

Higher enrolment fees put pressure on lifelong learning

Urgent opinion on adult education tuition fee increase

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Power lines

The adjustments to fees in adult education come in order to raise the millions needed to balance the budget. However, the increase in enrolment fees means an additional financial barrier to lifelong and life-wide learning in Flanders. This undermines the Flemish Government's own ambitions and the democratic character and decretal mission of adult education.

In adjusting enrolment fees, the Flemish government has chosen not to spare basic education courses (despite the high literacy needs in Flanders) and to hit language courses and another select group of courses labelled as 'hobby' courses in particular with higher prices. This will first and foremost have major consequences for the students who will no longer be able to pay for their training, but will also lead to a reduction of the training offer in adult education, with a related impact on staff.

The Flemish Education Council regrets that the plans also came about very late and without the necessary consultation with the sector. We ask the government to sit down with the educational and social partners as soon as possible to formulate transition measures if the planned measures go ahead. In the longer term, we would like to work with the government to shape a new inspiring project for adult education that offers a clear future perspective for trainees, staff and centres, and provides guidance for thoughtful and sustainable public policy.



1 Location

In order to achieve a balanced budget from 2027 onwards, the Flemish government planned to raise an additional 50 million euros a year from 2026 through adult education enrolment fees. For 2025, a revenue of 17 million euros has already been included in the penny book as well. To still introduce the new enrolment fees for courses starting from 1 September 2025, the Flemish Government adopted another amendment to the Programme Decree for the 2025 budget adjustment on 23 May.

Because of the major impact of the proposed adjustments on students, staff and course offerings, the Flemish Education Council is formulating an urgent own-initiative opinion to inform the Flemish Parliament about the potential impact of the increase in tuition fees.

2 Undermining ambitions around lifelong learning

In December 2021, the Flemish government published an action plan on lifelong learning.¹ In it, Flanders committed itself, in line with European ambitions, to achieve a 60% participation of the adult population in continuing education by 2030 (on an annual basis). In the Coalition Agreement 2024-2029, the Flemish Government also made a commitment around lifelong learning, namely to work on vocational training and lifelong learning for employees and jobseekers through a training offensive.

At the same time, we note that a curve has been set and the objectives around lifelong learning are being abandoned or even thwarted in various ways by various cuts. For instance, the budget for Flemish Training Leave has already been reduced by 5 million euros in anticipation of a reform,² VDAB has to make structural additional savings of 20 million euros each year until 2028,³ including by phasing out training offers, and adult education is now also becoming more expensive for a large group of course participants. Given that participation in lifelong learning is still far away from the target (measurements vary between 26 and 45%)⁴, it is extra problematic that the savings this legislature completely undermine the Flemish Government's ambition to reach 60% training participation. This is particularly unfortunate, because adult education is and should be precisely the engine for lifelong and life-wide learning in Flanders.

3 Threshold raising measures

In its amendment, the Flemish government itself assumes that there will be a decrease in the number of trainees due to the increase in registration fees, 'especially in the courses with a fee

¹ Flemish government (2021). [Lifelong learning action plan. Setting a course towards a learning Flanders](#).

² Minister Demir wants to reform Flemish training incentives (Flemish training leave, training cheques and the Flemish training credit) and career cheques by 2026. From then on, about 45 million euros would be available for all these measures combined. That is about half of the current budget of €89 million. See SERV (2025). [Opinion Effective use of Training Measures](#).

³ From 2028, the amount will remain €80 million a year.

⁴ Geraert, F., et al. (2024). [Monitoring report 2024: Individual training participation and ' training efforts employers in Flanders](#). Department of Work and Social Economy/Steunpunt Werk.



of 4 euros'.⁵ The Flemish Education Council follows that analysis: an increase in the registration fee undeniably has a threshold-raising effect and threatens the democratic and affordable character of adult education. Students who want to enrol, but also those who are already enrolled for a course starting on 1 September and certainly those who have already started a course, suddenly find themselves facing higher costs.

These measures go directly against the ambition in the Coalition Agreement 2024-2029 that CVOs should work in a more threshold-reducing way because short-skilled people would not make enough use of the training on offer in adult education.⁶ The ambitions in the Coalition Agreement to further focus on functional, financial and digital literacy are also thwarted in this way.⁷ In this opinion, we focus on the adjustments that will have the greatest impact.

