

The New Follow-up System for the Unemployed : An Evaluation

SUMMARY OF FINAL REPORT

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The *Plan d'Accompagnement et de Suivi des chômeurs* (Plan to Assist and Monitor the Unemployed (PAS)), implemented in Belgium in July 2004, aims to reinforce the monitoring and assistance of the unemployed in the actions they take to find work. This reform encompasses better coordination between the National Employment Office (ONEM) and the regional public employment services (referred to below as the "SPEs"¹). On the one hand, the ONEM is responsible for monitoring unemployed persons receiving benefits through the procedure known as "Activation of Job Search Behaviour" (ACR): their efforts to find work are regularly evaluated during individual interviews and sanctions are envisaged if these efforts are deemed inadequate. On the other hand, the SPEs provide better assistance to all unemployed persons through a series of active policies: individual diagnostic interviews, insertion routes, help with finding work, training, etc.. Our research aims to evaluate the impact of the PAS, in its launch phase, on the job prospects of unemployed persons receiving benefits, aged between 25 and 29.

This summary is structured as follows. The first section describes the essential components of the PAS. The second section specifies the scope of our evaluation (public in question, PAS components evaluated, evaluation criteria). The third section summarises the results obtained and the fourth section interprets them and identifies the main lessons.

1. The Plan to Assist and Monitor the Unemployed (PAS)

The introduction of the PAS in July 2004 is evidence of major changes within (i) the system of unemployment insurance and (ii) assistance for unemployed persons. We will review these two changes in turn.

(i) Unemployment insurance

The system of unemployment insurance in Belgium *in theory* provides benefits for an unlimited period. In this system, the suspension schemes (end of entitlement) and the schemes for sanctioning the unemployed were designed to complement the principle of benefits granted for an unlimited period. Before July 2004 two types of scheme for suspension and sanctions were essentially in place. On the one hand, Article 80 of the legislation provided, under certain conditions, for an end to the right to benefits for long-term unemployed persons living together². Apart from its lack of transparency, its restriction to those living together meant that women were highly over-represented among those suspended. On the other hand, the ONEM was responsible for monitoring the availability of unemployed persons receiving benefits with respect to the labour market. It used as its basis the data forwarded by the SPEs regarding rejections of work or the participation in active labour market programs, failure to respond to convocations, etc.. Nonetheless, the Federal State and the ONEM frequently complained about the lack of information forwarded by the SPEs and the limited monitoring of job search efforts.

¹ The SPEs include the FOREM in Wallonia, the ORBEM in the Brussels Region, the VDAB in Flanders and the ADG in the German-speaking Community.

² Those regarded as cohabiting are the unemployed who are not "heads of household" or "isolated", in other words unemployed persons living with one (or more) person(s) who receive(s) earnings from employment or a replacement income.

With the implementation of the PAS in July 2004, the federal government chose to replace Article 80 with a new, fairer system which could, at the same time, guarantee the viability of a system of unemployment insurance for an unlimited period. Two essential aspects characterise this new system.

Firstly, the ONEM is authorised not only to monitor the availability of unemployed persons receiving benefits based on information forwarded by the SPEs, but also to monitor *itself* how much effort is being devoted to looking for work. This involves the procedure for the Activation of Job Search Behaviour (ACR), which consists of regular individual interviews during which a counsellor evaluates the job search activities of unemployed persons receiving benefits. The introduction of the ACR means that all categories of unemployed persons now run the risk of having their unemployment benefits reduced or suspended, temporarily or permanently, because they are not making enough effort to find work. The first meeting takes place approximately eight months after dispatch of a *notification letter*, restating the obligations of unemployed persons receiving benefits in terms of looking for work and availability with respect to the labour market and setting forth the ACR procedure. The letter is sent after a certain period of inactivity, measured in a specific way and varying with age (7 months for those under the age of 25, thereafter 13 months). Finally, we should state that the ACR procedure was introduced in stages: with effect from July 2004, for those under 30; after July 2005 for those under 40 and from July 2006, for those under 50.

