

## Educational Policies that Address Social Inequality

# Belgium/Flanders case study report 1 Helping At Risk Students Gain Admission to Higher Education

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The EPASI project is a programme of analysis of educational programmes in fourteen European countries, designed to address various forms of social inequality. The project analysis was conducted in the period 2007 – 2009. This report is part of the overall project, details of which are at <http://www.epasi.eu>.

The analysis is intended to be used within the overall framework of the EPASI programme.

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The EPASI project was conducted by the following institutions:

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## Helping at risk students gain admission to Higher Education

### 1. Description

<b>Country</b>	BELGIUM, Flanders
<b>Title</b>	<b>Helping at risk students gain admission to Higher Education</b>
<b>Funded by</b>	KATHO
<b>Action implemented by</b>	KATHO
<b>Partners</b>	HOWEST University college West Flanders KULAK Catholic University of Leuven, department Kortrijk, 7 secondary schools, West Flanders pupil guidance centre City of Kortrijk
<b>Cost 2006-2007</b>	10% FTU, (approx. €5,000 / year) + overheads
<b>Where did it operate? Local, regional, national ...</b>	First year (experimental implementation): 7 secondary schools in Kortrijk  3 institutions of higher education with departments in Kortrijk, Tielt, Roeselare, Torhout, Bruges, Ostend  → pupils from all over the West Flanders province  During the second year, schools from other towns and organisations of the social midfield can also participate
<b>Target group (theme, or other)</b>	+ 17. Pupils in their final year of secondary education
<b>Theme (of 7 strands)</b>	Ethnic minorities, linguistic minorities, religious minorities, indigenous minorities, socio-economic disadvantage, gender, disabilities
<b>Duration from</b>	2006
<b>to</b>	→

## ***1.1 Rationale for action***

It has been pointed out that there is a problem with the intake, flow through and graduation of students from underprivileged groups into higher education.

Different hypotheses exist about the causes of this phenomenon.

The finding that pupils experience unequal opportunities to enter higher education has led to a declaration of commitment of the Flemish Higher Education: 'Diversity as an appreciation'.

The *Proefpas* ("sample pass" for higher education) is a concrete way to improve the opportunities to enter and to succeed in higher education for future students who are, at the time of first contact, in their final year of secondary education.

## ***1.2 What is the PROEFPAS ("Sample Pass for Higher Education")***

The *Proefpas* is a pass for higher education that is handed out to students who don't intend to enter higher education or where one suspects that crossing the bridge to higher education will not be without difficulties for the student.

There can be various reasons:

- lack of support at home
- disabilities
- learning disorders
- financial and practical problems
- lack of connection between secondary school and higher education etc.

A teacher of the secondary school assigns the *Proefpas*. This can be a subject teacher in consultation with other teachers and the class committee. The teacher's familiarity with and the knowledge of the students is crucial. Teachers who believe in the capacities of their students and notice that these students hesitate to enter higher education can use the *Proefpas* to give them a better view of the feasibility of higher education for them.

The *Proefpas* is thus an active attempt to encourage students who have the capacity to succeed in higher education but for whom obstacles to success can stand in the way. The *Proefpas* insists that the student and the institution look for ways to remove, compensate or avoid existing obstacles to enter and succeed in higher education, for instance by offering extra support.

This means the *Proefpas* is assigned because a teacher suspects that the student will have difficulties making the transition to higher education or will not enter higher education at all.

The *Proefpas* can also be assigned by a pupil guidance centre, or by the social midfield organisations (school community work, integration centre, centres for welfare migrants, association of and for needy people etc.). They may possibly have other concerns about the school career of the pupil, and decide that extra support will be needed. This way the *Proefpas* gives a voice to a group (target group, opportunity group) of people and may empower these groups as they are in a position to contact the institution for higher education through the organisation to which they belong. This does not mean the *Proefpas* is a 'target group policy' but there is a possibility to integrate actions for and from target groups in the overall plan.

Two characteristics of the *Proefpas* are very important.

- The secondary school teacher's knowledge of the student is important to support pupils with special educational needs. The bridging between higher education and secondary education leads to cooperation.
- The pupil never gets support because he or she belongs to a minority or target group. Support is given because of an educational need whether he or she belongs to a target group or not. Vice versa, it is not because potential students belong to a target group (eg migrant students) that they have an educational need by definition.

### ***1.3 What can a student do with the Proefpas?***

The student can, depending on his or her personal needs:

- ask for a conversation between their parents and the secondary school, institution of higher education and the pupil guidance centre
- attend some classes in the chosen faculty or department
- get acquainted with the campus
- get acquainted with students' social services
- participate in a language programme (language proficiency is a crucial factor for success in higher education)
- participate in a pre-trajectory student guidance (to think about what are his strong or weak points are, to anticipate on possible problems etc.)
- get acquainted with other students with the same problems
- etc.

One of the main advantages of the *Proefpas* is that pupils are registered earlier for student counselling and gain some valuable time. We often see students who come to student counselling in February, which means that students have to catch up. Hence they do not only have to manage their current courses, they also have to catch up, which is a difficult combination for some students.

The *Proefpas* allows student counselling services to take the initiative to address the issue early in the year.

It goes without saying that a student only subscribes to the initiatives that he feels answer to his personal needs.

### ***1.4 Why a Proefpas?***

The institutions of higher education – in cooperation with secondary schools and social services – want to trace the students with the potential to succeed in higher education but without the intention to take up that option for one or more reasons. Those reasons can be social, cultural, medical, and financial.

