impose themselves in the answers provided by each target group: the need for more financial resources to support the development of continuing education; an increase in the number of governmental directives on this topic, together with the need to convince employers of the necessity of further study for all the employee categories.

The replies offered by students when asked about their opinion on the future of continuing education, however, is an optimistic and encouraging one. 54% of them believe that, ten years from now, most people in Europe will take advantage of lifelong learning opportunities, while 59% agree that lifelong learning will become indispensable for employees and people who want to

improve their job prospects. 64% are of the opinion that lifelong learning opportunities will become more accessible than they are now.

Section 2. INTERMEDIATE DEGREES

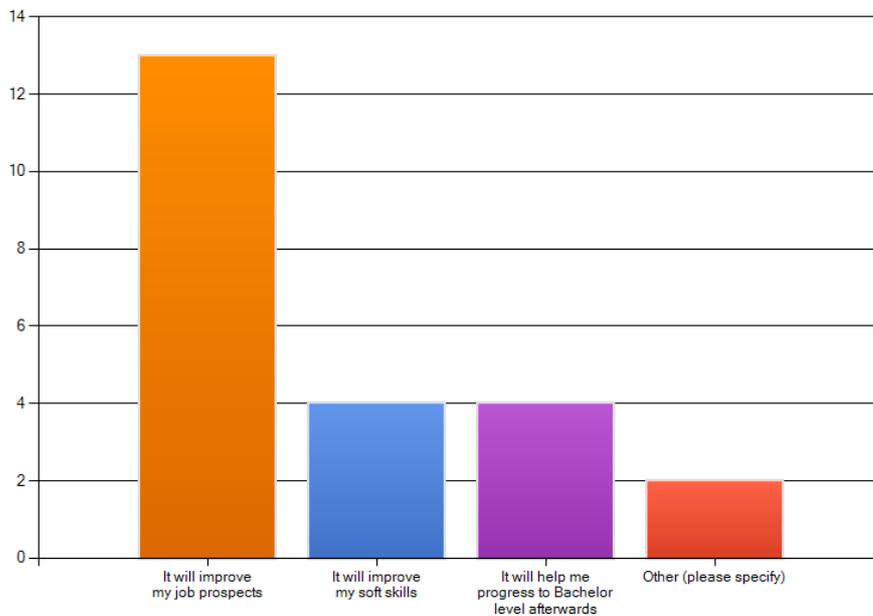
94.1% of the students who submitted replies to our survey said they are currently enrolled in an intermediate degree programme. The 5.9% of the respondents who gave a negative answer to this question also stated that they are not currently planning to enrol in an intermediate education programme over the course of the next 12 months. Concerning the teachers, 46.2% of them stated their involvement in teaching an intermediate programme. 50.9% of the administrators claimed to be involved in either intermediate degree programmes only, or in the administration of both intermediate and continuing degree programmes.

REASONS FOR INITIATING/ENROLLING IN INTERMEDIATE DEGREES

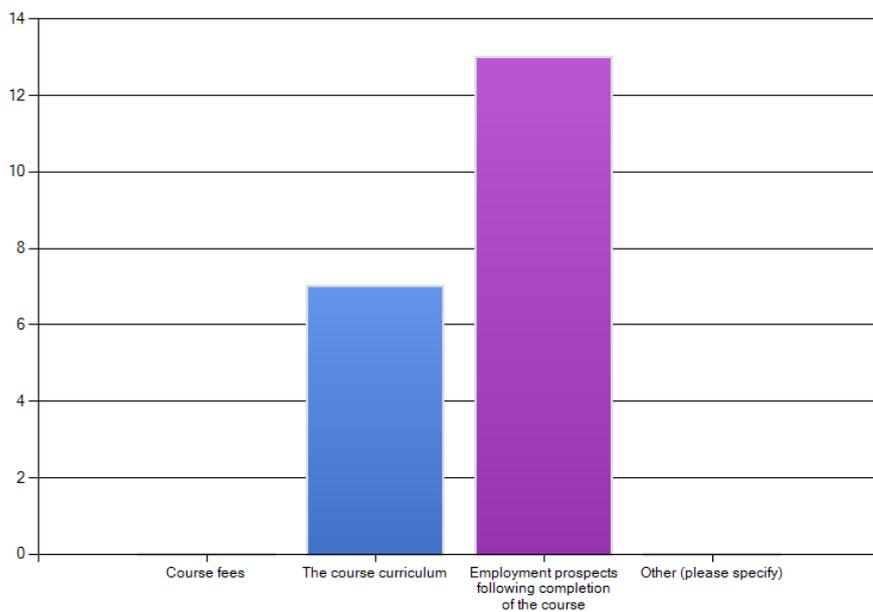
The main reason the students cited for enrolling in this type of programme was its capacity to improve their job prospects (81.3% of the replies). This was followed by improvement of soft skills (25%) and the opportunity to progress to Bachelor level afterwards (25%):

