

2012-12-10

PRESS RELEASE

Labour market integration of the population of foreign origin

(Article for the December 2012 Economic Review)

In Belgium, the employment rate of persons born in a non-EU country is the lowest of all Member States, namely 45.8 % in 2011. There is a difference of almost 20 percentage points compared to those born in the country of residence. Conversely, regarding European immigrants, this gap with the native-born is very narrow.

The foreign-born population represents around 14 % of Belgium's total resident population. The main countries of origin are Morocco, France, the Netherlands and Italy, which together account for almost 40 % of the immigrant population.

The socio-demographic characteristics of that population differ from those of people born in Belgium. Although age, gender and level of education may influence the likelihood of having a job, it has been calculated that, given the same population structure (as native-born), the average employment rate of immigrants would be almost unchanged. All other characteristics being equal, the effect of being "foreign-born" has a significantly negative impact on the probability of getting a job. Nonetheless, certain parameters such as the place where a person's diplomas were obtained, fluency in the language of the country of residence, and social networks are not included in the analysis, whereas they could also be explanatory factors here.

Problems concerning the recognition of foreign diplomas and the weak development of skill validation are probably additional impediments, because even if foreign-born people have completed higher education, they are still considerably less likely than native-born to be in work.

In 2010, only 37 % of women originating from outside Europe were working: that is 20 percentage points below the figure for men of the same origin or for women born in Belgium. Family responsibilities, precarious job prospects, and the social model are some of the factors which may explain this imbalance.

The employment rate for children of immigrants, a still relatively young population, is also lower than that of the children of parents of Belgian origin. The fact of having one parent born in Belgium increases their chances of finding work, and that tends to confirm the importance of linguistic and social aspects. In fact, the inequalities begin even before the attempt to find work. According to the OECD's PISA studies, the parents' socio-economic circumstances are the main reason why the academic results of pupils from immigrant families are inferior to those of Belgian origin.

Apart from individual characteristics, discrimination in recruitment cannot be disregarded as was shown by an ILO study. This is borne out by other more recent studies such as the employment diversity barometer produced by the Centre for Equal Opportunities.

Foreign-born people who have a job are proportionately more often employed than native-born Belgians in certain branches regarded as precarious, such as the hotel and catering trade or cleaning services, whereas they are under-represented in public administration and education. In addition, over a third of people from outside Europe have a job which does not match their level of education. Also, taking account of the greater prevalence of temporary contracts and involuntary part-time work in their case, it is possible that this risk group is obliged to accept less secure jobs or reduced working hours in order to gain access to employment.