Secondly, the new cooperation agreement reached on 30 April 2004 between the Federal State, the Communities and the Regions provides for a much *more systematic* electronic exchange of data between the SPEs and the ONEM. This exchange has been in operation since October 2004 and relates to data used to judge the availability of the unemployed person with respect to the labour market (participation in campaigns, rejection of work or campaigns, failure to respond to convocations, etc.). The ONEM Annual Report for 2005 confirms a net regain in the number of transmissions in 2005, particularly by the Walloon Region.

(ii) Assistance

The launch of the PAS in July 2004 also gave the SPEs the opportunity to move closer to the recommendations described in the first European guideline for employment. This recommends, on the one hand, a preventive approach aimed at activating all unemployed persons at an early stage in their period of unemployment and, on the other hand, a curative approach aimed at systematically directing the long-term unemployed towards private services aimed at promoting their entry into professional life. Before 2004, the regional SPEs had fairly intensive and early practices in place for job search assistance. Thus, the FOREM and ORBEM only offered a preventive approach to young unemployed persons, while the VDAB had offered this type of approach to all unemployed persons since 1999. Since 2004, all the Regions and Communities have noticeably reinforced their efforts to assist the unemployed. This reinforcement can be seen during the first months of unemployment as well as beyond a fairly high threshold period of inactivity. In particular, the FOREM and ORBEM have expanded their preventive approach to adults and every regional SPE has introduced a curative approach which was previously non-existent. In order to achieve these objectives, the regional SPEs have developed their methods of assisting with the search for

work (individual diagnostic interviews, insertion routes, job search aids, etc.) and tangibly increased their training supply.

To summarise, the PAS combines the intensification of four measures:

- informing the unemployed person of the steps he is supposed to take in exchange for the benefits he receives;
- monitoring job search efforts and availability with respect to the labour market, with the risk of sanctions if these commitments are not fulfilled;
- assistance in looking for work;
- training offers.

2. Scope and study sample

In evaluating the PAS, it is of course necessary to bear in mind all the components summarised above. This task is a long-term activity. It requires the availability of information relevant to the actions taken at all levels of power, especially regional assistance and training programs in which the unemployed participate. It also requires the completion of information relating to spells of unemployment with the appropriate data about what happens when people disappear from the unemployment registers. Within the period of our research, we began the procedure of gathering this vast amount of data. The evaluation presented here contains a set of preliminary results and conclusions obtained exclusively from a sample of unemployed persons receiving benefits, made available by the ONEM. This research will be continued in more depth using more complete data from other institutions (ONSS, INASTI, etc.), enabling us to identify the transition reasons for these persons, who are no longer receiving benefits from the ONEM.

(i) Public

Since a certain distance is essential for the evaluation, we evaluate the PAS during its launch phase and, from then on, for those who are the first to be affected by the ACR: the full-time unemployed receiving benefits who are compulsorily registered as job-seekers (CCI-DE), aged between 25 and 29 and who received the notification letter from the ONEM between July and October 2004 because they had just reached their 13th month of unemployment (the unemployment threshold period beyond which the ONEM notifies unemployed persons receiving benefits of the ACR procedure).

At first glance, this group may seem highly particular in terms of its unemployment duration (13 months of inactivity).³ Its heterogeneousness in terms of recent work experience,⁴ level of education, family status or place of

³ The way in which the ONEM calculates unemployment threshold periods which determine entry into the various stages of the ACR procedure is peculiar and differs from the "Eurostat" unemployment duration usually used in unemployment statistics. In particular, the duration concept counter used for the ACR – the "DISPO" concept of duration – is only reset to zero after a return to full-time work lasting at least 12 months (as opposed to 3 months for the "Eurostat" duration) and it is measured in days (rather than months).

⁴ Even if the selected unemployed persons all have a "DISPO" duration of 13 months, they are characterised by very different "Eurostat" unemployment periods. Unemployed persons with a short "Eurostat" period are those who have had recent work experience (enough to reset the "Eurostat" counter to zero but not enough to reset the "DISPO" counter to zero).

residence does however enable us to judge whether the impact of the PAS differs according to these dimensions. However, the reported effects concern only young (25-29 year-old) CCI-DEs during the launch period of the PAS, leaving open the question of the evaluation of effects on the unemployed who do not receive benefits, younger or older unemployed persons, as well as at a time when the PAS will be at cruising speed.

