



POLICY BRIEF 6

EDUCATION:

ENTERING AND LEAVING OKAN

This policy brief is relevant for:

- Municipalities, Cities and VSSG
- Secondary schools that offer regular education and/or OKAN-classes
- Flemish Ministry of Education and Training

REFUFAM examines the **effects of government policies on the integration trajectories of refugee families**. These *Policy Briefs* are based on interviews and focus groups with 98 members of refugee families, and with 99 street-level practitioners and local experts. By *refugee families* we understand families in which at least one person has acquired international protection, either through refugee status or subsidiary protection.

SUMMARY

Just like other newcomers between 12 and 18 years old, young persons with International Protection who reside in Flanders are required to register for OKAN education – *Reception Classes for Non-Dutch speaking Newcomers*¹. In line with earlier studies, our research shows that the **processes of entering and leaving OKAN** – either into regular education or into the labour market – **are riddled with obstacles**. This has a significant **impact on various aspects of their integration trajectories** as it leads to a sense

of frustration and loss of time among pupils, to lower qualifications, and to less prospects on the labour market. This *policy brief* speaks to **multiple ambitions of the new Flemish coalition agreement**:² creating equal opportunities to contribute to a prosperous Flanders, with assistance where needed; positioning children and young people at the centre of Flemish policy concerns; and supporting each individual who wishes to (further) develop their talents.

In this policy brief, we formulate a number of **recommendations** that are relevant to both persons with international protection between 12 years and 18 years old and young newcomers. These recommendations include, amongst others: a **prolongation of the 35-day ‘trial period’** for former OKAN-students in regular education; a **database that synchronises waiting lists** across OKAN schools; and the facilitation of **flexible learning tracks**.

POLICY

In Flanders, enrolment in OKAN education is required for newcomer children by the 60th day of their presence in Belgium.³ Enrolment is possible throughout the schoolyear, although – especially towards the end of the schoolyear - it is possible that children are put on a waiting list if schools have reached their maximum capacity.

In secondary education, the (on average) one-year OKAN program is aimed at learning Dutch and integrating the pupils into regular education and the Flemish society more broadly. While this enables the OKAN students to learn the language in a comfortable and safe environment, this approach often **leads to segregation in practice**, with OKAN classes taking place in separate classrooms, sometimes in a separate wing or even in separate buildings.⁴

¹ From a policy perspective, ‘OKAN education’ refers to both the one-year education program as well as the support structures and guidance provided in the transition to regular education.

² Flemish Government, [Flemish Coalition Agreement 2024-2029](#), p.4.

³ Art. 1 §7, law of 29 June 1983 regarding compulsory education.

⁴ Kemper, R. et al. (2022). Separating newcomers : pragmatism or ideology? Schools’ responses to newly arrived migrants in Flanders. *Int. Journal of Inclusive Education*, 26(6), 622–641.

For enrolment in OKAN in secondary education, a student must fulfil the following criteria:

1. Maximum 1 year residence in Belgium;
2. Between 12 and 18 years old;
3. Non-native Dutch speaker;
4. Insufficient level of Dutch to follow regular classes;
5. Maximum 9 months of prior enrolment in Dutch speaking education.

OKAN schools are able to make an exception to requirements 1, 2⁵ and 5.

Prior research has shown that many OKAN students encounter **difficulties in both entering OKAN secondary education, and in transitioning into regular secondary education programmes and the labour market.**⁶ These difficulties have a potentially **negative, retardant effect on their integration trajectories.** It has been extensively documented that former OKAN students are often guided towards the vocational oriented education tracks, even when they might have the capacity to pursue more advanced education paths.⁷ These developments evidently impact their future employment possibilities.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Entering in Secondary Okan Eudcation

How schools organize their OKAN classes in secondary school is not prescribed by law. While some schools divide their classes by age, others organize them according to the educational and/or language levels of the students. These differences create a problem when schools make use of a

waiting list when the maximum capacity of OKAN students is reached.