An identical result has been obtained by asking the question: 'Which of these factors has influenced your decision to enrol on a particular course?', the respondents were given options from which to choose, among which 'employment prospects'; 81.3% of the respondents have chosen this option, followed by 43.8% mentioning the course curriculum as the determinant factor that influenced their choice of programme:

What are your main reasons for taking this course?

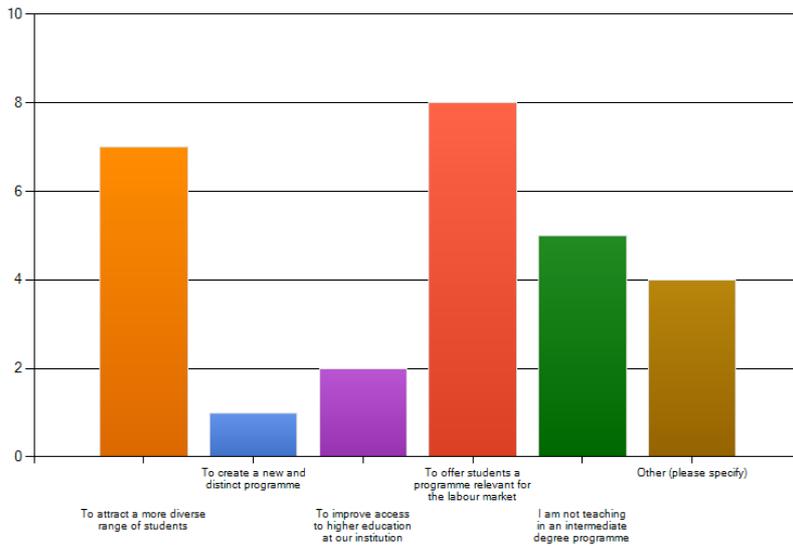


Which of these factors has influenced your decision to enroll on a particular course?



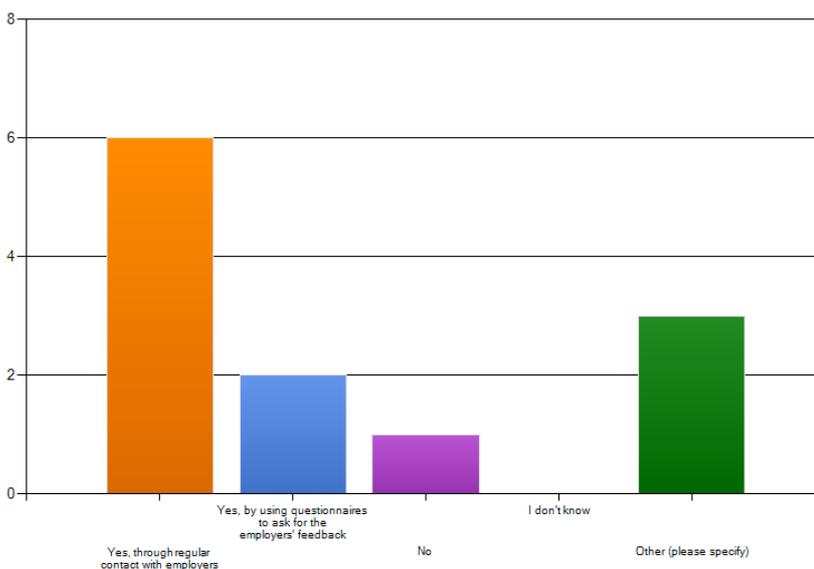
The same type of reply has been obtained from the teachers. 61.5% of them mentioned having initiated an intermediate degree programme with the specific aim of offering students a programme that is highly relevant for the labour market. 53.8% mentioned their goal was to attract a more diverse range of students:

Out of the following, what were the 3 most important reasons for developing this intermediate degree programme?