(ii) Evaluation method and components of the PAS evaluated

Any evaluation of the effects of a policy must compare the socio-economic trajectory of the participants *with what would have happened to them if they had not taken part in the scheme. Omitting this comparison and settling for an observation of the facts for the participants is not, it must be emphasised, the appropriate response to the challenge of evaluation.*⁵ As evaluators, we must choose, in the best way possible, individuals whose trajectory on the labour market provides accurate data on *what would have happened to participants in the policy if they had not been involved in it.* In order to do this, we rely on the trajectories for unemployed persons similar to those in our target group (CCI-DEs aged between 25 and 29), but who were *not* notified by ONEM because they were aged slightly over 30.

For each unemployed person in our sample, we know the history of his appearance in the ONEM files between 1 and 10 months from the notification from the ONEM. This means that we can monitor whether the effects of the PAS vary depending on the number of months since the notification. The evaluation method we use in this study does not allow us to extend the period of analysis beyond 10 months from the notification. In fact, unemployed persons aged just over 30, who act as control group in the evaluation, have been affected by the ACR procedure since 1 July 2005 and have therefore also been eligible to receive a notification from the ONEM with effect from this date.

Apart from at the end of the analysis period, those aged under 30 have still *not yet* attended their first interview at the ONEM. The notification letter is therefore the only component of the ACR procedure for which we can evaluate effects. Some regional SPEs have also chosen to provide specific assistance for unemployed persons who have been warned by the ONEM. We then evaluate the combined effect of the notification letter and the search assistance actions. Based on information gathered concerning the schemes introduced by the regional SPEs, below are the components of the PAS, for each region of the country, for which effects are evaluated within the context of this study:

- *In the Brussels Region:*
The effects of the ONEM notification letter *combined* with a joint information session at the ORBEM;
- *In the Walloon Region:*
The effects of the ONEM notification letter *combined* with individualised assistance at the FOREM (a joint information session, an individual diagnostic interview which may result in a recommendation of independent job search or different actions);

⁵ In this respect, see section 3 of Dejemeppe and Van der Linden (2006a) or Dejemeppe and Van der Linden (2006b).

- *In Flanders:*
The effects of the ONEM notification letter.

The fact that it is not possible to evaluate the effect of assistance measures at the ORBEM or VDAB does *not* mean that these two regional SPEs provide no assistance for the young unemployed. It is impossible simply because a *specific* offer of assistance has *not* been put in place for unemployed persons aged under 30, warned by the ONEM between July and October 2004.

The international literature shows that the dispatch of a notification letter is an integral part of assistance and monitoring policies for the unemployed and that changes – sometimes major – in job search behaviour can result from the announcement of a compulsory programme such as the ACR in Belgium. This programme could therefore accelerate insertion into employment once the unemployed person is informed of the new monitoring procedure. The limited number of unemployed persons who took part in an interview during our analysis period does not therefore mean that our evaluation relates to a secondary part of the new scheme introduced in Belgium.

(iii) Outcome indicators

Within the confines of the available statistical apparatus, we identify four outcome indicators for evaluating the effects of the PAS:

1. A return to work;
2. The granting of exemptions from searching for work for social and family reasons;
3. Access to training or return to study;
4. The introduction of sanctions or a suspension.

The first indicator in reality combines the situations of employment, unemployment without benefits and inactivity. In fact, as we have already mentioned, this research is based on data exclusively from the ONEM. These data do not allow us to identify the transition reason for those persons who no longer receive unemployment benefits. However, for the period covered by our evaluation, the variation in this indicator should only reflect a variation in employment. Let us briefly explain why. If a person prefers to give up his unemployment benefits because of the introduction of stricter eligibility conditions (and to become either inactive or unemployed and without benefits), this person has no reason to give them up *before* the stricter job search control becomes applicable to him or her, i.e. before the first evaluation interview at the ONEM. This is why we interpret the effects of the PAS on this indicator as its effects on a *return to employment*.

The ONEM can temporarily exempt full-time unemployed persons receiving benefits from registering as job-seekers for social and family reasons. This implies a transition into inactivity since this status exempts the unemployed person from having to look for work, for example, in order to look after loved ones (children, elderly relatives, etc.). The level of benefit associated with this status is however lower than that received by a full-time unemployed person receiving benefits and looking for work. The second indicator – *the granting of exemptions from searching for employment for social and family reasons* – now enables us to check the hypothesis that we have just formulated, that is that the effect of the PAS is

to encourage transitions from unemployment into employment, not into inactivity, before the first evaluation interview with the ONEM.