Since there are no legal instructions on how the students are divided into different classes, the waiting lists are used on a first come, first served basis. As a result, when classes in schools are organized based on education and/or language level, it is possible that whenever a spot in the OKAN program becomes available, it may not be in the class that is most suitable for the first person on the waiting list. For example, a spot in a more advanced class opens up, while the first student on the waiting list should ideally be placed in a class with beginner level. As an OKAN coordinator explains:

Imagine that a student is moving house, who was in a more advanced class, then a spot for a new student becomes available in this advanced class. However, we wouldn't have a spot available for a student with a beginner level. You see, that's what makes it difficult.

(OKAN coordinator, 16.04.24)

The current 'capacity-based system' does not allow schools to indicate that they have spots available in advanced classes but not in beginner classes. The school can only indicate whether or not they are 'full'. And the use of the (informal) waiting lists used by schools therefore follows this same logic, students sign up for the waiting list, and spots are assigned on a first come, first served basis. But when a spot becomes available, it might not be in the 'right' class. Hence, the current way of organization leads to an **inefficient use of resources** in cases where schools work with a waiting list, while organizing their classes based on education and/or language level.

Especially in bigger cities, a centralized database of OKAN school waiting lists is lacking.⁸ Currently, young newcomers

⁵ Exceptions to this requirement are temporarily limited (see Section 2.1.2.2., Omzendbrief SO 75, Onthaalonderwijs voor anderstalige nieuwkomers in het voltijds gewoon secundair onderwijs (20.04.2024).

⁶ Emery, L., 'De organisatie van OKAN-onderwijs wordt gekoloniseerd door de logica van het regulier onderwijs', Welwijs, 32(1), 2021. Taalunie, 'OKAN/ISK en daarna: aanbevelingen voor de doorstroom van

nieuwkomersleerlingen naar het vervolgonderwijs in Nederland en Vlaanderen', 2023.

⁷ Taalunie, 2023, (n6).

⁸ See also: Kinderrechtencommissariaat, [Capaciteitstekort in OKAN: houd de vinger aan de pols - Advies](#), 2022-2023/12, 2023.

may be on **multiple waiting lists, which are not synced** when, for example, a student finds a spot at one of these schools.⁹ The limited availability of spots in some regions and cities in OKAN secondary education may imply that **larger families will have children enrolled in OKAN programs at different schools in the area, which can create complicated practicalities** – see also our Policy Brief 5 on Housing.

Lastly, starting in OKAN can be difficult because the program is **only available as a full-time study program with little flexibility**, while this may not always be the best arrangement to newcomer's individual circumstances. As one expert explains, this system is **ill-adapted to the life-worlds of many young newcomers**:

The education system for young newcomers [is] not very flexible: a fulltime education program is offered and the moment that you miss half a day, you get a B-code, and after so many B-codes your allowance ('schooltoeslag') is terminated. That's all pretty repressive. While the question whether these youngsters are ready for fulltime education is not often asked. [...] You're 14 years old, you've never been to school and you arrive here and you need to go to school from Monday to Friday, from 9am till 4pm, there are youngsters who cannot do that.

(Social worker collective asylum centre for unaccompanied minors, 19.01.2023)

Similarly, **young newcomers may prefer to combine their OKAN classes with (part-time) work, or** – due to their advancement in certain subjects – **already attend specific classes in regular education**. Others do benefit from a full-time OKAN program, since it provides them with daily activities and social contacts. Hence, as a result of the diversity of student profiles and their needs, **more flexibility within OKAN programmes** would enhance OKAN-students ability to develop their full potential. More opportunities for

Dual Learning opportunities would also work to the benefit of both young newcomers and society as a whole.

