

The removal of barriers for labor mobility for qualitative career transitions. Comparative study and success conditions for policy models and good practices.

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1. Abstract

“Mobility across jobs is low, careers are too short”. This is the image of Belgium and Flanders that often shows up in international comparisons. But does this imply that our country should invest more in the mobility of workers, to lengthen their careers? The research starts with a literature study on the mobility barriers, and analyses policy models and policy instruments in different institutional systems or mobility regimes. The systems that were analyzed in detail were Finland, the UK and the Netherlands. In addition, some individual instruments were assessed for France, Japan, the United States and Sweden. From each of the cases we drew conclusions for Flanders. The central postulate of the research is that mobility is not a miracle solution to lengthen working lives. Moreover it is not enough to only change the retirement age or the labour protection legislation: a policy for longer careers necessitates a broad mix of hard and soft measures. The research pleads as well for policy differentiation on the basis of age: this implies that current measures adopted by the social partners, such as the Loopbaanakkoord, should be adjusted to the target group of older workers.

Key words: older workers, late-career mobility, transitions

2. Study objectives

The project’s objective was to distill best policy practices for facilitating or removing barriers to late-career labour mobility (occupational rather than geographic) that might serve as an example to implement the EU’s “making transitions pay” policy guidelines in Belgium and Flanders. In order to do so three research goals were set:

- 1) To understand the role of labour mobility in different country’s policies: how do the relevant actors interpret mobility in the context of late careers? What is the conception of their own role in promoting or facilitating labour mobility? Under “relevant actors” we understand trade unions, employers’ representatives, government agencies and Public Employment Services.*
- 2) To identify policy instruments that have facilitated older workers’ mobility in the past, regardless of their initial objective (i.e. focus on results).*
- 3) To assess the systemic features of each country that have been crucial for the success of policies, such as institutional interfaces between the educational system, the social protection system, labour law and the labour market (i.e. institutional complementarity).*

3. Methods and data

The research was subdivided into three phases:

- 1) *Exploration of the barriers to mobility and policy instruments to deal with them.*
 - a. *Data collection: literature study (Belgian and international), interviews with Belgian stakeholders. In this phase of the project a conceptual and theoretical framework was developed. First, the concept of mobility was critically analyzed, and a definition of mobility was elaborated. Second, the most important barriers to the mobility of older workers were inventoried and classified in four large categories. Third, a conceptual framework was developed in which mobility patterns were related to different institutional systems.*
 - b. *Deliverable: background document.*
- 2) *Study of mobility patterns in case-countries (the UK, the Netherlands, Finland and some smaller cases).*
 - a. *Approach. First, several questions were posed with regard to the cases: what is the level of mobility? Where does it come from? Which policy instruments and/or institutional features have been crucial in determining that level of mobility? In addition to the case countries, some individual measures were researched for France, the US, Sweden and Japan. For each case, the institutional regime was set out, as well as the way in which the features of that regime influence mobility patterns. Subsequently, specific policy instruments having important consequences for late-career mobility and the length of careers were analyzed. Finally policy lessons were drawn from the main findings.*
 - b. *Data collection: desk research, interviews.*
 - c. *Deliverable: country reports.*
- 3) *Policy recommendations: how can the lessons from the core cases be applied to the Flemish context?*
 - a. *Approach: in order to proceed to the translation of the research findings to the Flemish context, we mapped out the Flemish policy landscape with regard to late-career mobility. In order to do so, we looked at both existing research on the actual mobility patterns of Flemish workers, and at the characteristics of the Flemish institutional regime.*
 - b. *Data collection: desk research, comparative analysis.*
 - c. *Deliverable: synthesis report with policy recommendations.*

4. Findings

The project's findings can be summarized by means of the policy lessons that we obtained from the three main case countries:

The Netherlands

The Netherlands is characterized by a strong increase in the degree of activity of older workers during the past decennium, but at the same time by a low degree of mobility. The country features further an average level of labour protection, a system in which the development of competences is

the responsibility of the social partners and the state, active labour market policies and a pension system that discourages early retirement.

In that institutional system, there are several instruments and initiatives that may contribute to facilitating the mobility of older workers:

- a) First of all, deep reflections have taken place in the Dutch political system about both mobility and the extension of careers. Those processes have led to consensus and are often based on scientific research. The discussions have led to a Taskforce on the Elderly and Labour, and a policy advice of the tripartite Social-Economic Council on mobility.*
- b) “Hard” measures such as increases in the pension age are complemented by “soft” measures such as information campaigns and the fiscal incentives for career investments.*
- c) At the sector level, there are several initiatives going on to facilitate the transition of older or nearly disabled workers to other positions, either within or outside the own sector. This is the case for the Fire Departments, where careers are limited to twenty years, and for the construction sector, where a large-scale project on support for the transitions of nearly disabled workers was set out.*

United Kingdom

The UK is characterized by a large proportion of active older workers, the absence of mobility as a policy priority, and the lack of specific measures for older workers as a specific target group. Its institutional setting is characterized by one of the lowest levels of labour protection among the members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a competence system where workers ought to invest in their own training, active labor market policies and a pension system that discourages early retirement.

