

## PRESS RELEASE

November 2021

### Report to the Flemish Parliament

#### *Study progress in higher education*

*In order to guard study progress, universities and universities of applied sciences can impose measures on students with a low study success rate. At the same time, they must offer students adequate study guidance. The Court of Audit's investigation of twelve higher education institutions shows that these institutions use a wide variety of measures, although not always sufficiently empirically substantiated and often only monitored and evaluated to a limited extent. One in four students with a low study success rate continues to study in the same programme. In general, student guidance is sufficiently available, but still leaves room for improvement: it can be tuned more closely to the needs and does not reach all students who need it, partly because it is rarely compulsory and too little aimed at second-year students and reorientators.*

#### **Introduction**

From the 2005–2006 academic year onward, Flemish government has made higher education more flexible, among other things to offer disadvantaged groups and secondary entrants more opportunities to obtain a higher education diploma. The annual system was replaced by a more flexible credit system. At the same time, government has established various mechanisms to adjust study progress, including study progress guarding measures and student guidance. The Court of Audit examined the use of these measures and study guidance at five universities and seven universities of applied sciences.

#### **Study progress guarding**

All institutions surveyed have implemented study progress guarding measures. They mainly impose binding conditions on students whose study success is too low or who refuse re-enrolment. Institutions' autonomy has led to major differences in measures, often resulting from different pedagogical points of view. In some institutions even differences between faculties and study programmes occur. Duration and scope of refusals have not always clearly been defined. All institutions pointed out their measures are based on some form of data analysis, of which scope, nature and depth however do vary. Substantiation, follow-up and evaluation of the measures can therefore be improved. An important limitation lies therein that possible further study careers of students who leave an institution are not sufficiently analysed. Consequently, measure effects cannot always be accurately estimated.

Effect analyses show that measures bring about few proactive behavioural changes. The prospect of strict measures has little influence on study success. In 1 in 4 cases, students with a low study success rate continue their education in institutions that do not refuse re-enrolment. Students who do re-enrol in the second year however, have a considerable chance of obtaining a diploma in the same study programme. Reorientation can offer advantages: on average re-orientators achieve a higher study yield in the new study programme as

compared to students with a similarly low study yield who continue their studies in the same study programme. Faster reorientation leads to a higher learning account at the start of the new study programme.

Institutions communicate their study progress guarding measures through various channels, mainly to first-year students. Not all students have sufficient insight into these measures.

### **Study guidance**

All higher education institutions surveyed offer study guidance. Due to their wide autonomy in this field, their organization differs greatly. Institutions partly organize guidance in a decentralized way, but they do not always provide in formal guidelines and agreement frameworks to obtain uniform, qualitative performances in the various programmes and faculties.

Study counselors are easily accessible and the institutions guard their expertise. However, they make little use of uniform criteria that indicate the need for guidance when allocating staff capacity to student guidance. This can lead to unequal availability of student guidance depending on faculty or study programme.

Providing information about study guidance is mainly aimed at first-year students, but second-year students and re-orientators may also need information. The institutions usually use test results to identify at-risk students. They rarely use other indicators of study success, such as language skills or previous education. They have few specific measures for disadvantaged groups or for students who are subject to study progress guarding measures. The extent to which guidance reaches at-risk students is highly dependent on the student's own initiative, as it is usually not compulsory. All institutions help students with a possible reorientation to another study programme, but they are not always aware of the conditions and modalities of the study programmes outside their own institution.

Most institutions keep insufficient or too little systematic data about their individual study guidance activities and students' requests for help to be able to evaluate their functioning and needs. As a result, it is uncertain whether guidance is sufficiently attuned to the needs.

### **Response of the minister**

The Flemish Minister of Education has replied on 12 October 2021 that he is developing future policy on this theme and that the audit, and its recommendations, have come at the right moment in time. He provided information, among other things, about the legal basis for using data from the Higher Education Database about students who have left institutions.

### **Information for the press**

The Court of Audit exerts an external control on the financial operations of the Federal State, the Communities, the Regions and the provinces. It contributes to improving public governance by transmitting to the parliamentary assemblies, to the managers and to the audited services any useful and reliable information resulting from a contradictory

examination. As a collateral body of the Parliament, the Court performs its missions independently of the authorities it controls.

The audit report on *Study progress in higher education* has been sent to the Flemish Parliament. The full version and this press release can be found on the Court's website: [\*\*www.courtofaudit.be\*\*](http://www.courtofaudit.be).