

Summary and Policy Recommendations

1 Evaluation of ESF interventions in the System of Learning and Working

1.1 Introduction

The European Social Fund (ESF) finances interventions in Flemish secondary education to tackle early school leaving and promote the transition to the Normal Economic Circuit (NEC) (ESF, 2018). In particular, it concerns the ESF interventions bridging project (or start-up phase¹) and IBAL in the System of Learning and Working in part-time vocational secondary education (DBSO in Dutch) and the motivation bonus in the alternating vocational training in special needs secondary education form 3 (ABO BuSO OV3 in Dutch) (Department of Education and Training, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c; Flemish Government, 2019). Table 1 gives a brief description of the three ESF interventions.

Table 1: Brief description of the ESF interventions

ESF interventions	Teaching format	Description
BRIDGING (analogous to the <i>start-up phase</i>)	DBSO	Young people who are almost ready for work are eligible for a bridging project. A young person in the bridging project is supervised by a bridging coach from an ESF-funded legal entity. The bridging coach acts as a mediator between the school, the young person, and the employer. A bridging coach looks for a suitable bridging location for the young person, usually an employer in the social economy. Efforts are made to develop the young person's employment-oriented attitudes and skills. The bridging coach comes from an ESF-funded legal entity or organiser (who is not part of the CDO - Centre for part-time education), which receives ESF funding for their activities in the context of the bridging project. The project takes a maximum period of 800 hours (18h/week).
IBAL	DBSO	Young people who are ready and willing to work can participate in IBAL. In this phase of their educational career, young people look for an actual work place themselves. In contrast to the bridging project, this is therefore no longer the task of the IBAL coach. The IBAL coach acts as a mediator between the school, the young person, and the employer. The IBAL coach comes from an ESF-funded legal entity or organiser (who is not part of the CDO - Centre for part-time education), which receives ESF funding for their activities in the context of the IBAL project. Students can receive IBAL guidance for up to 25 hours over a maximum period of 6 months.
Motivation bonus	ABO BuSO OV3	Young people who successfully complete phase 3 in the BuSO can voluntarily take part in alternating vocational training (ABO in Dutch) for one year. If the young person exceeds the threshold of 1200 hours in ABO, of which at least 400 hours of training and 700 hours of work experience, they are entitled to a motivation bonus of €500. This motivation bonus is financed by the ESF.

In the report of KU Leuven HIVA, commissioned by the Department of Education and Training, the researchers evaluated the effectiveness of the three ESF interventions. The evaluation was made on the basis of a brief literature study, 20 interviews with young people and their supervisors involved in the ESF interventions, and an impact analysis based on administrative data. The interviews were held in the autumn of 2018, and the administrative dates cover the period 2014-2018. This summary describes the main results of the research, and proposes policy recommendations.

¹ During the period of the research, the bridging project was still referred to. This bridging project corresponds to the *start-up phase* referred to in the Flemish Government (2019).

1.2 Early school leaving

The report started by analysing the causes of early school leaving as outlined in the literature. Early school leaving has a wide range of causes, including: child poverty and family problems, having bad friends, drugs and alcohol abuse, lack of study motivation, no affinity with the subject or school, low test scores, fear of failure, and unauthorised truancy (Cabus, 2017). Rumberger (2001, 2011) classifies these causal factors of early school leaving into four groups: the student, family, the school and the environment. A student at risk of early school leaving is often confronted with multiple problems at home and at school (De Witte et al., 2013). Tinto (1975) and Finn (1985) show that students with multiple problems primarily drop out of school when they can no longer identify with the school. This is called the process of student attrition.

In order to address the process of student attrition, policy makers can focus on various measures. The European Union classifies these measures as 'preventive measures'; 'interventions'; and 'compensatory measures' (Council of the European Union, 2011). Preventive measures prevent the development of negative feelings towards the school. In particular, preventive measures are aimed at a better match between the student and the school. Measures to achieve this relate to school characteristics and school organisation and are therefore implemented at a higher institutional level (i.e. school policy level or public policy).