One of the objectives of the PAS is to increase assistance for all unemployed persons through a series of active policies. Among these, training occupies an important position. In the absence of data on the participation of the unemployed in our sample in regional assistance or training campaigns, the third indicator – *access to training or a return to study* – is built up using information about exemptions from the obligation to look for work granted temporarily by the ONEM to unemployed persons receiving benefits who are in training or who resume studying.

If these commitments are not fulfilled, the PAS envisages sanctions in the form of temporary reductions in the unemployment benefit and the suspension of payment of benefits. The fourth indicator – *the imposition of a sanction or suspension* – is built up from individual information relating to sanctions and suspensions of payment of unemployment benefits for the unemployed in our sample. If the PAS has an effect on the imposition of sanctions and suspensions, it should not however be clearly evident until after our analysis period, in other words after the first ONEM interviews.

3. Summary of results

For each of the four result indicators, we summarise below the estimated effects of the PAS in the three Regions of Belgium.

3.1. Effects of the PAS on the return employment

The PAS speeds up the return to employment by young unemployed persons receiving benefits in Flanders and Wallonia

In Flanders and Wallonia, the result of the PAS is to increase the chance of finding a job by an average of about 5 percentage points: five months after the ONEM notification, a CCI-DE aged under 30 and residing in the Walloon (or Flemish) region had a 27% (or 35%) chance of having found a job; *without* the PAS, this probability would have been only 22% (30%). The *relative* increase in the probability of employment is therefore significant: after five months, the PAS brought about an increase in the probability of employment by 23%⁶ (16% in Flanders). This positive effect of the PAS on the probability of employment is evident after the second month following the ONEM notification and is maintained throughout the analysis period.⁷

The positive effect of the PAS on the return to employment benefits unemployed persons who have more favourable recruitment characteristics, women and the unemployed who are not heads of household

The impact of the PAS is not the same across the board. Job-seekers who have more favourable employment characteristics find that their recruitment prospects

⁶ This effect is obtained using the calculation $[(0.27-0.22)/0.22]*100=23\%$.

⁷ It should nonetheless be emphasised that this effect is estimated with little accuracy: we cannot rule out the possibility that it may be close to zero, or that it may be of the order of 10 percentage points.

are further boosted by the effect of the PAS. For example, a CCI-DE aged under 30 who holds a *higher education qualification* and who lives in the Walloon (or Flemish) Region had a 40% (or 43%) chance of having found a job five months after the notification from the ONEM; without the PAS, this probability would only have been 29% (or 32%). The relative increase in the probability of employment is therefore substantial: after five months, the PAS brought about an increase in the probability of employment of 38% (or 35%). To summarise, the PAS is found to have *clearly* (“significantly”) *positive* effects on the chances of finding employment⁸ for unemployed persons:

- who have a higher education level (Flanders and Wallonia);
- who have had recent employment experience⁹ (Wallonia);
- who live in a sub-region where unemployment is lower (Wallonia).

Two other groups of unemployed persons take greater advantage of the PAS to make an earlier transition from unemployment into employment. Positive and statistically significant effects of the PAS are observed on the chances of finding a job, of the order of 7 percentage points, for:

- women (Wallonia);
- unemployed persons who are *not* heads of household (Flanders and Wallonia).

The effects of the PAS are *insignificant and often close to zero* for the other groups of unemployed persons (lower level of education, without recent work experience, living in sub-regions where unemployment is high, men and heads of household).

The PAS seems to encourage, for instance, a return to part-time, poorly paid work in Flanders

Taking into account the data we currently have available, we do not know the type of employment held by the unemployed who rejoin the labour market. We can only identify the jobs which are financially supported by the ONEM. It seems that, in Flanders, the *specific* effect of the PAS is to encourage transitions into part-time jobs for which the worker receives additional income from the ONEM.¹⁰ Thus, almost 3% of CCE-DEs aged between 25 and 29 transitioned into this type of work five months after the notification from the ONEM.¹¹ The estimated fraction for these same CCI-DEs if they had *not* received the notification is half as much. This effect is not observed in the Walloon Region.