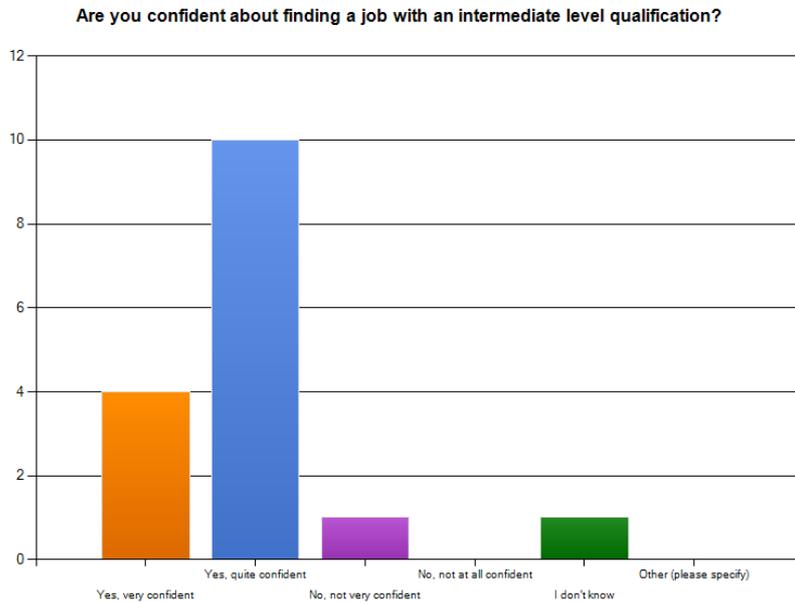


The main conclusion that can be drawn from the above replies is the focus that both the developers of intermediate programmes and the students themselves put on the relevancy of such programmes for the labour market. According to the replies we received, not only is the curriculum designed in such a way as to encourage employability, but the employers are regularly involved through meetings with the academics:

Are employers regularly involved in this intermediate degree programme?



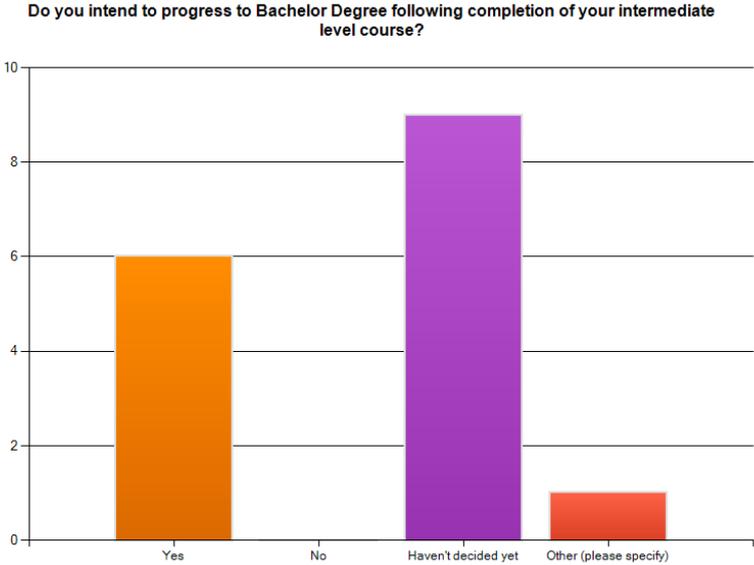
Moreover, 62.5% of the students declare themselves 'quite confident' in their chances of finding a job following graduation. 25% declare themselves 'very confident' in this respect:



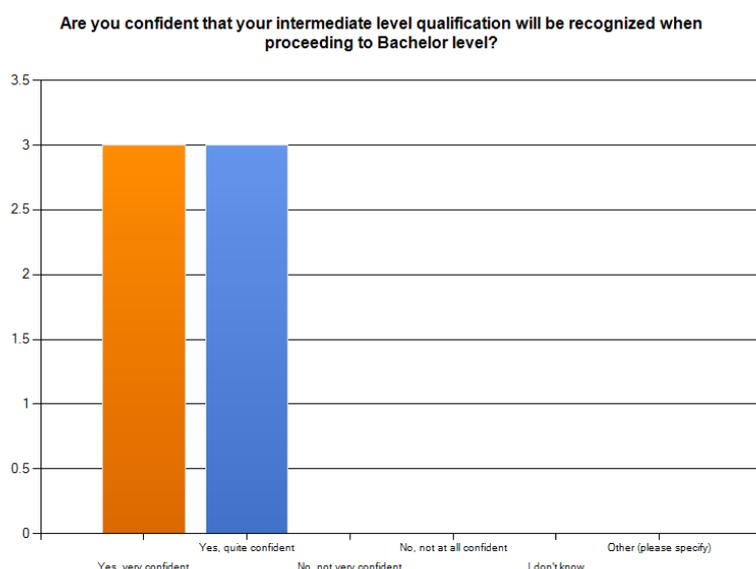
Another strategy we employed in order to find out more about the link between intermediate degrees and employability was to present teachers with a series of statements on the subject and ask them to let us know to what extent they agree to what is mentioned. The replies followed the same pattern as above, namely the majority of respondents seem convinced that intermediate degrees encourage employability. For instance, the majority of them (44.4%) agree that the development of intermediate degree programmes is very much encouraged by employers, while a further 44.4% claim that employers seem to be increasingly interested in graduates of joint degree programmes. An even larger majority, of 77.8%, told us that, in their opinion, intermediate degree programmes are more oriented towards the labour market than regular degree programmes and that graduates of intermediate degrees have no difficulties in finding employment after graduation. As expected, the reverse is also valid: 50% of the respondents disagree that graduates of intermediate degrees have more difficulties in finding a job than graduates of regular academic programmes (Bachelor, Master, Ph.D.).

On the contrary, when it comes to recognition of their previous degree for the purpose of progression to the Bachelor level, we have received quite a different set of answers. 75% of the teachers questioned fear that graduates of intermediate degrees meet too many obstacles when they want to get their qualification recognized as part of a Bachelor degree programme.

Linked to this reply are the answers to the question enquiring whether graduates of intermediate degree programmes intend to progress to Bachelor level afterwards. More than half (56.3%) of the respondents admit they haven't yet decided, while a percentage of 37.5% of the students state that, indeed, they are taking this opportunity into consideration:



The students also declare themselves quite confident when it comes to the recognition of their intermediate level qualification for direct progression to the second year of their Bachelor:

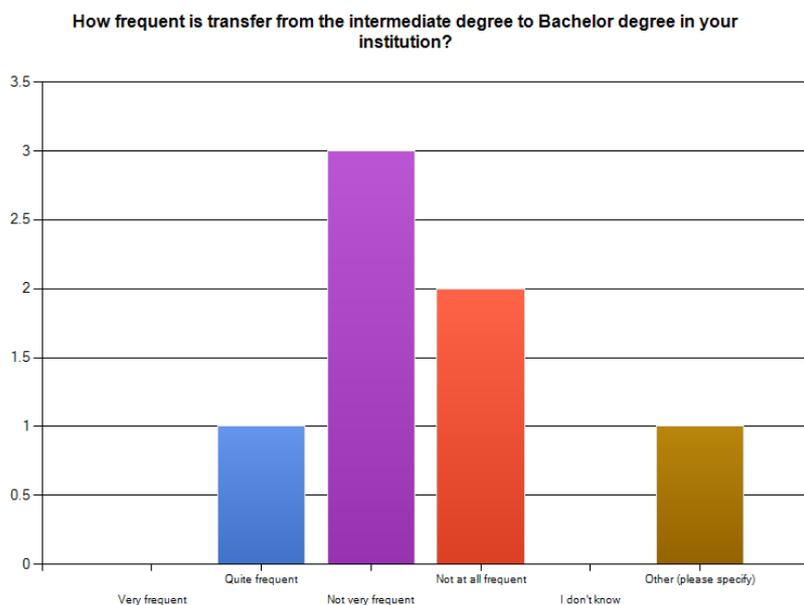


These replies paint a more positive picture than in the case of continuing education programmes, where a large discrepancy could be noticed between the replies we received from the students and the ones received from the administrators. In the case of intermediate degrees, while the administrators' answers regarding the recognition of prior learning are very similar to the ones we obtained in the previous section, the students seem more confident that RPL will actually benefit them.

75% of the administrators involved in intermediate degree programmes state that their institution recognizes the intermediate qualification for the purpose of exemption from parts of a study programme, only 13% admitting that they do not have an answer to this question. Students are informed about the opportunity of having their prior learning recognized via the website of the higher education institution and through information published in the study guides. One respondent also mentioned the education regulations published on the website of their institution. According to his reply, a specific chapter in the education regulations describes the system and procedure of recognition and transfer of 'prior learning activities' or 'professional competences', operating in the degree programme.

The actual recognition of these prior study or work periods is done through the examination of the candidates' portfolio and/or assessments. The material provided by the students is analyzed by two independent assessors and, in case of validation, the student obtains a certificate attesting his/her previously acquired competencies.

When it comes, however, to stating how frequent the transfer from the intermediate degree to the Bachelor degree is in their institution, the respondent administrators admit that it does not take place very often (42.9%), while 28.6% agree that this type of progression is not at all frequent within their institution:

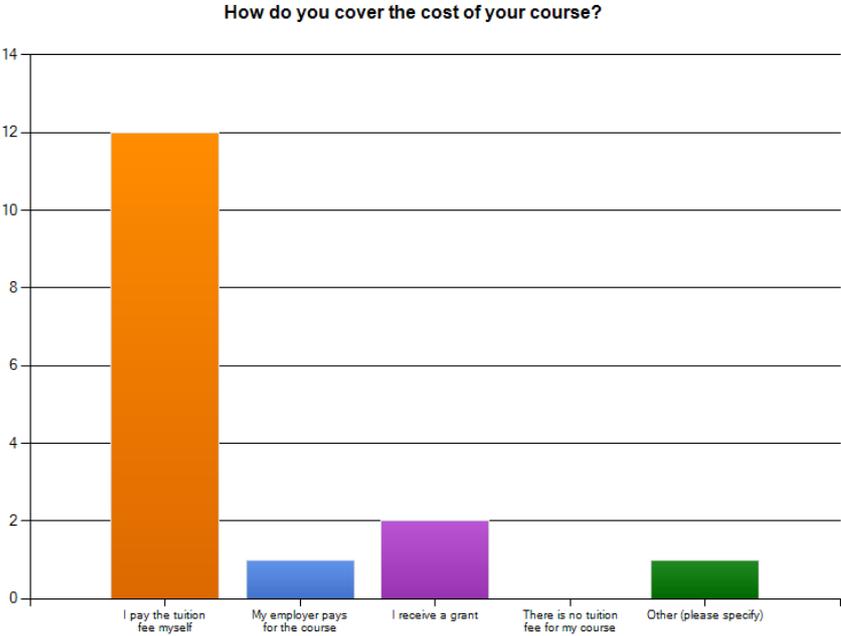


This makes for a quite contradictory situation, since the students declare themselves confident in the recognition of their qualifications in case they wish to progress to Bachelor level and the recognition of prior learning is in place at most institutions. The relative absence of requests by students to progress to Bachelor level might be due to the students' increased level of confidence in their capacity of finding a job on the basis of their intermediate qualification. Increased employment prospects have also been cited as part of the main reasons why students opt for this type of degrees. Therefore, they do not see the Bachelor as a necessary step for their insertion on the labour market.