In the context of the ESF interventions, the category 'preventive measures' also includes an alternative way of organising education. **Indeed, DBSO in Flanders is an alternative to vocational secondary education.** The combination of training at school and work experience in an actual company offers an alternative for young people who are no longer motivated to spend a whole day at school. Interviews with young people and their supervisors confirm this. Young people believe that DBSO accommodates their intention to work without losing the opportunity to obtain their diploma of secondary education.

Under the category of interventions, we can include measures that support at-risk youngsters in their educational career. In this case, mentoring is often highlighted as an effective tool to combat early school leaving. In particular, mentoring focuses on three different aspects: attendance, a commitment to school, and personal problems (Mac Iver, 2011; Sinclair et al., 2005; Maynard et al., 2014; van der Steeg et al., 2015). **Mentoring is adapted to the situation of the young person.** There is a clear parallel between the ESF interventions bridging project and IBAL and the mentoring programmes highlighted in the literature. First of all, there is an extensive offering of supervision for the young person. Supervision of the young people is indeed provided by different parties: the project mentor at school, the bridging or IBAL coach (ESF-funded legal entity), and the mentor in the workplace. Secondly, there is the focus on supervision tailored to the young person. Sometimes the focus is on the school

situation, in other cases more on work, depending on the situation of the young person. This flexibility has been identified by the Learning and Working Institute (2019) as a crucial element of a successful bridging project. In addition, bridging and IBAL coaches often act as **bridging figures** that form the link between the young person and the mentor/employer at the workplace or school.

Compensatory measures are designed for young people who have already left school early. Their aim is to lead young people towards obtaining a diploma of secondary education or certificate. Lessons from the literature on compensatory measures are rather limited because ESF interventions are not compensatory measures. However, there is a certain degree of overlap between the target group of (ESF) interventions for young people in the DBSO and the target group for compensatory measures. Many young people who start in DBSO have already had one or more periods of leaving school without qualifications. The literature sometimes refers to 'stopouts' (as opposed to 'dropouts' who have definitively left school early). A profile description of 7,210 young people in DBSO in the report of KU Leuven HIVA shows that **around 1 in 5 young people were problematically absent** from their previous school before entering DBSO. Although the re-entry of young people into education is not a defined goal in itself for the ESF interventions, young people can benefit from ESF interventions that aim to support them in obtaining a diploma or certificate in order to enhance their employability. The idea of compensation through increased employability of the young person in the labour market through training, which is typical for bridging projects and IBAL, can also be found in the measures contained in the literature (e.g. Schochet et al., 2008; Alegre et al., 2015).

1.3 Positive selection

Many young people who start in DBSO have a more challenging profile than, for example, young people in vocational secondary education (Flemish Education Council, 2019). However, the most challenging profiles are not *selected* in a bridging project, IBAL or ABO BuSO OV3. In the report, we discuss a **three-stage selection**. In a first stage, young people are screened for their (quasi-) readiness and willingness to work. Students are selected in an ESF intervention when they lack employment-oriented attitudes and skills (bridging project) or when those attitudes and skills need to be adjusted (IBAL). It is the task of the project mentors (at school) to determine which students fit within which profile (Flemish Education Council, 2011). The second stage in the selection procedure consists of finding a suitable organiser (ESF-funded legal entity). **In practice, however, the choice of an organiser appears to be limited.** Nonetheless, selecting an organiser determines (1) which bridging or IBAL coach the student receives at a later stage; and (2) which employers or workplaces are available for the student (in bridging projects) with this organiser.² Selecting the 'right' workplace for the student

² At this point it is important to emphasise the difference between a bridging or IBAL intervention. As regards the IBAL intervention, the selection of the workplace is not part of the intervention. It is the student who - with

is the third stage in the three-stage selection. In the interviews, the bridging coaches stress the fact that finding a suitable workplace is crucial to the success of a bridging project. As such, they try to take various criteria into account during this selection: a match between the profile of the student and the workplace (match between the study areas and programme, match with the supervision style of the mentor, etc.), the proximity of the workplace, the wishes of the student (in terms of the tasks and type of workplace) and the pedagogical qualities of the mentors. Ideally, a work place scores well on all these criteria. However, this is not always possible in practice; given the limited number of bridging places, the organisers cannot make too many demands.