The PAS has no effect on the return to employment by young unemployed persons receiving benefits in Brussels

Unlike in the two other Regions, the PAS does not have the effect of encouraging a return to work among young unemployed persons receiving benefits who live in Brussels. The lack of effects by the PAS on insertion into employment by unemployed persons in Brussels could be the result of a statistical problem: the

⁸ Of the order of 10 percentage points. But we must remember that these effects, even if they are meaningful, are estimated with little accuracy: we cannot rule out the possibility that they may be close to 1 percentage point, or that they may be of the order of 20 percentage points.

⁹ In reality, these are unemployed persons who have a short “Eurostat” period of unemployment.

¹⁰ These are part-time jobs where rights are maintained together with the Allocation of Guaranteed Income (AGR); see ONEM web site: <http://www.onem.be/Home/MenuFR.htm>.

¹¹ Representing approximately 10% of transitions into employment.

size of the Brussels sample is too small to produce accurate estimates. However, we have no firm explanation for the lack of PAS effects on young unemployed persons in Brussels.

3.2. The granting of exemptions for social and family reasons

The PAS does not have the effect of increasing exemptions for social and family reasons among young unemployed persons receiving benefits in any of the three Regions of the country. This result was predictable and confirms that, for the period covered by our evaluation, the PAS did not have the effect of encouraging transitions from unemployment into inactivity. If a person meets the conditions for being given this exemption, there is no reason for that person to request it before the stricter monitoring of job search becomes applicable to him or her, in other words after the first interview with ONEM. In fact, the granting of this status implies a significant reduction in the amount of the unemployment benefit. The appearance of a positive impact in Wallonia ten months after the notification could reflect the effect of the first follow-up interview at the ONEM concerning the granting of exemptions for social and family reasons.

3.3. Access to training or the return to studies

The PAS encourages access to training and the return to studies by young unemployed persons receiving benefits, especially in Wallonia

The effect of the PAS on the chances of taking some form of training or having resumed studying is clearly (“significantly”) positive in **Wallonia**. Thus, 7% of CCI-DEs in Wallonia aged 25-29 are in a training programme or are taking a course of study five months after receiving the notification from the ONEM. The estimated fraction for these same CCI-DEs if they had *not* been warned is half of the above (3%). Ten months after receiving the notification letter, this gap reaches over 6 percentage points. This result comes as no surprise in so far as a large majority of unemployed persons in Wallonia aged under 30 who were warned by the ONEM took part in an individual interview at the FOREM, at the end of which assistance or training campaigns are suggested for those who have difficulty finding a job independently.

In **Flanders** and **Brussels** the PAS does not on average have the effect of promoting access to training or the return to studies by young unemployed people receiving benefits. However, the PAS does clearly (“significantly”) accelerate access to training for certain unemployed groups¹²: men and those with higher education qualifications, as well as unemployed persons admitted based on studies and the long-term unemployed in Flanders. Unlike the FOREM, the ORBEM and the VDAB did not specifically deal with unemployed persons who had been warned by the ONEM. However, the letter from the ONEM invites the unemployed person to “contact the regional employment and vocational training office without delay” if the person has “not yet received individual or intensive assistance”. Moreover, it specifies that the act of participating in an active policy implemented by the regional office can, under certain conditions, postpone the ONEM evaluation interview. It is therefore likely that some CCI-DEs aged under 30 targeted by the ACR were encouraged by the letter from the ONEM to register for training programmes.

¹² The estimated effects are however smaller than those estimated for Wallonia.

3.4. The imposition of sanctions or suspensions

As we anticipated, the PAS does not on average increase the rate of sanction or suspension for unemployed persons aged under 30 and receiving benefits. This is true for all three Regions of the country. This can be explained by the fact that we cannot evaluate the effect of evaluation interviews at the ONEM on the imposition of sanctions and suspensions.

4. Interpretation and lessons learned

Our results show that, in Flanders and Wallonia, the notification letter sent as part of the job search behaviour activation procedure does, on average, have a positive effect on the rate of transition from unemployment into employment. This average effect, which we however measure inaccurately, translates the fact that the evaluation interviews referred to in the letter are regarded as constricting by the unemployed who are receiving benefits (additional steps to find employment, risk of temporary sanctions, etc.) and do encourage them to step up their job search activities well before the first interview.