2. Leaving Secondary Okan Education

When students leave the OKAN program and continue their educational career in regular secondary education, the OKAN school provides advice about the educational track that the student should follow. The student can choose whether to follow this advice, and the new secondary school can decide, after a **trial period of 35 calendar days**, whether or not the student will be allowed to continue in the track and program that the student chose.¹⁰ A special meeting is held to decide on the continuation of this student in a given track, which the follow-up coaches ['vervolgschoolcoach'] is invited to as well. After this 35-day period, the student may then be moved to a different track and/or program, if the new school deems this necessary. **In practice, 35 days is a short period to assess students' learning potential.** As an OKAN coordinator indicates:

I don't think that's right, because I think 35 days is not enough, especially when students are introverted, because you cannot know after 35 days if someone can do it or not. [...] While we've seen them for a year, and based on that we've [given advice]. [...] I always tell 'vervolgschoolcoaches' to try and stretch it until [the end of the first trimester], give students three months, and if it is not going well with the exams around Christmas time, then I understand that [the new school] might want to move the student to a lower level

(OKAN coordinator, 01.03.24)

Extending this trial period would enable schools and follow-up coaches to make a more adequate assessment of students' capacities. This would increase the likelihood that young newcomers fully develop their potential.

⁹ This system also makes it impossible to have a general insight into the number of children that are awaiting enrolment in OKAN education across Flanders.

¹⁰ Section 9, Omzendbrief SO 64, Structuur en organisatie van het voltijds secundair onderwijs (25.06.1999).

3. When Okan Students Become Adults

For OKAN students who reach the age of majority, there is **no systematic structure in place** to ensure a smooth transition to alternative forms of education or training that can **be combined with employment**. As an expert explains:

*I have a student now, for example, who needs to find work now. He also comes to school, every once in a while, he is absent a lot. He just turned 18, but he tells me: "Yes, miss, I need to start working because I need to pay everything myself". And yes, that's difficult. I don't think that he doesn't want to come to school, because he is a motivated student. He literally said that he would want to come to school, but that he also needs money...*¹¹

(OKAN coordinator, 26.10.2023)

As the above quote illustrates, the **financial concerns are particularly challenging for unaccompanied minors who turn 18 during the OKAN program**, who may have no family who they can financially rely on during this time. They become subject to additional requirements in order to continue to receive financial support, while appropriate assistance and advice during this period is lacking. Financial motivations (e.g. to fund family reunification procedures) are likely to influence their decision to seek employment rather than continue or finish their (secondary) education. This pushes young newcomers to stop their education, thus leading both to missed opportunities for young newcomers, and to a loss of human capital for the Flemish labour market

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

Various Flemish schools have adopted **flexible learning tracks** that enable students to develop at their own pace.

¹¹ For example, the costs to arrange family reunification can create a significant financial burden, see: Debruyne, P. (2024) 'Gezinshereniging onder druk; transnationaal sociaal werk', Mammoet.

¹² Emery, L. (2022). New to the game : a system analysis of the orientation process of newly arrived migrant students in Flemish secondary education. Free University Brussels. Faculty of Social Sciences & Solvay Business

They step away from the so-called *grammar of schooling*¹², the method which assumes that children in the same age group learn and develop in the same way, at the same pace. For young newcomers who enrol in regular secondary school, after the OKAN program, such flexible learning tracks would increase the chances of developing their full potential in terms of their achievements in both education and the labour market.¹³

Similar tracks are already being organized for **young newcomers who have had little to no prior schooling experience**. In Brussels, initiatives such as [Villa Veerkracht](#) and [La Petite Ecole](#) have developed a preparatory programme that allows children to familiarise themselves, at their own pace, with the structured school environment through a more flexible, personalised track. These help to orient young newcomers within the regular school system.

In Ghent, the initiative '[OriëntatieWerk](#)' 'provides young newcomers aged 18-28 with the opportunity to follow a **full-time, one-year program to further develop their Dutch language and other skills, and to explore different sectors of employment**. To ensure that they can fully focus on their education, this programme also reimburses childcare and travel expenses.

