

CIMIC reflections on M2M Study Visit London

1. Before visiting, we were mostly curious about how adult education policy in a mega city like London was organized. The scale and composition the immigrant population in London seemed mind boggling and so we expected more differences than similarities. In effect, we were surprised more so by similarities than by fundamental differences. There were differences, but often, as we learned, these differences can be couched in terms of degree and seemed to indicate tendencies that we find in our country (as well in others) as well:
 - a. Perhaps more so than in Belgium, adult education has explicitly moved in the direction of preparing adult learners for employment opportunities, away from the former 'pleasure/leisure' offerings. It appears that especially in the sector of migrants, the idea of preparing people for the job market seems deeply enshrined. Qualification (for employment opportunities) is regarded as the most prominent measure of success. One might say that the UK system is more market driven than the continental system (at least the Belgian one), but even that is increasingly becoming a matter of degree than anything else.
 - b. The focus on language training, in particular the more functional and appropriately funded ESOL training (50% of the WAES learners, as we were told...), illustrates a particular view on diversity that we recognize in our own country where language is regarded as the holy cow of integration. From one of the slides: *"it is felt that immigrants speaking English binds our nation together as a single grope in a way that a multiplicity of community languages cannot."* Change English into Dutch, and we are in Flanders (welcome everyone by the way...). On the other hand, we did note the sharp distinctions between ESOL courses and EFL programs oriented to basic English skills (and apparently not funded by government). Policies seem very much targeted and funding very much selective (e.g. less for housewives but more for women seeking employment). New streams of ESOL courses were being introduced, where qualifications are shorter, work focused qualifications to enable immigrants and speakers of other languages to facilitate speedy access to the labor market. We were struck by the multitude of policies and admired how WAES managed to cope with these rabbit holes, both in terms of its own programming and in terms financial and ethical considerations.
 - c. We noted that fees were introduced for English language courses, and that hefty integration policy discourses (i.e. on language, civic integration) do not always fit well with market mechanisms... Notably, the expectation that employers recruiting immigrant workers should bear the full costs of any English language training of their staff kept us wondering about how this might affect the prospects of M2M initiatives to facilitate upskilling of migrants.
 - d. The presentations by Sandra and Chris about organizational changes at WAES were inspiring for us as they resonated surprisingly well with on-going discussions about our own organizational setting (albeit at a smaller scale), in which we are often expected to be both trainer (or researcher) and product salesman at the same time. The drive towards

marketization is not entirely new to us, but the idea of developing an entirely new unit on 'business solutions' (with different views and image) certainly provides an challenging perspective. It was inspiring to learn how WAES was seeking innovative ways in terms of organizational change in order to reconcile employer needs and (individual) learner needs.

2. In spite of the focus on labor market orientation and targeting (highly) qualified groups of migrants, we did encounter recognition of the diversity of immigrant groups in a lively way in the testimonials and even more so in the informal visits and walkabouts in London.
 - a. We were pleased to learn from the outreach programs WAES was running for hard to reach groups, with little formal education and low English skills. In particular the program where WAES staff would go into the communities and work directly with members of the community to explore training needs, seems a viable way to reach people who are usually not reached in adult education programs.
 - b. The testimonials brought it all back home to the issue of 'migrant to manager'. The importance of networking was ever present, especially in the stories of Chris (at WAES) and Gilbert (Shell). Conflicts of cultures (e.g. tackling the old school boys club...) were recognized as barriers but apparently could be tackled successfully at an individual level. The ideas of participating in various networks and mentoring schedules provided new perspectives on dealing with the diversity of migrants (and non-migrants). Mixed approaches and developing new communication tools that better fit with ambitions and motivations of individuals seem to offer opportunities.
 - c. There were various and wide ranging opinions in our group about the museum on migration. Nonetheless, the visit did beg the question again of 'what is a migrant' (which was how also Gilbert started his talk), and 'when do you stop calling people migrants'.
3. We learned from the open discussion on indicators and evidence based ways to convince managers and policy makers to invest in diversity management and professional mobility of migrants within their organization. Whether data are based on qualitative or quantitative research methods, there is a strong (business) case to be made for diversity. Immigration remains a hot issue throughout Europe, and the media more often than not brings a negative image. It is important to tackle the negative perspective with the more positive picture and opportunities that emerge from practice and research. As Lauretta concluded her presentation with an indication of how migrants are important to the UK, also in an economic sense.
4. (more) elements that we recognized:

We recognized a similar policy outlook on integration, even in the implementation of programs, methods and tools such as language training, civic integration courses in order to ensure integration (or should we say 'assimilation'?) in our societies. It appears that underneath all the national debates there is a European agenda at work, more often implicitly than explicitly. The agenda includes a closer look at content and its relationship to labor market needs, attention to competition with private providers, the introduction of fees... At the level of organizations, we noted similarities with discussions, albeit at a smaller scale, in our own organization on better 'marketizing' training and advisory work to the needs of businesses... I think it is fair to say that we learned to be aware of the broader picture in which we all operate, and still develop ways and tools that respond to migrant needs, without necessarily 'chasing the rabbits' of ever changing policies.