



TE_REG Report WP2b1 / KUL & UCLL

Competency-based Teacher Standards in Flanders: Practices and Impact

Research report on regional practices and impact of competency-based Teacher Education by the joined forces of KU Leuven and UCLL

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Introduction : Context, purpose and method

This report was developed within the framework of the TE_REG project, an Erasmus+ co-funded initiative that explores two major challenges facing contemporary teacher education. On the one hand, the rapid development of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) challenges established practices in teaching and learning. On the other hand, the emphasis on competency-based teacher standards — initially intended to enhance quality and clarity — has, in practice, led to analytical, fragmented, and procedural approaches to teacher education. These practices, now facing additional pressure from the demands of GenAI, call for a close (re-) examination of what it means to be a teacher and how teacher education can respond.

An exploratory literature review on the goals and organization of the Flemish teacher education system was conducted as a foundational step. This review included both analogue and online academic and popularized literature, policy documents, legislative texts, and program guides. The insights gained from this analysis informed the design of the focus group discussions.

It is important to note that this report addresses primary as well as secondary education given that the teacher standards are similar. As far as possible specific attention is paid to the specifics of both educational levels.

In the context of WP2 of the TE_REG project, two focus group sessions were organized. The second session (February 5th 2025), to which this report pertains, specifically examined competency-based teacher standards and their effects on teacher education. Different teacher education stakeholders – ranging from student teachers and teacher educators to policy makers and experts in education and GenAI – were brought together. This diverse composition was deliberately chosen as it enriches the discussions and allowed participants to broaden their professional networks and perspectives.

The report first reconstructs the current situation of competency-based teacher standards in Flanders based on literature studies and focus group dialogues with



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stakeholders. Next, in a discussion some initial reflections on the 'as is' situation are presented.

Origins and motives

The introduction of the 'basic competences for teachers' in Flanders in 1998 marked a significant shift in the conceptualization and regulation of teacher education. Minimum requirements in the form of competence-based teacher profiles were adopted by the Flemish Parliament, based on the proposals developed by the Department for Education Development (DVO) and the advice of the Flemish Education Council [in Dutch: de 'Vlaamse Onderwijsraad' (Vlor)]. On 15 December 1998, the Flemish Parliament voted the Decree ratifying the decision of the Flemish Government of 29 September 1998 concerning the professional profiles of teachers (Verhoeven & Verbeeck, 1999). This development was rooted in the Decree on Teacher Education of April 16, 1996, which mandated the creation of a so-called 'professional profile' together with a number of 'basic competences' for teachers. The 'professional profile' describes the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required of teachers in their professional practice. The 'basic competences' outline the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that every graduate student teacher must have to function competently as a beginning teacher. These competences represent the starting qualifications and enable teachers to grow professionally. They serve as the final attainment targets of teacher education and are directly derived from the professional profile.

Ceulemans (2017) notes that the development of these competences was driven by several motives. First of all, there is a clear ambition to ensure quality (control) in teacher education. In the 1990s, the concern about the variability in the quality of teacher training programs across Flanders was growing. Policymakers sought a standardized framework to ensure that all teacher education programs adhered to minimum quality standards as well as to create the legal basis for a common quality control. Another driver was the professionalization of teaching: the framework was designed to create uniformity in the education and professionalization of teachers as well as elevate teaching from a craft to a recognized profession, emphasizing the skills, knowledge, and attitudes required for effective teaching. The framework broadens teachers' responsibilities, shifting from individual autonomy in the classroom to shared autonomy within the school. Next to that, the basic



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competencies framework introduces an expanded conception of teacher professionalism; the starting point here is a view of professionalism with an open and process-oriented character, guided by reflection and a capacity to mobilize and update knowledge in function of the school and classroom context. This conception broadens teachers' responsibilities and requires them to exchange their individual autonomy in the classroom for shared autonomy in the school (Aelterman et al., 2007). The development of the competences was influenced by broader European movements toward competency-based education, emphasizing the need for clear and measurable outcomes in professional training programs. Finally, it can be seen as a response to societal changes; The rapidly evolving societal and educational landscape, including increased diversity in classrooms and the integration of new technologies, required more defined and flexible approaches to teacher preparation.