Also **BENO**, Basic Education after OKAN, offers students aged between 17 and 23 years an orientation year if the OKAN education followed has not yet given them sufficient knowledge and skills to take the next step towards a professional career. The programme focuses on both the reinforcement of competences and familiarisation with different vocational courses, allowing students to discover where their interests and talents lie. BENO pathways are organised in several Flemish cities.¹⁴

School ; Ghent University. Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, Brussels, Belgium ; Ghent, Belgium.

¹³ For more information on flexible learning tracks, see: Vandecandelaere, M. (2020) Flexibele leerwegen voor meertalige nieuwkomers' Lannoo Campus, Leuven.

¹⁴ See for example: [BENO Oostende](#).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

For municipalities and secondary schools¹⁵:

- Use the possibility of applying **flexible learning tracks**, as explained in *omzendbrief SO/2024/02*¹⁶, to allow students to develop and learn at their own pace¹⁷, as encouraged by the Flemish Coalition Agreement.¹⁸
- **Facilitate flexible learning tracks into adult education and the labour market** for pupils that turned 18 during or shortly after the OKAN year, as facilitated by the Flemish Coalition Agreement.¹⁹
- **Stimulate structural exchange and cooperation between schools, school networks, and the various organizations and actors that receive former-OKAN students aged 18+**, including organisations such as Ligo, CVO, VDAB, AGii.

For the Flemish Government, in particular the Ministry of Education and Training:

- Develop a **database that streamlines and combines the school's waiting lists for OKAN students**, so that there is an insight into the number of OKAN students awaiting their enrolment.²⁰
- Stimulate and support schools to offer flexible learning pathways and tailored support to ex-OKAN pupils. **Circulate a new 'omzendbrief' that substantially increases the 35-day trail period** to decide on the continuation of former OKAN-students educational tracks, thus revising paragraph 9 of 'omzendbrief SO 64'.
- **Ensure that the "more flexible"²¹ dual learning systems enable enrolment throughout the schoolyear and become more accessible to former-OKAN students by**

lowering the enrolment requirements²², to optimize the use of this program for newcomer students.

- **Ensure that learning tracks and trainings for young persons who wish to make the transition to the labour market are durable**, meaning that they are in line with the individual's talents and interests, whereby the labour market needs are considered secondary - see also our Policy Brief 7 on Durable Employment.
- **Take away practical obstacles** that may withhold 18+ students from continuing their education by providing funding for expenses such as transportation and daycare.

FURTHER READINGS

- Emery, L. (2021), 'De organisatie van OKAN-onderwijs wordt gekoloniseerd door de logica van het regulier onderwijs', *Welwijs*, 32(1).
- Seynhaeve, S., Vanbuel, M., Kavadias, D., & Deygers, B. (2024). Equitable education for migrant students? Investigating the educational success of newly arrived migrants in Flanders. *Frontiers in Education*, 9,
- Vlaamse Onderwijsraad (2018), *Onderwijs voor vluchtelingen: warm onthaal, vlotte leerloopbaan en duurzaam toekomstperspectief*.

¹⁵ Depending on the local context, this role could also be taken on by other local actors such as LOP.

¹⁶ Omzendbrief SO/2024.02, 'Flexibilisering in het secundair onderwijs, 20 August 2024.

¹⁷ For more information on flexible learning tracks, see: Vandecandelaere, M., (2020) Flexibele leerwegen voor meertalige nieuwkomers, Lannoo Campus: Leuven.

¹⁸ Flemish Government, [Flemish Coalition Agreement 2024-2029](#), p.140.

¹⁹ Flemish Government, [Flemish Coalition Agreement 2024-2029](#), p.148.

²⁰ See also: Kinderrechtencommissariaat, [Capaciteitstekort in OKAN: houd de vinger aan de pols - Advies](#), 2022-2023/12, 2023.

²¹ Flemish Government, [Flemish Coalition Agreement 2024-2029](#), p.148

²² Zie onder andere Omzendbrief SO/2019/01, 'Duaal leren en de aanloopfase', 13 March 2019.

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