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## Mentoring to work for highly skilled immigrants. An effective tool against brain waste?

AN ANALYSIS OF AN INNOVATIVE POLICY INSTRUMENT

Hanne Vandermeerschen & Peter De Cuyper

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# MENTORING TO WORK FOR HIGHLY SKILLED IMMIGRANTS. AN EFFECTIVE TOOL AGAINST BRAIN WASTE?

## An analysis of an innovative policy instrument

Hanne Vandermeerschen & Peter De Cuyper

### Abstract

Belgium has one of the largest employment gaps in Europe in terms of people of foreign origin. Traditional labour market programmes do not always work well towards their labour market integration. To this end, there seems to be a need for new methods and programmes. A programme on the rise in this context is 'mentoring to work', in which a recent immigrant (mentee) and a volunteer familiar with the local labour market (mentor) are matched. This study looks at four 'mentoring to work' initiatives in terms of their set-up and implementation, their added value for the mentee and tries to identify tips and tricks for setting up 'mentoring to work' initiatives. The research was conducted with the support of the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and was coordinated by the Public Employment Service of Flanders (VDAB).

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# 1 | Labour market integration strategies for highly skilled non-native speakers

Labour market integration is considered a key indicator for measuring migrant success in a host country; it is also seen as an essential step in terms of social integration (Bilgili et al., 2015; Reyneri & Fullin, 2011; Valtonen, 2001). However studies suggest that integration into the labour market is no simple task (Hooper et al., 2017). Eurostat figures for 2016 indicate that unemployment among immigrants born outside the EU is 8.4% higher than that of native populations in the EU28. In countries such as Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands, the employment gap amounts to 16, 18 and 21 percent respectively (figures from 2017).

Labour market access appears to be equally difficult for highly skilled new migrants. A 2016 study by De Cuyper & Wets found the employment gap was relatively higher for highly skilled newcomers than for medium-skilled or low-skilled newcomers. Moreover, this group frequently ends up accepting jobs they are overqualified for (Geets, 2010). The @Level2Work programme was initiated to address this gap. The project tested and implemented new intervention strategies to increase labour market opportunities for highly skilled newcomers at their level of qualification.

This project ran from June 2016 to March 2018 and concentrated on the labour market integration of highly skilled new migrants. Different interventions (n=40) were implemented and evaluated in eight regional pilot programmes in order to identify successful strategies. One of these interventions was 'mentoring to work', which was implemented in four of the eight pilots.

## 2 | Mentoring to work: high expectations, very little evidence

Mentoring to work has gained increasing popularity in recent years and is widely regarded as an effective tool when it comes to the labour market integration of migrants. The use of mentoring in labour market policies is an innovative approach as (public) employment services do not typically rely on volunteers.

Mentoring to work seems promising as it taps into existing resources that traditional labour market instruments have largely ignored or not capitalised on. In particular, the knowledge and expertise of employers and experienced employees (De Cuyper & Vandermeerschen: 2019). One of the barriers preventing non-native speaking newcomers from accessing the labour market is that they lack the human capital (i.e. specific local knowledge, skills and network) relevant in the host country. Employers and employees, however, *do* have this knowledge, which is often specialised and sector-specific. This makes them ideally suited to mentoring and supporting the non-native speaking newcomer on their journey towards employment. That, at least, is what theory indicates as of now. The main objective of mentoring to work is to increase the newcomers' human capital with respect to the host country but mentoring to work can also raise awareness among employers about some of the labour market barriers faced by highly skilled newcomers.

So far, there is a lack of empirical evidence about the effectiveness of mentoring to work. Research has mainly been focused on other forms of mentoring in different contexts, such as youth mentoring, mentoring in education and mentoring *at* work. Very little research has been done on mentoring to work aimed specifically at immigrants, both in Flanders and at an international level. Therefore, we hope this study provides greater insight into a largely unexplored subject matter.