FUNDING

Concerning funding, the situation is less promising than in the case of continuing education. 55.6% of the interviewed administrators denied the existence of any source of funding at their institution for students of intermediate degrees, only three respondents mentioning that they are able to provide education cheques (of a maximum of 250€/year) or obtain funding support from

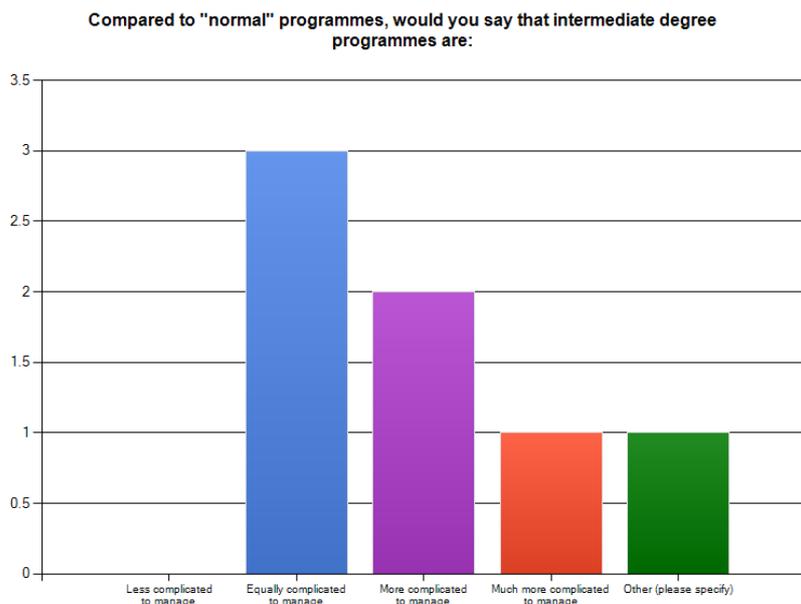
the government. This explains why 75% of the students say that they are paying the tuition fees themselves, only 12% mentioning that they receive a grant:



This situation is quite the reverse of the one described in the case of continuing-education programmes. While students enrolled in continuing education were mostly full-time employees and their learning was supported by their employer, students of intermediate study programmes are currently unemployed and hoping to get a better chance to integrate on the labour market through their course.

MANAGEMENT OF INTERMEDIATE DEGREES

Keeping in mind the similar question concerning continuing education programmes, we have asked the administrators involved in intermediate degrees whether managing these types of programmes is more complicated than in the case of 'classic' degrees (Bachelor, Master, Ph.D.). And just as in the case of continuing education programmes, the majority of the respondents (42.9%) agreed that intermediate degrees are just as complicated to manage as 'classic' ones:



What is interesting to note here is that, although 28.6% of the respondents claimed intermediate degrees are more complicated to manage than normal programmes, no one chose to say that they are less complicated to manage.

Among the aspects that make intermediate degrees more difficult to manage, the one that is cited by all the respondents is the difficulty, for adult students, to combine work, family and study. As the majority of the replies have been collected from adult education centers, it is easy to see why this type of problem is so often mentioned. The combination of work and study often means that courses have to be arranged so as to suit varied individual schedules, which puts a supplementary strain on the administrative process.

THE FUTURE

Concerning the future of intermediate degrees, the picture painted by our respondents looks rather optimistic, with a majority of students (82.4%) believing that intermediate degrees will begin to occupy a central place in higher

education and 70.6% agreeing that more people will enroll in intermediate degrees. 68.8% of the students questioned are of the opinion that Recognition of Prior Learning will start to be used regularly concerning transfer from Intermediate Degrees to Bachelor Level. Also, 58.8% agree with the statement that employers will become more confident in the skills of intermediate degrees graduates.

The administrators believe that there is a high chance that the number of intermediate degrees will remain unchanged over the next decade, but, unlike the students, they believe that a lot is still to be done in order for this type of programme to improve. They complain of the lack of clear instructions concerning the organization of these programmes and the lack of concrete legislative provisions when it comes to recognizing the existence of level 5 education. More facilities for student support are also needed, together with an increased cooperation with other educational centers, to facilitate the exchange of best practice. On the same note, the lack of clear governmental laws and lack of finances are perceived as factors which might endanger the future development of intermediate degrees.