Teacher education in Flanders prior to 1998

Before the introduction of the 'basic competences,' teacher education in Flanders was less standardized and institutionally highly fragmented. Different types of institutions, including teacher education colleges and university faculties, offered programs that varied significantly in structure, content, as well as focus. Key characteristics of the system included:

1. **Diverse institutional landscape:** Teacher education was offered at both non-university institutions (Hogescholen) universities and adult education centers (CVO's), aimed at different teacher profiles, with separate pathways for primary and secondary education teachers. These institutions operated with significant autonomy, leading to discrepancies in curricula and quality.
2. **Traditional focus on subject knowledge:** Programs placed a heavy emphasis on subject-specific knowledge, often at the expense of pedagogical and didactic training. Practical training (internships) was often limited and not systematically integrated into the curriculum.
3. **Limited national oversight:** There was no overarching framework or set of standards to guide teacher education programs, resulting in variations in graduate preparedness.
4. **Limited sense of shared responsibility:** Teachers were largely seen as individually responsible for educational quality and often worked in isolation. The classroom was perceived as a self-contained unit within the school, and

the school itself was viewed as somewhat separate from the wider world. This perspective placed less emphasis on collaboration and broader connections.

5. Focus on local needs: Teacher education programs were often tailored to the specific needs of local communities, which sometimes led to a mismatch between training and broader societal or educational demands.

This decentralized and varied approach to teacher education induced the need for a more cohesive framework to ensure consistency and quality across programs. The introduction of the basic competences in 1998 was a direct response to these challenges, aiming to create a unified vision for teacher preparation in Flanders.

Evolution of the basic competences

Since the early 1990s, the government has formulated minimum requirements for pre-primary, primary and secondary quality education, translated into attainment targets and developmental goals. This highlights the comprehensive and complex nature of a teacher's work (Aelterman et al., 2008). The mission of education had made a shift, became more extended, complex and difficult. (Vlaams Parlement, 1996). The student population changed both qualitative as quantitative. Quantitative changes are the result of the prolongation of compulsory education and the democratization of education. Qualitative changes are due to a more heterogenic school population. A diversity is noticeable concerning motivation, social background and talents. Furthermore, society expected education to be a partner in solving problems in society and the amount of knowledge in each learning domain and subject increased. Society's high demands on education had an impact on the teacher's professional profile that encompassed the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of teachers in their professional practice. Teachers were more and more seen as team players. Collaboration with other teachers and stakeholders within the school team was considered as highly important to ensuring high-quality education. To participate fully in this collaboration, each starting teacher should possess certain competences that can be applied both individually and collectively with colleagues.

The basic competences were derived from the professional profile and served as starting competences for teachers, indicating the minimum quality criteria for beginning teachers set by the government. This became a model for the professional development of every teacher (Aelterman et al., 2008).

With the Decree of December 15, 2006, the teacher education program was renewed based on new policy priorities. Consequently, the professional profile was updated. These adjustments, while not drastically different, placed more emphasis on the use of standard Dutch (Standaardnederlands), diversity, and communication with non-native speakers. The update was approved by the Flemish Parliament on November 27, 2007, following advice from the Vlaamse Onderwijsraad (Vlor). The professional profile was no longer differentiated by educational level due to the introduction of the unified 'diploma of teacher.' However, the basic competences continued to differentiate between kindergarten teachers, primary school teachers, and secondary school teachers (Tanghe, 2021). It was not until 2017 the government decided to simplify the three existing sets of basic competences to one overarching set of basic competences for kindergarten teachers, primary school teachers and secondary school teachers (Vlor, 2017).