## 3 | Research design and methodology

### 3.1 Research setting

We analysed mentoring in four pilot programmes, which mainly focused on the provinces of Antwerp, Limburg, East Flanders and West Flanders. The findings from Antwerp city (Connect2work) were also included in our analysis, as the mentoring to work programme was implemented at an earlier date and was inspirational for some of the other projects. ~~We deliberately chose the term ‘pilots’, as the main objective was to experiment and learn.~~ Table 1 provides an overview of the different pilots, the partners involved in the implementation of the programme and the two different implementation models that were used: the ‘dual model’ and the ‘centralised model’. The dual model ensures that the mentoring programme is run by two different organisations, while one organisation is responsible for the mentees (the screening process and the follow-up), the other organisation is in charge of the mentors (the recruiting process and the training process). In a centralised structure, one organisation conducts the screening process, the matching process and the follow-up process of both the mentors and the mentees. Other organisations may play an important role as a go-between.

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**Overview of the implementation models and the partners involved in the mentoring programme in the pilots**

Model	Pilots	Responsible for mentees	Responsible for mentors
Dual model	East Flanders	VDAB	VOKA (Flanders Chamber of Commerce and Industry)
	East Flanders	Leerwinkel	VOKA
Centralised model	Antwerp city	Atlas (Antwerp Integration and citizenship education)	
	Province of Antwerp	Atlas VDAB	
	Limburg	De Bakker-Martens (General Partnership), commissioned by VDAB, in collaboration with RiseSmart	

The pilots revealed significant differences in terms of their view of and approach to mentoring. This dissimilitude went beyond the different types of implementation models represented in the table above. Many pilots showed considerable variation in terms of the goals and objectives they set. Some formulated broad, general goals that were meant to empower newcomers, whereas others focused on very specific aims that were geared towards actual employment. A few partners and pilots took an in-between approach and decided upon a ‘reality check’ as an end goal. They felt it was most important that newcomers familiarised themselves with the Belgian/regional labour market and had realistic expectations, as this was a crucial step in ensuring that the newcomers achieved their long-term employment goals. The participant selection process is another example of the heterogeneous nature of these projects; some projects explicitly focus on ‘weaker’ profiles in terms of labour market readiness while others screen for ‘stronger’ candidates.

### **3.2 Objectives and research methodology**

The research objective was two-fold. The first goal was to ensure that the pilots were documented and analysed. In the early stages of our study, we focused on programme implementation and the lessons we could learn from these experiences: What are the advantages and disadvantages of these different approaches? Have the pilot studies produced specific examples that could be used to benefit future developments? Are there any issues that have still not been resolved? The second objective was to provide an insight into the results: Can mentoring be an effective tool in improving labour market integration? Do mentoring programmes create added value for the mentees and do they ensure the designated objectives are met?

This study relied on qualitative research. We gathered data through focus groups and semi-structured interviews and spoke to 30 highly skilled newcomers out of 158 mentees and 10 mentors. We also interviewed the organisations responsible for the recruitment, screening, matching and follow-up of the mentors and mentees. The interviews with the mentors and mentees addressed five main themes: 1) their motives for joining the mentoring programme, 2) the mentoring process so far (frequency of contact, action taken so far, agenda setting), 3) the benefits of the programme for the mentee/mentor, 4) the prerequisites for a successful mentoring relationship and 5) a general evaluation (covering questions such as: What did you think of the programme? What were the positives? Did you face any issues while participating in this programme?).

First, we will discuss our findings regarding the added value of the mentoring programme. In the next section we analyse the lessons learned, particularly in terms of setting up and implementing mentoring projects, as this can have a profound impact on the effectiveness of the mentoring programme. The actual approaches to mentoring in the different pilots are beyond the scope of this paper but have been discussed in more detail in our research report (Vandermeerschen & De Cuyper, 2018).

## 4 | Does mentoring create added value?

### 4.1 Creating added value for mentees by providing culture-specific and sector-specific advice

Findings from our qualitative research suggest mentoring creates added value for both mentees and mentors. Mentees mentioned *culture-specific and/or sector-specific advice* as being the most important element in creating added value. This involved things like mentors familiarising the mentees with the Flemish labour market and advising them about the ins and outs of a specific profession/sector in Belgium. This seems to be the key factor in creating added value. The mentees confirmed there were quite a few differences in professional approaches between their country of origin and Belgium, and the mentor helped them deal with these differences. The mentors explained how things worked in Belgium, which enabled the mentees to implement effective job search strategies, such as knowing where to search for sector-specific vacancies, etc. The mentors also provided support in orienting the mentees towards the Belgian labour market for instance, by recommending specific training programmes based on their experience as “insiders”. The mentees also considered other mentoring elements to be useful, such as receiving job application advice, having a person of trust/a “helpline”, learning and practising Dutch and building/restoring their self-confidence.