In Wallonia, the measured effect combines the effect of the letter and specific assistance actions by the FOREM. Although it is generally more difficult to find a job in Wallonia, the similarity between the average effect of the PAS in Wallonia and in Flanders can undoubtedly be explained by this specific support from the FOREM. Before July 2004, it was not unusual for an unemployed person to meet with a FOREM adviser only in exceptional cases after his or her registration as a job-seeker. Now, within two months of the notification from the ONEM, he or she must take part in a compulsory individual interview during which an adviser helps the unemployed person to (re)define his job search activities and directs him towards a broader range of job offers than that from which he would have had to choose as part of his personal job search.

However, this average effect hides a high level of similarity among the unemployed. The intensification of job search efforts caused by the letter only proves clearly ("significantly") effective for certain groups. This refers in particular to the unemployed whose profile is more favourable for recruitment, such as those with a higher level of education or those who have recent work experience as well as women whose growth potential in the job search effort is probably greater¹³ (provided they are not heads of household¹⁴). This does not mean that the dispatch of a letter containing a warning of stricter monitoring is ineffective for the other job-seekers. On the other hand, it suggests that the announcement of monitoring does not promote re-insertion into employment unless it is accompanied by other regional actions (job search aids, training, etc.) or federal actions (promoting the demand for labour through targeted reductions in labour costs, etc.). This research will be pursued in more depth by the use of individual data about the actions pursued by the regions for the unemployed persons in our

¹³ Given the greater involvement of women in domestic duties and in childcare, some of them are probably characterised by an average job search intensity that is lower than that of men before the introduction of the PAS; the potential effect would therefore be greater for women.

¹⁴ Heads of household with dependent children, but without a partner, will find it more difficult to join the labour market in so far as this entry into the market cannot take place without childcare.

sample. We will thus be able to evaluate the effect of regional actions on the insertion chances of unemployed persons whose characteristics are, to begin with, less favourable for employment.

One of the effects of the PAS is to encourage the transition from unemployment into part-time poorly paid jobs in Flanders, where no individualised assistance has taken place following receipt of the notification. This phenomenon is not observed among the unemployed in Wallonia who did receive this assistance. The threat of monitoring and sanctions, *without specific assistance from the SPE*, could thus encourage the unemployed to lower their demands regarding recruitment. In order to reach a conclusion on this matter, more research is necessary using data providing information about the type of job filled by unemployed persons who rejoin the labour market.

It is important to insist on the fact that our results could be over-valued because of the substitution phenomena: job-seekers receiving benefits and aged under 30 would be better positioned than others on the labour market and would fill the available jobs or training places more quickly, to the disadvantage of ineligible unemployed persons. The effects of the PAS would then be overestimated because it would increase the insertion chances of unemployed persons receiving benefits and aged under 30 to the disadvantage of others. The data we currently possess do not allow us to confirm or refute this hypothesis. Apart from the phenomenon of substitution, the PAS could have induced effects on wages and the number of jobs posted as vacant. For example, an increase in the average level of job search intensity reduces the costs of looking for candidates for vacancies and can thus boost the demand for labour by companies. To our knowledge, the induced effects of assistance and job search monitoring programmes have rarely been studied in other countries. A recent study (Blundell *et al.* 2004) however finds little evidence of major induced effects resulting from a scheme for monitoring and assisting job search activities in the UK.

It should also be pointed out that our results were obtained during the *launch phase of the PAS*, during which most of the stages of the ACR procedure had not yet taken place. The unemployed persons receiving benefits were therefore somewhat uncertain about the constricting nature (or not) of the procedure being implemented. It is therefore possible that the gradual disclosure of the results of the ONEM evaluation interviews and the associated sanctions may have changed the perception of the ACR procedure by unemployed persons receiving benefits. In order for this system to continue to encourage *anticipatory* transitions from unemployment into employment, as we have highlighted in this study, it has to be perceived as credible by unemployed persons receiving benefits; in other words they associate this system with the risk of a deterioration in their living conditions in the future (caused by stricter monitoring) and the *genuine* possibility of sanctions.

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