

ETHICAL FORUM 2015 OF THE UNIVERSITY FOUNDATION

Thursday 12 November 2015

Too many students? On the purpose, legitimacy and adequacy of university entry and orientation tests

« Kick off » of the concluding panel discussion by

Jean-Paul LAMBERT

Recteur honoraire de l'Université Saint-Louis – Bruxelles

Membre de l'Académie royale de Belgique

In view of the time limit, let me concentrate on a few points only.

I. First, **some factual observations**, which should be kept in mind.

1) contrary to what might be suggested by the deliberately provocative question « *Too many students?* » in the title of the Forum, Belgium is better characterized as having « not enough » students, as may be checked from OECD data:

- Belgium exhibits the lowest entry rate to university¹ of all the OECD countries, far below the European average, and, consequently, exhibits also one of the weakest score for the % of university graduates in the 25-34 years old age group;
- moreover, while almost all the OECD countries – as well as our European neighbours – have managed to improve considerably their entry rates to university during the first decade of this century, Belgium did not show any progress.

Hence we distinguish ourselves by having a higher education sector strongly skewed in favour of shorter vocational programmes at the expense of a more advanced university education, which incidentally puts us in an awkward position with respect to the Europe 2020 strategy.

2) our Belgian higher education system is also characterized by particularly strong inequalities with respect to entry (and hence graduation). According to a most commonly used measure - the relative likelihood of participating in higher education according to parents' educational attainment - Belgium scores badly, with worse prospects (for students from modest socio-economic background) than in the large majority of OECD countries. This is for participation in higher education in the broad sense; no doubt that for participation at university (where Belgium was just pointed as attracting a much lower proportion than anywhere else), Belgium's score would be even worse. This observation should come as no surprise since, as stressed by the OECD, inequalities in higher

education rest to a great extent on accumulated inequalities in primary and secondary levels of education. And we know, from the PISA surveys, that our Belgian secondary system is more crippled with inequalities than any other OECD system. This stems from its highly stratified structure, which allocates pupils, at an early stage, along types (general, technical, professional) and even, within each type, along “options”, in a way which proves to be strongly correlated with socio-economic conditions of the family.

II. Second, some **thoughts** about the nature – and the likely outcome – of **orientation tests**.

Considering the extent of the “reorientations” after the first year, the idea of an orientation test to be taken by everyone prior to the start, should, at first glance, be unreservedly welcome. Each student would, from now on, start directly in a field of study most suited to her aspirations and abilities. Success rates will increase (and so the number of graduates), time to completion will decrease (as will total costs) and everybody will be fine, with nobody worse off.

But this is not the real story. Basically, an orientation test is a procedure that, for each prospective student, assesses an ex-ante probability of success in the various programmes offered at university or at vocational colleges. It directs – firmly if the orientation test is “binding” and softly if it is “non binding” – the prospective student towards programmes for which the assessed ex-ante probability of success is above a threshold value (say 30%). This leads to a reallocation of the prospective student population, some part of it shifting, within university, towards other university programmes, some part shifting from university towards vocational colleges and some part being directly “transferred” from vocational colleges to the labour market.

What are the likely outcomes? First, success rates and time to graduation will – I would say “mechanically” - improve in both sectors (university and colleges), leading to cost savings. Total enrolment will decrease, with a marked decrease at university, only partially compensated by an increase at college. The number of graduates will decrease at university and increase at college, resulting in a total number of higher education graduates remaining stable or, at best, increasing slightly.

This policy calls however for some severe reservations:

¹ More precisely, to tertiary-type A, according to the OECD classification. Tertiary-type A encompasses all higher education programmes of a duration of at least 4 years while tertiary-type B covers programmes with a vocational orientation and a duration of min. 2 years.

- proponents of such a “filtering” device point to European countries (mostly Nordic countries) applying already such admission standards. True but one should also consider that these Nordic countries are precisely the ones that exhibit the lowest level of inequalities at secondary education level. What may be considered a “fair” policy (all pupils showing up with more or less equal chances) in these countries would be “unfair” in Belgium whose secondary education level stands out as most unequal, with inequalities strongly correlated to socio-economic status;
- any “filtering” device entails “false negatives”, in this case aspiring students who will be discarded at once but would, if admitted, have managed to graduation. The number of these students increases of course with the severity of the (implicit) threshold value of the test. If admitted, these students would, after graduation, have a much higher wage – and hence pay much higher taxes – than if immediately redirected to the labour market. When taking account of the loss, for the government, of the discounted flow of these tax receipts, it turns out that this policy is ill advised from a budgetary point of view;
- finally, let us notice that such a test would end up shifting students and graduates away from university towards the college sector, in a country already characterized by its higher education sector being strongly unbalanced at the expense of the university sector.