In general, the results reveal that mentoring is valuable and can be used effectively alongside professional services such as the public employment service. It is primarily the ‘insider’ status of the mentor that creates the added value. They understand what it takes to be a professional in a certain sector on a daily basis and are often employers themselves. The project coordinators agreed with the analysis that mentoring provides insight into the reality of corporate sectors, the work culture and the labour market. Additional benefits of mentoring are that the mentor only guides one person at a time, whereas professional job counsellors coach several people. Mentors also provide moral support if confidence and motivation is lacking and help newcomers work on the local language. The fact that the relationship is on a voluntary basis is an additional plus.

### 4.2 Accessing mentor’s network not evident

When asked about their biggest motivation to join the mentoring project, most mentees said: *to build a professional and/or social network*. The project coordinators also expected network-building to be an important factor in creating added value for the mentee. They predicted the effect would be two-fold: 1) The mentor would help the mentee meet new people in the sector 2) The mentor would use their own network to open doors for the mentee, for instance, by organising an internship.

The reality was somewhat different. Only a few mentees specifically mentioned network-building as one of the concrete outcomes of programme. In fact, during interviews and focus groups some mentees explicitly expressed their disappointment that their mentor had failed to meet their expectations in helping them build a network. We therefore must conclude that even though some mentors did use their network to open doors for their mentees, but this was not the case for most of the mentees.

There is no simple answer to why mentors did not use their networks in this way. It seems three factors were at play here. Firstly, it does not appear to have been clear or self-evident that this was

expected of the mentors or even that this was one of their possible tasks when taking on role of a mentor. Secondly, some mentors may not have been able to use their network if a non-sector specific match was made and the mentor and mentee came from widely varying sectors. Thirdly, the mentor would have to place a lot of trust in their mentee to use their network and they may not want to impose too much on the people in their network. Thus, we found that helping a mentee build their own network is not as straightforward as it seems.

### **4.3 The verdict**

The mentees felt that the mentoring programme was useful and that it had helped them in several ways. Most mentees said they would recommend the programme to their friends. Nevertheless, not all the feedback was positive. We already know some mentees were disappointed that the programme failed to meet their expectations in terms of building a network, but this was not the only issue the mentees came up against. Several mentees stressed they had not gotten that much out of the mentoring programme because they had only been given some job application advice or had been matched with a mentor who worked in a different sector, and was therefore unable to help much. Some mentees also reported having very little contact with their mentor.

Based on the interviews, it seems that effective mentoring for highly skilled newcomers is contingent on the following requirements: matches need to be sector-specific, guidelines need to be set regarding the mentoring process and the mentor and mentee need to have regular contact (see below). The mentoring programmes in this study were not overly concerned with ensuring that these conditions were met, which may have affected the results. The programmes in study were pilots and had the freedom to experiment in order to determine what worked. Following up on their learning curve, this study attaches as much importance to the lessons learned as to the results. In point 5, we have summed up the most important lessons learned from the pilots.

# 5 | Lessons learned regarding the implementation of mentoring programmes

## 5.1 Mentoring requires specific guidelines

The first thing that usually springs to mind when the topic of mentoring is brought up is the relationship between the mentee and the mentor. But mentoring in this context is a three-way relationship (see De Cuyper & Vandermeerschen, 2019). One may overlook this fact and forget the third party, i.e. the supervisory organisation, but the supervisory organisation plays a crucial role when it comes to mentoring. They connect the mentor and mentee and ensure a good match, they bear the responsibility for providing specific mentoring guidelines, they provide guidance and support to the mentor and mentee, they ensure any necessary conditions are met and they provide advice when it is needed, etc. The professional organisation should not be seen just as an ‘initiator’ or ‘organiser’ as it plays a crucial role in safeguarding the quality of the mentoring programme.