The basic competences for teachers in Flanders that are in use now are formulated rather generally and are used in pre-primary, primary and secondary teacher education. The actualization of the professional profile lies mainly in the concretization of the teacher basis competences. A set of highly specific competences would cause the risk of the basic competences no longer being relevant rather soon due to the constant development of our society. Furthermore, overly detailed competences risk becoming a checklist, thereby undermining the integrated and holistic approach of teacher professionalism. The basic competences for teachers in Flanders are clustered into three main domains, each representing a significant area of responsibility for teachers. Each of these domains consist of a number of functional areas that include different competences. The clustering in 3 areas of responsibility, 10 functional units and the 8 attitudes – for all Flemish teachers in all levels of compulsory education – have remained unchanged since the introduction of the basic competencies in 1998. The basic competencies themselves (which in turn fall under the various functional units) have undergone a number of updates.

The Vlor (2017, pp. 5-6) advised the government of Flanders that the basic competences should:

- make clear what is needed and sustainable for a novice teacher
- be formulated as generic as possible in order to be applicable and recognizable to all teachers



- guarantee the authenticity of different educational levels by mentioning the specific education contexts if necessary.
- be individually assessable with every teacher
- put the learner central
- be a coherent whole of competences

THE BASIC COMPETENCES FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHERS IN FLANDERS

Three domains of responsibility and ten functional units:

Responsibilities of the teacher towards learners

- Functional unit 1: The teacher as a facilitator of learning and development processes
- Functional unit 2: The teacher as an educator
- Functional unit 3: The teacher as a subject matter expert
- Functional unit 4: The teacher as an organizer
- Functional unit 5: The teacher as an innovator and researcher

Responsibilities of the teacher towards the school and the educational community

- Functional unit 6: The teacher as a partner of parents or guardians
- Functional unit 7: The teacher as a member of a school team
- Functional unit 8: The teacher as a partner of external parties
- Functional unit 9: The teacher as a member of the education community

Responsibilities of the teacher towards society

- Functional unit 10: The teacher as a cultural participant

Intersecting all these functional areas are eight attitudes for the beginning teacher:

1. Decision-making ability
2. Relational orientation
3. Critical mindset
4. Eagerness to learn
5. Organizational skills
6. Team spirit
7. Sense of responsibility
8. Flexibility

Each of the revisions of the set of teacher competences and the professional profile reflected evolving societal and educational demands, ensuring that the framework remained relevant and responsive to contemporary challenges. As expressed in table below, the number of competences for each functional unit changed over time. In general, the number of competences went down or remained the same. Exceptions are both functional unit 3 (The teacher as a subject matter expert) and functional unit 9 (The teacher as a member of the education community).

Functional unit	Number of competences 1997	Number of competences 2006	Number of competences 2018
1	16	13	11
2	7	7	7
3	3	3	5
4	4	4	4
5	3	3	3
6	4	6	5
7	4	5	3
8	1	4	1
9	2	2	4
10	5	1	1

The framework of the basic competences for teachers (2018)

The basic competences for teachers – as stated in the Decree of the Flemish Government concerning the basic competences of teachers, approved on June 8 2018 (Vlaamse Regering, 2018) – define the expectations that both education and society have for newly qualified teachers. They serve as a reference framework for the curriculum development of teacher education programs and as an individual assessment tool for each student in teacher training. The government establishes these minimum quality criteria to ensure transparency, so that parents and other stakeholders understand what they can expect from teachers. Explicitly defining basic competences for every student teacher to achieve, creates a shared language to talk about teaching and teacher quality (Ceulemans, 2014). This clarity is intended to improve the recognition and appreciation of the teaching profession. Furthermore, by specifically defining the basic competences, the government clarifies that newly graduated teachers are not expected to perform at the same level as those with more



experience. This reinforces the understanding that ‘being a teacher’ is a lifelong learning process.

Program-specific learning outcomes for teacher education programs in Flanders are based on the basic competences (and attitudes), the Dublin Descriptors (which define the qualification level), and the specific educational context. Input from the professional field will be systematically sought when developing these learning outcomes. The program-specific learning outcomes provide a guiding framework for the curriculum of every teacher education program.