3.1 In basic education and second-chance education

For example, students in basic education will have to pay a standard fee of 0.30 euros per lesson time (for courses that are not Dutch as a second language). However, the PIAAC results at the end of 2024 showed that a sixth of the adult population remains low-literate and the gap between high and low literacy in Flanders has increased significantly over the past 10 years.⁸ The Flemish Education Council remains convinced of the great importance of literacy skills to fully participate in society and recently issued an advice to close the literacy gap.⁹ However, since 1 January 2025, the government no longer has a coordinated plan to set up a literacy policy. Now additional barriers are being added just for those who need this training the most.

However, the government's plans also include a reduced rate of EUR 0.03 per class time 'because of social importance' for literacy modules, courses from the study area of (supplementary) general education and courses from the study area of special educational needs (from secondary adult education). Why are not all courses in basic education included in this group because of their social importance? "¹⁰

This does raise the question of the added value of a fee of 0.03 euros per lesson time. If the social interest is indeed so high, remove all barriers immediately. This amount has mainly a high symbolic value as it will yield comparatively little to the Flemish budget, but nevertheless provides a real threshold for the most vulnerable target groups. It does involve a large administrative burden, however, where the centres for basic education are not prepared to suddenly, at very short notice, charge enrolment fees for all

⁵ [Note to the Flemish Government: Government amendment to the preliminary draft programme decree to the 2025 budget adjustment - Education and Training, 23 May 2025, p. 4.](#)

⁶ See p. 151 in [the Coalition Agreement of the Flemish Government 2024-2029](#).

⁷ Functional literacy: p. 151; financial and digital literacy: p. 156 in [the Coalition Agreement of the Flemish Government 2024-2029](#).

⁸ Dewulf, L., et al. (2024). [Skills for tomorrow's challenges. Flemish results of PIAAC 2023](#). University of Ghent.

⁹ Flemish Education Council, Lifelong and Lifewide Learning Council. [Closing the literacy gap. Opinion following the results of the PIAAC survey](#), 6 May 2025.

¹⁰ Minister Demir seemed to announce the same in the plenary session of the Flemish Parliament: "Basic education and second-chance education: they remain particularly cheap, 0.03 euro per hour". [Flemish Parliament, Plenary session, 28 May 2025](#).



trainees to collect. They are now yet to start informing trainees once the legacy process is complete.

3.2 For vulnerable target groups

This policy measure has an impact on several vulnerable target groups in society who can no longer avail of a fee exemption. Detainees specifically seem to have been overlooked in this amendment. After all, the Adult Education Decree stipulates that CVOs and Ligo may not charge enrolment fees to detainees.¹¹ They rarely have their own financial resources and have limited access to paid work.

The amendment now includes no structural exemption from registration fees for detainees, so courses with registration fees (such as supplementary general education, ICT and various vocational courses) risk disappearing from the offer. This eliminates $\frac{2}{3}$ of the offer in prisons and leaves mainly NT2 courses, with drastic consequences for the education and probation opportunities of detainees.

3.3 In secondary adult education

The amendment stipulates that a student will have to pay 1 euro per class hour for a course with a structural bottleneck character, namely from the study areas of general personal care, specific personal care, large transport, refrigeration and heat, mechanics-electricity and carpentry.¹² This is a reduction of 0.5 euro per hour to encourage participation in these courses, but at the same time the ceiling of 300 euro per course per semester is increased to 450 euros. As a result, the cost of (intensive) vocational training will not decrease, but increase. Among others, for (part-time) working trainees who want to retrain, this will form an extra threshold, while in policy areas such as care, the focus is precisely on learning by working people through workplace learning (including dual learning) ...

For other vocational courses, the cost is increased to 2.25 euros per class time. For a specific group of courses that "would not or to a much lesser extent" provide access to the labour market, including many language courses, the cost is even increased to 4 euros per class time. These are courses from the following fields of study:

- Craft accessories
- Beverage knowledge
- European main languages guideline 1 and 2
- European secondary languages guideline 1 and 2
- European languages guideline 3 and 4
- Photography
- Hebrew
- Domestic cooking
- Home decoration and sewing techniques
- Fashion tailoring
- Fashion realisations
- Oriental languages

¹¹ [Decree on adult education. Article 113novies, paragraph 4, 5°.](#)

¹² These are not all courses that prepare for a bottleneck profession, which are tracked by VDAB in the [bottleneck profession list](#).



- Scandinavian languages
- Slavic languages
- Textiles

That offer will become structurally inaccessible to a large population group, which will certainly require social corrections. However, the amendment states that no reduction in tuition fees is possible for those courses, nor is there a ceiling on tuition fees per course per semester, making competition with other (public) courses difficult.