This study highlighted the importance of this role, as interviews and focus groups revealed the need for *clear guidelines*, for both mentors and mentees. It is absolutely essential that the supervisory organisation prescribe specific guidelines so both parties have a better understanding of what mentoring entails, how they can help each other, what they should be doing and what they can expect from each other and the supervisory organisation. The organisation will also strike a balance between giving the mentor and mentee enough freedom to respond to individual wishes and needs (by avoiding too many strict rules and schedules) and providing sufficient direction and guidelines to ensure that the duo benefit from the mentoring programme.

It also appears that a proper and systematic follow-up is crucial in safeguarding the quality of the mentoring programme. The supervisory organisation should check up on the following points at regular intervals during the mentoring process: Are the mentor and mentee still in touch with one another? Are the needs and expectations of both the mentor and mentee being met? Are the necessary conditions being met (i.e. is enough time being devoted to face to face contacts, are travel distances not too long, ...)? In the course of this study, we found that several mentor-mentee pairs never really got started or only had sporadic contact. It is important that an organisation is quick to pick up on these signals and tries to find a solution.

Specific mentoring guidelines are of crucial importance for mentors as well. One of the pilots specified both mentors and mentees must commit to the mentoring programme despite it being a voluntary arrangement. Organisations should therefore not lower their expectations when selecting a mentor even if they are facing mentor shortages or facing difficulties in finding mentors. After all, the effectivity of the mentoring programme largely depends on the qualities of the mentor. The screening process plays a key role in maintaining mentoring standards.

## 5.2 Sector-specific matches are the most valuable

The mentoring initiatives faced significant challenges when trying to recruit mentors that would be a good match. There were always plenty of mentees but this was not the case for potential mentors.

An important issue was that the process of finding suitable mentors was extremely time-consuming, which is why several pilots decided to include non-sector specific matches. It goes without saying that it is easier to find a mentor than to find a mentor who works in a specific sector, such as an engineer or chemist. However, feedback from the participants indicates that using non-sector specific matches compromised the quality of the mentoring programme. Most mentees believe a good mentor should have a large amount of sector-specific knowledge and experience, whereas the mentors are more divided on this issue. Some mentors share the view that sector-specific knowledge and experience are a prerequisite for a successful mentoring experience, while others consider it to be an advantage but not essential. Nearly all mentees, agree with the first point of view. It is true that a mentor who has sector-specific knowledge and experience will have more to offer a mentee, particularly in terms of their network and sector specific knowledge.

### **5.3 Accessing mentor's network not always self-evident**

The findings of this study reveal that it is not self-evident to all mentors that they should devote time to help mentees build a network or generate social capital. Not all mentors wish to use their network in this way. An initial step in resolving this issue might be to include it in the guidelines for mentors. This would highlight the importance of social capital and encourage mentors to view network building as something they could help their mentees with. It could even be presented in a more explicit manner as something that is expected of the mentor.

### **5.4 Effective collaboration and the right mix of team members are essential**

A strong network with employers and companies is an asset, and perhaps even a necessity, for any organisation wanting to successfully recruit and match mentors. Collaboration, at least in a supportive capacity, is key here as the programme's viability largely depends on an agent that has the type of network described above (particularly in terms of contact with employers). The programme also needs someone who understands the target group so that they can stand up for the mentees' interests (this requires insight into issues that come with certain prerequisites, such as mobility, childcare and housing). The programme leader/joint partner should view this type of expertise as being critical in ensuring the success of the mentoring programme.

## 6 | Conclusion and recommendations

Should mentoring be implemented as a tool to help highly skilled newcomers on their way towards employment? The results show a mixed picture. The interviews show that mentoring helps newcomers in a number of areas, particularly when it comes to country-specific knowledge and knowledge of the ins and outs of the local labour market. On the other hand, many of the projects require streamlining when it comes to implementing the mentoring programme. One of the positives of this study is that we were able to experiment in pilots, which yielded many valuable lessons on how to improve mentoring for the future. It is clear that certain conditions need to be met in order for mentoring to be effective: a well-thought-out programme is essential, as are quality criteria and sound monitoring of the results. Overall, more research is needed to advance the field itself. Areas of concern include how to ensure quality mentoring, understanding what works and for whom (e.g. do the findings of this research also hold for low skilled newcomers), and if mentoring to work is effective at all in generating higher employment among highly skilled immigrants.

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