In this framework, there are several measures that have had some consequences for older workers-careers:

- a) The Train to Gain program, in which advice was given to employers with regard to their workers’ training, and training activities were subsidized. The program was successful in reaching older workers and served as a bridge to other training activities.*
- b) The Union Learning Representatives (ULR) program, in which trade union members served as “training brokers” between their peers and the employer. They also succeeded in reaching older workers better than other categories.*
- c) The reform of the Scottish Public Employment Services (Careers Scotland), in which the focus was changed from the school-work transition to an all-age focus. Qualitative evidence shows that older workers’ transitions to other jobs were facilitated.*

Finland

Finland succeeded in increasing the employment rate of older workers since 2000. It did so in a context in which labor protection is average, pension age flexible, training is provided by the public sector and the social partners, and where labor market policies are focuses on income replacement. The Finnish policies on older workers do not contemplate mobility as a means to longer careers, but are based on Work Ability, a concept which assesses the match between an individual workers and his job from a multidimensional perspective that includes health issues, mental functioning and the characteristics of the job itself (among other features). In this context, several projects have been carried out which consolidate Work Ability as a pillar of Finnish policies on older workers:

- a) The Finnish Program on Ageing Workers, which boils down to a large-scale coordination scheme across several ministries (Health, Culture, Work and the Finnish Institute for*

Occupational Medicine). The partners' policies were coordinated to improve Work Ability and employability.

- b) The Noste Program, which attempted to stimulate the access of older workers to education.
- c) The VETO-program, which also created tools for interministerial coordination.
- d) The TYKES-program, that subsidized projects related to innovation at the workplace.

5. Conclusions and policy implications

Conclusions

- a) Careers in Flanders are short, but this is not necessarily because of a lack of mobility. The most important barriers to work longer can be found in the field of pension age. The importance of cultural components in the determination of mobility patterns should not be underestimated either.
- b) The relationship between career support instruments and longer careers should be taken into account. The current Flemish policy on Personal Development Plans and other instruments (Mijn Loopbaan, COMPETENT) risks to be channelled to younger workers with more perspectives than older workers at the end of their career. It is important, therefore, to take into account older workers in the preparation, implementation and evaluation of the policies.
- c) Longer careers do not automatically lead to positive transitions. We should differentiate in this context between two groups: workers who stay longer in the labour market because of their own motivation and workers who are financially obliged to work longer.
- d) The British, Dutch and Finnish experiences refute the common sense-opinion that careers can be automatically prolonged by a heightened mobility. Mobility and mobility policies are barely related to the increase in the degree of activity of older workers in those countries. This is not the case, however, for some sectors where the characteristics of the job itself make transitions to other sectors an alternative for early retirement.
- e) As a consequence of the previous statement, we conclude that *a policy that promotes mobility is not a necessary condition to prolong workers' careers*. On the one hand, there are other approaches, such as Work Ability, that succeed in doing so without recurring to job changes. On the other hand, mobility is used in some sectors to help workers to work longer.

Policy implications

Several policy lessons and recommendations can be drawn from the research. Among the most important are:

- a) The need to develop a vision on labour mobility, in which all relevant actors (government, social partners, public employment services) are involved. The vision should contain a clear definition of what is understood as labour mobility, and what the policy goals with regard to it are. A clear definition of responsibilities is another essential element. Moreover, existing policy instruments should be analyzed from a mobility point of view.
- b) Intersectoral mobility may offer a solution for the low retirement age. In order to facilitate and/or promote this type of mobility, it is necessary to designate an instance that can steer mobility policies across sectors. Such an instance can, for instance, develop instruments to train workers wishing to change jobs across sectors. This is, however, not needed for all sectors, but only for those in which early retirement predominates.
- c) A successful approach towards longer careers and labour mobility requires a mix of soft and hard instruments that takes into account different ministries (coordination) and applies a preventive approach to the development of longer careers and that as such also

pays attention to the needs of younger generations. Even though measures specifically targeted at older workers are not always needed, policies should keep in mind the need to differentiate among different groups, and also the need to evaluate policies taking into account the specific characteristics of those groups.

Full reference of study report(s) and or paper(s) and other key publications of the study summarised here

Gonzalez Garibay M. & Struyven L. (2011), *Late-career labour mobility. An analytical framework.*

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