The three-stage selection means that young people with better profiles in terms of competences and attitudes are more likely to be selected. This positive selection of young people in bridging projects and IBAL received special attention in the third section impact analysis of the KU Leuven HIVA report. The starting point of the impact analysis is to find a relevant control group in the data for students in ESF interventions. Students are selected in the control group if they have not followed an intervention and on the basis of their background characteristics. However, the researchers do not observe which competences, attitudes or study motivation students have. If these traits of the students are insufficiently monitored, there may be a bias in the estimated effects of ESF interventions. In accordance with the literature on impact analysis, we refer to this as selection bias. Due to selection bias, the researchers applied different research methods and performed robustness analyses. This brings us to the effectiveness of the ESF interventions.

1.4 Effectiveness of the ESF interventions bridging project and IBAL

In the following section, we discuss the effectiveness of the bridging project and IBAL. Using propensity score matching (see Table 2), and controlling for selection bias as mentioned in the previous section (cf. the three-stage selection), we conclude that the bridging project is not significantly effective in reducing early school leaving and facilitating the progression to NEC. When we control for selection bias, this means in concrete terms that we take into account the initial positive affinity and motivation for learning and working among young people selected in bridging projects. In other words, a positive affinity and motivation for learning and working is an important prerequisite for obtaining a diploma in DBSO, as well as an important precondition for the success of bridging projects.

or without the support of a supervisor (cf. IBAL to provide orientation) or under the influence of the school - makes and realises the selection. This is different in the bridging intervention, where the school chooses an organiser and the supervisor of that organisation is then given the task of leading the student towards a workplace (within the social economy, for example).

Table 2: Research methodologies per intervention

Intervention	Methodology	Description
Bridging project	Propensity score matching	In this method, we compare the results of the intervention group with the results of a control group. This control group consists of youngsters who, based on their background characteristics had an equal chance of being assigned to a bridging project, but ultimately did not follow a bridging project.
IBAL	Propensity score matching	In this method, we compare the results of the intervention group with the results of a control group. This control group consists of youngsters who, based on their background characteristics had an equal chance of being assigned to a IBAL-project, but ultimately did not follow an IBAL-project.
ABO OV3	Propensity score matching	In this method, we compare the results of the intervention group with the results of a control group. This control group consists of youngsters who, based on their background characteristics were just as likely to participate in ABO BuSO OV3, but ultimately chose not to do so.
Motivation bonus	Regression discontinuity design	In this method, we compare the outcome measures of the youngsters just before and just after the cut-off value of 1200 hours in ABO. The method assumes that these youngsters are similar, except in their position with respect to the cut-off value. The difference in outcomes between the group above and the group below the cut-off value of 1200 hours can then be attributed to the intervention.

* Propensity score matching (PSM) consists of two steps. In the first step, for each student in an ESF intervention, a comparable student is sought without intervention based on their background characteristics. This creates a comparable control group for the intervention group. In the second step, the outcomes (early school leaving, transition to the labour market) of students in the intervention group are compared with those of the control group. Source: Own handling of Caliendo & Kopeinig (2005); Hahn et al. (2011).

We would like to make a few important remarks regarding our results. Firstly, it is the explicit purpose of bridging projects to teach young people employment-oriented attitudes and skills. Outflow (with qualifications) is not the end in itself. Progression to NEC after leaving school is therefore not the goal of bridging projects either. Preparing young people for a job in an actual company as part of their educational pathway in the System of Learning and Working is therefore much more a goal of bridging projects. **As such, we believe it is (more) important to look at the continuity between the bridging project and the IBAL project in order to identify successful bridging projects.** In the data, we observe that only 16% of the 1,990 young people in bridging projects start in IBAL. And it emerges from the interviews that IBAL workplaces remain underutilised.

In order to explain even more clearly why (among other things) the continuity between bridging and IBAL was rather limited in the period of observation 2014-2018, the researchers held **focus groups** among the provincial consultation forums in the final phase of the research. The structure of these focus groups are discussed in detail in Chapter 2 Policy recommendations. Various causes were identified during the focus groups, namely: the negative perception on the part of project mentors

compared to the IBAL coaches; the negative perception on the employers' side that an 'extra supervisor' would create more work for them; insufficient referral of schools to IBAL; lack of commitment to 'learning to apply for jobs' from the bridging projects; and insufficient organisers and/or offering of workplaces. In addition, it is recalled that IBAL was only recently introduced, while bridging projects have been around for 20 years. Finally, the participants in the focus groups point out that the CDO/CLW (Centres for Learning and Working) themselves ensure the continuity of young people throughout their educational careers. There is therefore less affinity with IBAL.