A transitional measure is provided for students enrolled in a number of courses in combination with the Supplementary General Education course in the 2024-2025 academic year.¹³ Until 1 September 2028, they will pay the new standard fee of 2.25 euros per teaching time of a module instead of the increased fee of 4 euros per teaching time of a module for the courses Diamondworker, Jewellery Designer/Goldsmith, Bespoke Women's Patterns, Bespoke Men's Patterns, Sommelier or Professional Photographer. It is good that these courses that (in combination with general education) can lead to a diploma do not receive a maximum increase in the registration fee. We ask that this temporary transitional measure be enrolled structurally.

4 The end of language training and life-wide learning in adult education?

The 2007 decree on adult education describes its mission as follows: "The objective of adult education is, on the one hand, to provide learners with the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for personal development, social functioning, further participation in education, practising a profession or mastering a language and, on the other hand, to enable learners to obtain recognised certificates of study."¹⁴

The increase of the enrolment fee to 4 euros per tuition hour for certain courses in secondary adult education raises an important barrier to fulfilling its mission under the decree, with regard to personal development and mastering a language. In its 2024 opinion on the funding of adult education, the Flemish Education Council already noted that the new funding decree and social demand have already led to a shift towards more intensive qualifying pathways.¹⁵ Thus, adult education succeeds in its mission of becoming more qualification-oriented, but the function of broad personality formation comes under pressure.

The Flemish Government's choice to hit the students in these courses the hardest and to almost triple the cost of these courses will inevitably reduce the intake significantly. After all, students will drop out for financial reasons or switch to private provision if they can afford it. Centres will therefore be forced out of financial necessity to reduce their offerings in these courses, which now account for 21.68% of the

¹³ These are courses from the study areas Craft accessories, Beverage knowledge, Photography and Fashion: customisation.

¹⁴ [Decree on adult education. Article 3, paragraph 1.](#)

¹⁵ Flemish Education Council, Lifelong and Life-wide Learning Council. [Investing in lifelong and life-wide learning](#), 26 March 2024.



training offerings of CVOs and are already under pressure due to the current funding mechanisms.¹⁶ Centres will be left with expensive investments and trainees will have to move further and further afield to still get their desired training, leading to further shrinkage of enrolment.¹⁷ The phasing out of training courses will also have a major impact on the appointment of teachers within these courses. Such upheaval calls for a major restructuring plan for the sector with a focus on reaffection and in-service training.

This measure is therefore not a mere austerity exercise, but rather a fundamental revision of the mission of adult education, which omits person development and language training. The Flemish Government's interpretation of labour market-oriented training is also too one-sided, focusing too little on broad education and life-wide learning. Nevertheless, the labour market demands more and more general education and human-centric skills.¹⁸ The Vlor has long emphasised the importance of life-wide learning alongside labour market-oriented learning.¹⁹ Life-wide learning has an important socialising function and has broader positive effects such as increased independence.²⁰ Moreover, life-wide learning also increases learning motivation.

Broad person development in basic education will also come under pressure with the introduction of enrolment fees for all trainees. This will lead to a reduction in intake into the courses and reduction in sustained participation in a variety of modules that work on broad literacy skills. This will also have far-reaching implications for the staff of the Ligos.

Finally, we note that a significant part of the courses that now have to charge maximum registration fees are also labour market-oriented and meet a real demand from the business world, such as courses in national languages (French and German) and English.²¹ VDAB figures show that of the vacancies open, French is demanded in 17.6% of cases and English (sometimes both) in 17.2% of cases.²² At the Centre for Living Languages, even 30% of trainees take their courses for professional reasons and 10% of trainees for educational reasons, such as preparation for study abroad.²³

Minister Demir himself indicated as recently as January 2025 that adult education has an important role to play here: "The supply of jobseekers with a knowledge of foreign languages who are

¹⁶ Incidentally, these courses are unevenly distributed among adult education centres, with some centres seeing a (very) large percentage of their courses affected.

¹⁷ Here, then, there is also the threat of a centralisation of provision, while one of the explicit policy objectives of the adult education funding decree is to move towards economies of scale without centralisation of provision.

¹⁸ World Economic Forum (2025). *The Future of Jobs Report*. p. 40. This report refers, among other things, to "analytical thinking; creative thinking; resilience, flexibility and agility" ... "Moreover, leadership and social influence, curiosity and lifelong learning, systems thinking, talent management, and motivation and self-awareness solidify their importance, emphasising the continued relevance of human-centric skills amid rapid technological advances."

¹⁹ In life-wide learning, the personal development and social participation of the learner are central. Both lifewide and labour market-oriented learning are part of lifelong learning, see Flemish Education Council, General Council. *Promoting lifelong learning through cooperation. Advice on the lifelong learning action plan 'Koers zetten naar een lerend Vlaanderen'*, 24 February 2022.