The targets of the *Proefpas* are:

- To offer optimal facilities for training so that students can find a good job on the labour market.
- To obtain a better intake, flow through and graduation in higher education of migrant students and students that stem from underprivileged families by means of a positive orientation based on their competencies and their interests.

- To offer a possibility to migrant and social centres to support students and their families in their entry to higher education.
- To offer a made to measure pre-trajectory and some activities to promote social and academic integration.
- To support higher education staff in dealing with diversity.
- To promote diversity in the student population.
- This project is specially geared towards improving the candidate's language skills. Good language skills are very important to succeed in higher education. A good mastery of language is also an important facilitator for integration in society.

### **1.5 How does it work?**

The *Proefpas* project has grown bottom up. Once the idea was launched and the partners were contacted, a steering group has put forward the practical outlines of the project. The steering group was and is composed of members of each participating organisation.

The department of education was informed and has expressed interest.

At the beginning of January 2007, the multidisciplinary teacher council decides which pupils receive a *Proefpas*. The pupils receive the *Proefpas* and both the pupil and the teacher fill in the *Proefpas* file. They discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the pupil and link it to the orientation files of the pupil guidance centre. The teacher expresses his or her views and invites the pupil to contact the *Proefpas* counsellor of higher education.

The first contact, by means of the internet or the phone, is the students' own initiative. This is because we want the students to take the study process in their own hands and because of privacy reasons. Belgian legislation is very strict about it.

After a first meeting and discussion about their *Proefpas* file, the students meet with the student counsellor of the department of their choice or with social services, enrol in a *Proefpas* initiative or make use of support provision (eg the use of Kurzweil software).

## **2. Results**

The *Proefpas* was internally evaluated by the steering group of the initiative. A report was sent to the governing body of the initiating and organising university college KATHO.

Other evaluation initiatives included the consultation of the secondary schools (managers, pupil counsellors and teachers), pupil guidance centres, departments of higher education, and of the students. Some quantitative information is also available (eg number of distributed passes, number of pupils who contacted the institutions for higher education, number of contacts, number of support provisions taken up, number of educational needs that were met, etc.).

The evaluation of the first year of action in the restricted area (limited implementation) shows us that five out of the seven participating secondary schools distributed 40 passes. Up until now students with the following educational needs have enrolled:

- Dyslexia
- Problems with the home front
- Financial and residential problems

- Orientation problems
- Working attitude problems
- Enrolment problems (residence permit, asylum)
- Linguistic skills

Other results included:

- Progress in bridging the gap between higher and secondary education
- Reaching out and awareness-raising: in every secondary school the *Proefpas* concept has been explained to the teachers of the last grade. This way they learn about issues related to higher education, which may lead to a better tuning between the two educational levels.
- This way we put transition from secondary school to higher education of pupils with underprivileged backgrounds once more on the agenda of the secondary schools. This perspective is taken into account when the results of the pupils are discussed in the council of teachers.
- The project demonstrates that the institutions of higher education value the expertise of secondary education and take it into account.
- Meeting opportunities for pupils of secondary education with the departments of their choice in the institutions of higher education were organised (eg 74 pupils visited the technical and management department. All parties concerned were very enthusiastic). The other participating secondary schools want to put similar actions on their agenda for 2007-2008.
- Discussions in the steering group of the project have led directly to some ‘fine-tuning’ between the curricula of secondary and higher education. This fine-tuning was experienced as effective and enriching by the institutions for higher education which want to programme similar meetings with other secondary schools during the next academic year.
- The *Proefpas* initiative has led to in-service training in pupil guidance centres.
- The *Proefpas* initiative has led to the start of a study group on linguistic skills for higher education. This study group is a cooperation between the different institutions for higher education involved in the project.
- Contacts with the secondary schools have led to cooperation on other initiatives eg application for funding and realisation of an “experimental garden on competence learning and emplacement learning”.
- Secondary and higher education have come to consider themselves partners with similar concerns for the educational trajectory of the student.
- Secondary schools are prepared to cooperate in higher education initiatives, eg pre-trajectory on language skills, implementing language tool for written courses, organising training on academic and instructional language, etc.

For the coming year, we want to make those results permanent, but we also want to extend the project:

- To a larger implementation field (more higher education institutions and more departments of the secondary schools, and to the social “mid-field” organisations of the regions concerned).

- With the extension of the *Proefpas* project to the social mid-field organisations as an actor in the distribution of the passes, we want to put the intake, flow through and graduation of higher education on their agenda.
- We want to enrich our joint venture agreement with the pupil guidance centres by allowing them to become active distributors of the *Proefpas*. Pupil guidance centres can be informed of special needs of pupils that we do not know anything about, but that can have an impact on participation in higher education.

It goes without saying that all applicants to the project are carefully registered. We register:

- Personal data as birth date, gender, family situation, language spoken at home and background.
- Secondary school the students attended including the educational level and subject.
- Special educational needs of the student (why did the student receive the *Proefpas*).
- What subject, discipline, and department of higher education does the student choose.
- Which university (college) he or she chose.
- Which support provision the student appealed to what was the student's experience in relation to that matter (quantitative and qualitative evaluation).
- Forms of support the student appealed to in secondary or primary education?
- Etc.

We do not intend to make any of these data public, of course. But it is interesting to know which obstacles make students apply for support, whether there is a difference between girls and boys, younger and older students, between the different educational levels, etc.

At a later stage, these data can be used to “fine-tune” the *Proefpas* project. Comparison between regions can also be interesting.

The aim of the project is to increase the intake, flow through and graduation of students from disadvantaged groups. A good registration should allow us to follow up those students properly.