However, we conclude from our research that IBAL is effective in reducing early school leaving and promoting progression to NEC. After checking again for selection bias, we estimate 14 percentage points significantly less chance of early school leaving and 7 percentage points significantly more chance of progression to NEC. From the interviews, we can distil some explanatory elements in identifying these positive results. On the one hand, IBAL aims to create an optimal match between supply and demand of attitudes and skills on the labour market. The literature shows that the supply of skills matches the needs of the labour market rather well, facilitating a smooth transition from school to work (Somers & Cabus, 2017; Somers, Cabus, Groot, Maasen van den Brink, 2018). Interventions, which aim to promote the transition from education to the labour market, should therefore not only focus on obtaining a diploma of secondary education *in itself*, but also on teaching the skills required by employers (Cahuc et al., 2017).

On the other hand, IBAL, whether or not in combination with bridging projects, makes the young person resilient, so that they can participate in the labour market as a fully-developed person. Mentoring appears to play a crucial role in this regard. As discussed earlier, young people in vocational education are more likely to be tired of school than young people in general secondary education, because they are confronted with different problems at home and at school and because they can no longer identify with school. They lack (more often) the attitudes that are essential for successful entry into the labour market, compared to motivated young people. At the same time, young people in vocational education already make the choice between school and work much more quickly than young people in general secondary education. In this context, reference is made to the opportunity cost of training: every additional year in education is weighed against one year's income from working. The opportunity costs for students in vocational education are generally higher than for young people in general secondary education, which can lead to early termination of their educational career (Cabus and Haelermans, 2017). Interventions, which incorporate the actual context of work in education, can therefore motivate young people, especially in vocational education, to go to school. And from this commitment to work, also have more chance to obtain their diploma of secondary education. Mentoring enables young people to (re)engage positively with education. The interviews with

supervisors also show that they primarily focus on mental skills such as perseverance, independence and (daring to) take initiative, but also on employment-oriented attitudes such as punctuality, attendance, collegiality, and a good work tempo.

1.5 Effectiveness of the motivation bonus in ABO BuSO OV3

In order to estimate the effectiveness of the motivation bonus, the researchers carried out two different analyses (see Table 2). The first analysis only looked at the effects of the motivation bonus on the progression to NEC. In the second analysis, we looked at the return of ABO BuSO OV3 in terms of the chance of employment after leaving school. Once again, the analyses use the estimation methods regression discontinuity design³ and propensity score matching⁴ (above).

The results of the first analysis show that the motivation bonus does not significantly increase the progression to NEC. **Young people fluctuating around the threshold of 1,200 hours are indeed comparable, also in terms of their outcomes on the labour market.** On the other hand, the second analysis of the study shows that an additional year in ABO BuSO OV3 has a positive return on the labour market. We estimate 18 percentage points more chance of progression to NEC up to 6 months after leaving school among young people participating in the voluntary year in ABO BuSO OV3 and compared to non-participants in this form of education. We therefore conclude that participating in the additional year is more important for the young person than the achieved number of hours in learning and working.

These results were also discussed with the regional consultative forums during the focus groups. Participants in the focus groups employed in BuSO confirmed the results, in the sense that they encourage all young people and their parents to participate in ABO BuSO OV3 after completing phase 3, *until they have found a job*.

2 Policy recommendations

In this last chapter, we discuss four policy recommendations resulting from the KU Leuven HIVA evaluation report. This report used various methods to evaluate the ESF interventions bridging, IBAL and ABO BuSO OV3. In addition to these scientific insights, which form the basis of the policy

³ For the first analysis, the researchers looked at students in ABO BuSO OV3 who were just below the threshold of 1,200 hours, and just above this threshold. It is assumed that these students are similar in terms of background characteristics, while the chances of obtaining the motivation bonus vary between these young people depending on whether they have achieved 1,200 hours in ABO. The RDD method uses the threshold of 1,200 hours to estimate the effectiveness of the motivation bonus.