²⁰ We refer to, among others, de Greef, M. & de Haan, M. (2024). *The impact of adult education on social inclusion in Flanders. Quantitative research on the impact of adult education*.

²¹ See Voka's 2019 call: Decroubele P. (2019, 11 March). Language learning among adults is in free fall. VRT NWS. <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2019/03/11/talenonderwijs-bij-volwassen-is-in-vrije-val/>.

²² Minister Zuhair Demir's reply to a written question by Ine Tondeur. 31/01/2025.

²³ Boufflette, M. (2025, 26 May). In 'Centre Levende Talen in Leuven regrets price hike in language training adult education'. VRT NWS. <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2025/05/26/leuvens-centrum-levende-talen->

[regrets-price-rise-language-training-idi/](#)



meets employer demand has shrunk solidly over the years. There is a discrepancy between supply and demand, not only quantitatively, but especially qualitatively. If a foreign language adds value on the labour market, good to very good knowledge is predominantly required. A lot of jobseekers can present a basic knowledge or notions. Pathways in adult education can help close this gap."

5 The future of adult education

5.1 More savings, higher barriers and less training supply?

The expected additional revenue from these measures is €36.4 million. However, the government itself already indicates that this amount will not be met because of two reasons:

- A drop in the number of students will also have an impact on the registration fees collected.
- The budget for adult education premiums (a necessary reimbursement for students who obtain their diploma through second-chance education)²⁴ will have to be increased.

VDAB will also have to provide a higher budget to refund course participants' registration fees, which is very challenging given their shrinking budget. We stress that vocational training should remain free of charge for jobseekers.

The Flemish Education Council expects that these measures will immediately have a major impact on course participants, supply and staff. At the same time, we are concerned about further savings to come.²⁵ For example, the Flemish Government is planning a reform of the registration fee for Dutch as a second language (NT2) courses in the short term, and a research/expenditure test is planned to map out labour-focused adult courses at VDAB (which are to be phased out because of savings), Syntra and adult education with a view to better alignment.

5.2 Thoughtful and sustainable policies are made together

The new adult education funding decree has still not been evaluated and these adjustments make a clear evaluation of the impact much more difficult. The evaluation was rather delayed because of the fluctuations due to the corona measures, while the increased enrolment fees have at least as heavy an impact on adult education. An adjustment of enrolment fees would be better implemented after a thorough examination of the impact and the functioning of the current funding mechanisms. A reform of this magnitude should also fit into a broader vision of the future of adult education.

The intention in the government amendment that the "effects of the changed enrolment fee will be monitored and, if necessary, adjusted" is not enough in this sense. If enrolments decline and supply is then reduced and teachers are deployed elsewhere, an adjustment cannot be of much benefit. It is not good governance that this disruptive decision

²⁴ It is crucial to retain these premiums to encourage young adults to complete their degrees, as rightly provided for in the government amendment.

²⁵ Indeed, the Flemish Government's penny book mentions a structural saving from adult education amounting to 50 million euros a year.



to adjust enrolment fees is taken so late without thorough consultation with the sector. This way, there is no time for a comprehensive and data-informed advisory process (including simulations), the measures seem ad hoc and hardly any room is left for readjustments in talks with education providers and unions. Centres, moreover, cannot adequately prepare for the new school year. As a result, adult education cannot assume its role as a reliable and responsible employer.

Adult education is keen to help build the future in the short and longer term, both as a partner and as a solution to societal challenges.


If the plans in this amendment go ahead, the government should immediately sit down with the education and social partners to come up with transition measures, such as the adjustment of the rationalisation standard, opportunities for centres to reorient their offerings, accompanying measures for staff and a restructuring plan.

In the longer term, we want to help shape an inspiring project for a future adult education in function of a prosperous and inclusive Flanders. The adjustment of enrolment fees is yet another step in adjusting adult education. The following plans have already been announced: the reform of the NT2 registration fee and the redesign of the VDAB-Syntra adult education programme. We fear that adult education will be faced with new measures each time, forcing the centres to make adjustments without a transparent and supported long-term plan. After all, such adjustments invariably have major consequences for learners, staff, supply and infrastructure. Such an approach also makes for inefficient use of public funds.

That is why we would like, together with the policy, to help shape an inspiring future project for adult education. The centres, teachers and course participants demand nothing more than a clear perspective, a long-term vision with relevant and widely supported assignments and commitments for Flemish adult education.



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