The professional profile of teachers and the basic competences as described in the Decree of the Flemish Government are guiding teacher education (Ceulemans, 2014). They create a certain space, a framework in which discussions about teacher education and teacher competences take place. Teacher educators move within a certain space, created by the professional profile and basic competences, when discussing about how to translate the competences to a specific educational practice, how to use them are shaped by their existence.

Teacher standards in Flanders: a discussion

The basic competences have been widely adopted and have significantly influenced teacher education in Flanders. However, they have not been without criticism. From the start on the Vlor has pointed out that a competency framework for teachers will never be able to grasp the full breadth and depth of the teaching profession. The validity, reliability and operationalization of competences is being questioned by several authors and concerns are being formulated about the assumed positive impact on the appreciation and professionalization of the teaching profession (Ceulemans, 2014). Scholars in Flanders such as Ceulemans (2014), Ceulemans and Struyven (2013) and Feremans et al. (2017) have raised important concerns about their interpretation and application.

1. Risk of a technical-executive vision: Critics argue that the framework’s focus on measurable competences can lead to a reductive, technical view of teaching. This perspective risks framing teachers as mere implementers of pre-defined tasks rather than as reflective professionals capable of navigating the complexities of education.

2. Fragmentation and proceduralization: The analytical nature of the framework has been criticized for promoting a fragmented view of teaching. By breaking down teaching into discrete competences, the framework may fail to capture the holistic and integrated nature of effective teaching.
3. Inconsistencies in integrative approaches: The separation of attitudes from competences has been highlighted as a fundamental inconsistency. While the framework claims to promote an integrative approach, this division undermines the holistic view it seeks to achieve.
4. Neglect of the 'lasagna' of teaching: Teaching is inherently complex and multifaceted, encompassing social, cultural, emotional, and moral dimensions. The focus on visible and measurable competences risks overshadowing more nuanced qualities of teaching (authenticity, passion, empathy...). These qualities are difficult to define and assess but are nonetheless crucial for effective teaching.
5. Overemphasis on outcomes: The framework's emphasis on intended learning outcomes may fail to communicate the essence of the teaching profession. As Entwistle (2005) observes, formal statements of learning outcomes often lack the depth needed to convey the values and knowledge inherent in professional practice.

As noticed above, the existence of basic competences for teachers and by consequence teacher education, has an impact on how we look at teachers and what is focused on in educating teachers. Although the existence of teacher competences is a clear guideline for the education of beginning teachers, certain qualities of teaching are being neglected from the framework of teacher competences. Feremans et al. (2017) argue that competency lists may fail to capture the full complexity of teaching, overlooking the personal and subjective qualities that are central to effective teaching.

To explore the impact of competences on teacher training and get a better view on teacher qualities that possibly are being neglected from the framework, a focus group was organized with a heterogenous group of people, all connected to the field of education and/or teacher training. While the bulk of the outcomes of the focus groups will be discussed in the integrative research report, the following statements already hint that also from an empirical perspective, teacher standards do constitute a challenge for teacher education and induce unwanted and unintended practices.

"[...] with the whole competency-based approach, [the uniqueness of every person] has actually been pushed to the background. These competencies push towards uniformity and standardization. Where has intuition, drive, and passion gone? They have become completely subordinate."

"We designed a set of learning tracks and each would lead to the acquisition of a competency and then we'd ticked it off, and leave it that way. This led to a sequence of competencies, with the result that everyone does the same thing at the same time, without real 'mastery' as in 'knowing why and when'."

*"It's not about finding a good way to teach.
It's about whether you achieve the competencies, so you make a checklist.
Education then becomes a procedure, you just do what is on that list."*

The introduction of competency-based teacher standards has undeniably provided a shared framework for structuring teacher education in Flanders. However, concerns are raised about the way these standards have been interpreted and applied in practice. The analytical and procedural nature of competency frameworks risks fragmenting the teaching profession into isolated tasks and measurable outcomes, potentially overlooking the more nuanced and integrative qualities essential to good teaching. As this research report has shown, while competency frameworks offer structure and consistency, their practical implications have raised fundamental questions about the nature of teaching and what it means to be a good teacher.



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