⁴ In the second analysis, PSM was applied to make students who choose ABO comparable to students who do not choose ABO. In this way, the return of one extra year can be estimated in ABO BuSO OV3.

recommendations, in this section we will also refer to focus groups in the regional consultation forums organised by the researchers between October 2019 and March 2020. In particular, the conclusions of the research were discussed during the focus groups (first round) together with several propositions regarding these conclusions (second round). In the first round, a short internet survey was conducted just after the presentation of the research. In a second round, the participants in the focus groups discussed the propositions with each other and also gave the researchers a concise summary of their main findings in polling devices, supplemented with their personal notes. We incorporate the scientific insights and focus groups as much as possible in policy recommendations in four domains, namely:

- Strengthening the optimal match between the characteristics and needs of young people and the workplace (2.1).
- Ensuring continuity in the supervision of young people: between bridging project and IBAL (2.2).
- Schools need (resources for) specialised customisation to support young people with an accumulation of problems in their educational careers (2.3).
- Creating incentives for participation in ABO BuSO OV3 is more important than rewarding the number of hours in alternating learning (2.4).

In the following section, the policy recommendations in these four areas are discussed.

2.1 Strengthening the optimal match between the characteristics and needs of young people and the workplace (2.1).

The interviews among stakeholders in bridging projects, which were discussed in part 2 of the evaluation report, show that there is a shortage of organisers. For example, the CDO where the researchers held interviews had only 1 or 2 organisers at their disposal. Nonetheless, it is the organiser who builds a network with potential employers (primarily in the social economy) for the bridging projects. In addition, there often appears to be insufficient choice for an organiser in the vicinity of the school, resulting in a lack of diversity of workplaces. The focus groups at the regional consultation forums confirm this last bottleneck, and indicate that this problem is even more acute in rural areas. **This lack of diversity of workplaces can hamper an optimal match between student and employer.** However, an optimal match was identified in the research as an important precondition for successful bridging projects.

Recommendations: It is necessary to deploy (ESF) resources to facilitate a wide and diverse range of organisers. This is the only way to really align with the characteristics and needs of young people. Nonetheless, the question remains as to how best direct young people to the appropriate

organisers. A diversity of organisers should not result in (more) fragmentation or to extra workload for the schools or organisers. In this sense, an increase in the diversity of organisers goes hand in hand with good coordination in guiding young people to the most suitable organiser. This can be done, for example, by linking one organiser to a school, in consultation with the school, who takes on the task of 'dispatcher'. This means that the '*organiser-dispatcher*' searches, together with the school and the young person, for the most suitable organiser and takes on the further practical coordination. Some of the participants of the focus groups indicated that this is already spontaneously organised in this way, and that they had found this method of working to be successful.

An optimal match between the young person and the workplace can also be hampered by difficult communication between the school and the organiser. That is why a **good relationship and communication between the school and the organiser(s) is necessary to place students in the best possible position**. For example, it was found in parts 2 and 3 of the evaluation report that there is only a low participation rate in IBAL projects. Interviews with project mentors show that very few people chose these projects at the start of IBAL because there was a negative perception of the IBAL coaches. The bridging projects also (sometimes) face resistance from the school. This negative perception is mainly related to the fact that the IBAL or bridging coaches are external persons who, in their experience, intervene in the pathway they have already taken with the students in question. If there is resistance, it undermines effective cooperation between the school and the organiser, and indirectly also the pathway of the young person him or herself. Schools can start to see the usefulness and necessity, if in this way more young people can receive (intensive) supervision in their pathway at the workplace (if they do not have time for this themselves) or if the bridging or IBAL coaches have complementary expertise with regard to the project mentors, for example, to keep young people motivated.