Similar opinions are shared by the teachers when it comes to the future of intermediate degrees. A special focus is put on transparency and clarity. The teachers feel that the most important improvement to be made is to clarify the situation of intermediate degrees (or, the way one of our respondents put it, 'to know what one [the intermediate degree] stands for'). This clarification includes: recognition of the special features of this type of programme (what sets intermediate degrees apart from other types of degrees); a better explanation of what the possible pathways following completion of an intermediate degree are (what the learning outcomes are and how these can be further used in order to lead to acceptance onto and completion of a Bachelor degree). In addition to this, flexible admission requirements have been cited as another factor that may lead to the improvement of intermediate degrees, together with the necessity of continuing contact with the labour market and more flexibility for the students.

Concerning factors that may endanger the development of this kind of programmes, the lack of finances is top of the list, followed by a lack of recognition from the part of the organizers of regular programmes, which, in turn, prevents the progression of students onto the Bachelor level. Some of the respondents even expressed fears that the special treatment adult students

currently benefit of will disappear and also that the employers will no longer accept intermediate degrees as proof of completion of education, looking instead for bachelor degrees only.

CONCLUSIONS

Continuing education programmes are well grounded in the Flemish higher education landscape, with the majority of students already in employment, thus aware of the advantages further education can bring to their respective careers. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) seems to have been solidly implemented within higher education institutions in Flanders and used thoroughly for the recognition of prior student experience. However, it is obvious that students are not very familiar with what exactly the term 'RPL' means, even if institutions claim providing enough information on this, through their website and brochures. The combination of work and study makes for very challenging administrative work; to this adds the different nature of the curriculum, a result of continuing education programmes being more labour market oriented. The opinions received on the future of continuing education are optimistic: ten years from now, most people in Europe will take advantage of lifelong learning opportunities. For this to become a reality, however, financial resources need to be improved and governmental legislation concerning continuing education made clearer.

The students enrolled in intermediate degrees are mostly unemployed and looking to improve their job prospects through this type of course. While they are very confident in their job prospects following completion of an intermediate degree, when it comes to progression to Bachelor level, most of the respondents fear that graduates of intermediate degrees meet too many obstacles when they want to get their qualification recognized as part of a Bachelor degree programme. Very few sources of funding are available to students of intermediate degrees, making course enrolment difficult. Apart from this, the combination of work and study often means that courses have to be arranged so as to suit varied individual schedules, which puts a supplementary strain on the administrative process. Concerning the future of intermediate degrees, most of the respondent students believe that intermediate degrees will begin to occupy a central place in higher education. However, more facilities for student support are also needed, together with an increased cooperation with other educational centers, to facilitate the exchange of best practice.

List of participating institutions

Higher Education Institutions

Katholieke Hogeschool St. Lieven (Gent)
Katholieke Hogeschool St. Lieven (Aalst)
Hogeschool Gent (University College Ghent)
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (University of Leuven)
Katholieke Hogeschool Brugge-Oostende
UG (University of Ghent)
Hogeschool West-Vlaanderen, Kortrijk (University College West Flanders)
Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven (University College Leuven)
Hogeschool Sint-Lukas (Brussels)
Lessius Hogeschool Antwerpen (University College Lessius)
Provinciale Hogeschool Limburg (Hasselt)
XIOS Hogeschool Limburg (Diepenbeek)

Centres for Adult Learning

CVO Deurne-Antwerpen
KIHA (Antwerpen)
HIK (Antwerpen)
CVO Lethas (Brussels)
VSPW (Hasselt)
CVO Technicum Noord-Antwerpen
CVO Hitek VZW (Kortrijk)
CVO Kisp (Gent)
CVO HiKempen (Geel)
CVO VTI (Aalst)
CVO Pantha Rhei de Avondschoon (Gent)
CVO IVO (Brugge)
VTI Waregem