Recommendation: In order to prevent negative perceptions or resistance on the part of actors from obstructing the pathways of young people, we therefore advocated investing more in communication about the pathway, in the early stages. The provincial consultation forums can provide a platform in this regard, in order to create more support between the partners involved. This means that the actors are given the necessary explanation as to why and to what purpose a new feature has been introduced. Before actors are willing to participate, they need a convincing motivational framework. It is therefore quite clear from the outset what the added value can be for schools and students of working with actors. We tested this recommendation with the participants in the focus groups. Not all participants appeared to be convinced of the added value of bridging or IBAL coaches,

especially if the relationship between project mentors and bridging coaches turns sour. Schools with these experiences are more likely to ask to receive ESF funding themselves so that the supervision of the young people remains entirely in the hands of their team of project mentors. The idea is that this gives the project mentors the extra time and space to supervise young people towards and in the workplace. What is more, they explicitly state that the schools must be able to retain control over the pathways of their students. The main point we recall here is that the recommendations from the focus groups are not unequivocal, and depend to a large extent on the perceptions and experiences of schools about the need for organisers operating externally from the schools. We therefore recommend that, if this is not yet the case, the provincial consultation forums consciously introduce methodologies and processes to shift perceptions and experiences towards an optimal match between young people and the workplace. Indeed, ensuring this optimal match should be the shared driving force for cooperation between all actors (school, organiser, young person and workplace).

2.2 Ensuring continuity in the supervision of young people: between bridging project and IBAL.

The impact measurement in part 3 of the evaluation report shows that young people who move on to an IBAL project at the end of the bridging project do significantly better at school and on the labour market than young people who had no continuity between the two interventions. After all, in practice, the bridging project does not have outflow (with qualifications) and progression to NEC as its goal. When young people are released by the organiser after (a successful) bridging project, it may be the case that this young person ends up in the vicious cycle of school fatigue once again, especially when the bridging supervisor was the person of trust (or bridging person) of the young person. Working on a positive relationship with a young person who was previously tired of school due to problems at home or at school is a **long term and customised undertaking**. This also emerged clearly from the interviews with project mentors, bridging and IBAL coaches and students. In order to give this proposition even more support, we also tested it in the focus groups. It appeared here that continuity and customisation in supervising young people are indeed the basis of a successful educational career. Not only does this apply to the continuity and customisation that an organiser could offer a young person, but also to the project mentor (at school) or the mentor (at the workplace). In this respect, the qualitative research shows that it does not really matter who supervises the young person, as long as they have someone to build a positive and lasting relationship with and can count on a supportive network of professionals. A young person primarily needs to gain a foothold, by entering into a positive relationship with a supervisor or mentor. This may be a project mentor, but also a supervisor of an organisation or a mentor in the workplace. The chance of a young person finding a good match with a supervisor increases when different people are involved in the pathway supervision. This

positive relationship creates a bond of trust (in one's own ability), and is partly responsible for the well-being of the young person, which are important preconditions for knowledge transfer between the school or workplace and the student. However, the research also shows that continuity in supervision between ESF interventions (e.g. from bridging projects to IBAL) cannot be guaranteed. Nonetheless, building a positive relationship with a supervisor is a long-term process that requires a certain degree of continuity in persons of trust.

Recommendation: Encourage schools, in this case the project mentors, to lead students who are successful in their bridging project to IBAL as soon as possible and generally avoid an interruption between the two interventions. Guidelines in this regard may form part of the ESF call for applications. The qualitative cases (best practice) show that an organised progression of bridging projects to IBAL may be an important explanation for their success. Continuity in supervision could also be enhanced by offering interventions not limited in time, but phased towards outflow with qualifications and NEC. A more important element is that the student can stay in the same school so that the support network can also remain the same. In this way, the young person does not need to build a relationship of trust with new supervisors every time.

2.3 Schools need (resources for) specialised customisation to support young people with an accumulation of problems in their educational careers.

The research referred to a three-stage selection to select young people in an ESF intervention bridging project or IBAL. Project mentors use various instruments to find out which young people are (quasi-) ready and willing to work, in order to allocate them to ESF interventions. This approach makes it very difficult for young people with the most challenging profiles to be included in the supportive ESF pathways in their educational careers. These vulnerable groups receive support within Learning and Working from the regular budget, but are not subsidised by the ESF. However, the research shows that young people, whether or not they are placed in bridging projects, with a positive affinity and motivation for learning and working are less likely to have an outflow without qualifications in any case. In this sense, the three-stage selection preceding the pathways hampers the ESF objective of tackling early school leaving. Once again, this finding was tested among participants in the focus groups. They point out that young people with the most challenging profiles are left behind because they are not ready for work. They have (clearly) insufficient skills and attitudes to be integrated into workplaces. The fact that schools and organisers are not motivated to work with these vulnerable young people is not confirmed in the focus groups. But they do look to each other, organisers look to the CDO, the CDO to full-time secondary education, and vice versa, to solve the problem (elsewhere).

Recommendation: This finding requires (additional resources for) specialised customisation to support young people with an accumulation of problems at home and at school in their educational careers. Indeed, the research shows that it is still better to have a prevention policy (at school) to combat early school leaving than a remedial policy. Young NEETs⁵ do indeed have poor prospects on the labour market, are more difficult to reach by schools to get them back to school or in learning and working, and their reintegration through the VDAB or CBE is not without (social) costs (Eurofound, 2012). At the same time, it must also be recognised that specialised customisation is more a competence of the well-being sector rather than education. More (intensive) cooperation with external well-being organisations therefore appears to be essential in order to keep these young people at-risk of being NEET on board the education system. An interesting avenue in this regard would be to link an employee of the organiser (from the well-being sector) to a school. The person would then be based in the school, but at the same time remain external (as they are not employees of the school). The advantage of this is that the person would know the school, teachers and students inside out, and would be regarded as 'external' to a much lesser extent. The employee, together with the school and the young person, could then draw up a suitable and phased trajectory that culminates in IBAL and therefore generates more chance of outflow with qualifications and progression to NEC.

2.4 Creating incentives for participation in ABO BuSO OV3 is more important than rewarding the number of hours in alternating learning.

The last policy recommendation concerns the ESF intervention motivation bonus in ABO BuSO OV3. The research in part 3 of the evaluation report shows that the motivation bonus is not effective in improving the prospects of young people in BuSO on the labour market. Although we cannot confirm the effectiveness of the motivation bonus from the research, conversations with ABO supervisors in the focus groups show that young people sometimes do not reach the 1200 hours of learning and working, as they were ill during the year. If they do not catch up, for example, during the holidays, they are not entitled to the motivation bonus. Young people are therefore willing to achieve the motivation bonus through learning and working during the holidays. **When young people do drop out, they tend to do so at the start of the ABO phase.** We also see this in our research: young people who do not reach the motivation bonus have only acquired a few hours in learning and working. For these young people, 1200 hours is too high.

In the evaluation report we also looked into the effectiveness of participation in ABO BuSO OV3. This **acknowledges the positive return of the voluntary year in ABO BuSO OV3**; even if the student does not complete the ABO phase. That is why we propose that this year in ABO should ideally be made

⁵NEET means "Not in Education, Employment or Training".

compulsory, because the additional year in ABO, especially for young people who do not yet have (permanent) employment, can contribute to more prospects on the labour market. In this way, the young person increases their chances of employment, because they are engaged in something and stick with it. According to ABO supervisors, the challenge among this group of young people is to retain their skills while looking for work. Of course, compulsory participation in ABO BuSO OV3 cannot discriminate against young people with permanent employment vs. no employment. That is why, in practice, implementing this obligation is not a (feasible) policy recommendation from the research. We therefore limit ourselves in the recommendation below to the effectiveness of the motivation bonus.

Recommendation: In order to motivate young people to choose ABO, it may be advisable to think about reorienting the motivation bonus from half way through the ABO pathway to the start. This might persuade some young people to choose ABO. It is of course problematic to only link the motivation bonus to enrolment in ABO. Young people can then sign up, with the aim of obtaining the motivation bonus without any real ambition to complete the ABO phase. Moving the motivation bonus to an earlier stage in the ABO phase therefore means concretely fewer hours in learning and working in order to obtain the motivation bonus; all the more so if the reason for dropping out in the ABO phase is (1) finding (permanent) employment; or (2) absence due to illness. Nevertheless, the researchers indicate that it remains a difficult balance between, on the one hand, creating incentives to start in ABO BuSO OV3 and, on the other hand, acknowledging that our research shows that just a few more hours in the ABO phase does not lead to better prospects on the labour market.

3 References

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