



# 'To be informed': understanding the role of feedback information for Flemish/European policy

Maarten Simons

To cite this article: Maarten Simons (2007) 'To be informed': understanding the role of feedback information for Flemish/European policy, *Journal of Education Policy*, 22:5, 531-548, DOI: [10.1080/02680930701541725](https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930701541725)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930701541725>



Published online: 23 Aug 2007.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 162



[View related articles](#)



Citing articles: 28 [View citing articles](#)

# **‘To be informed’: understanding the role of feedback information for Flemish/European policy**

Maarten Simons\*

*Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium*

The aim of this article is to argue that the evident exchange of information on performance (and its supply, demand and use) should be regarded as a symptom of a new governmental regime that installs less evident power relations. Educational policy in Flanders (Belgium), and in particular the need for feedback information from the Flemish government, will be used as a case to describe this regime. Based upon the analytical framework of ‘governmentality’ (Foucault), the article focuses on the ‘governmentalization’ of Europe and Flanders that accompanies the need for feedback information. The main result of the analysis of European and Flemish policy documents can be summarized as follows: government or the ‘conduct of conduct’ currently takes the form of ‘feedback on performance’. This means that the strategy of the governmental regime is to secure an optimal performance for each and all (member states, schools), and acts upon the ‘need for feedback’ and ‘will to learn’ of the actors involved. On the basis of these findings, the article introduces in conclusion the notion ‘synopticon’ in order to grasp the exercise of power in ‘feedback on performance’.

## **Introduction**

An increasing number of activities in the context of educational policy can be placed under the heading ‘to inform people’ and ‘to get informed’. For example, the inspectorate in Flanders (Belgium) sees it as her task to spread information about the performance of schools.<sup>1</sup> International assessment studies, like PISA and TIMMS, inform the Flemish government about the performance of educational systems. Through electronic newsletters, principals and teachers in Flanders are informed about recent legislation and examples of good practice concerning administration, innovation and teaching. And journals are used to inform teachers, parents and students about a wide range of educational issues, such as the experiences of teachers in the classroom, the results of recent and relevant research, the implications and assumptions of new

---

\*Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Center for Educational Policy and Innovation, Vesaliusstraat 2, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium. Email: maarten.simons@ped.kuleuven.be

policy measures, published lists of recent initiatives in teacher training, and so on. In short, it feels as if ‘we’—and this ‘we’ includes the author of this article—are permanently in need of information.

The aim of this article is to argue that the evident exchange of information mentioned above (and its supply, demand and use) should be regarded as a symptom of a new governmental regime that installs less evident power relations. The thesis that I will elaborate can be summarized as follows: what is of strategic importance today is the circulation of *feedback* information, and as far as the actors involved in education come to understand what they are doing as a *performance*, feedback information is experienced as indispensable in order for the actors to position and reposition themselves in a *competitive* environment. Within this governmental regime, educational policy understands (and justifies) its role and task as collecting and offering feedback information. Within the scope of this article, I will develop this thesis while focusing in particular on the role of feedback information for the Flemish government (and its educational system) in a global/European environment on the one hand, and for schools in the Flemish context on the other hand. But first I will explain in more detail the analytical perspective I am using.

### **An analytics of the current form of ‘conduct of conduct’**

The analysis draws upon the work of Foucault (2004a, b) in three related areas: first, upon the analytics of government as ‘conduct of conduct’; second, upon the ‘ontology of the present’; and third, upon the attempt to identify the type of power in the governmental regime that seeks to govern us (see also Edwards, 2002; Ball, 2003; Peters & Humes, 2003; Olssen *et al.*, 2004).

From a Foucauldian perspective government is to be regarded as a form of ‘conduct of conduct’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 237) or a more or less calculated and rational attempt to direct human conduct by the application of particular technical means. An ‘analytics of government’, Dean (1999, p. 23) explains, ‘takes as its central concern *how* we govern and are governed within different regimes, and the conditions under which such regimes emerge, continue to operate and are transformed’. The assemblage and operation of these regimes of government can be analysed by focusing on three related dimensions: the governmental rationality or programme at stake, the *techne* of government being used, and the type of governable subject involved (see Foucault, 1978a, b; Gordon, 1991; Dean, 1999; Rose, 1999).

Governmental rationality refers to the mode of reasoning about how and why government takes place, the role of agencies and the justification of their authority, the entities to be governed, and the *telos* of government. A second dimension of analysis in a regime of government is the *techne* of government. This encompasses the instruments, procedures, techniques and tools that are combined and used in order to accomplish the governmental objectives. Finally, in order for people and organizations to be governable within a regime, they have to come to understand themselves in a particular way, to experience particular issues as relevant and to govern or conduct themselves accordingly. At this point it is important to stress that the aim of

this analysis is not to understand or explain the particular agency and underlying motives of multiple and different actors involved (see Dale, 2004). The focus of an analytics is, as explained by Rose (1999, p. 21), the space of thought and action for a particular self-government or conduct to emerge and hence the 'conditions of possibility and intelligibility for certain ways of seeking to act upon the conduct of others, or oneself, to achieve certain ends'.

The last remark is closely linked to a second area where this analysis draws upon Foucault: the critical concern or care for the present (Foucault, 1980, p. 108; see also Rajchman, 1991, p. 141). Foucault (1982, pp. 231–232; 1983, p. 448; 1984a, p. 573) used the concept '(historical) ontology of the present' in order to describe in a general way the aim and focus of his analytics, and in particular his perspective on government as the 'conduct of conduct'. In short, his aim was to make our present understanding of the self (others and the world) and our present experiences less evident, and to show how our self-government is being shaped within a particular governmental regime. In a similar way, and as explained in the beginning of the article, the point of departure is 'our' present experience of information and feedback (in the context of Flemish policy) in order to understand which governmental regime it emerges within as a 'singular, historical experience' (Foucault, 1984b, p. 13). As such, the focus is on (historical) conditions of possibility in order for information and feedback to be experienced as meaningful (Foucault, 1984c, p. 632).

Thus what is at stake, according to Rose (1999, p. 20), is 'introducing a critical attitude towards those things that are given to our present experience as if they were timeless, natural, unquestionable' and 'to enhance the contestability of regimes' that seek to govern us. As a result, the aim is to draw attention to what is familiar ('our present') and exactly what is often invisible due to this familiarity (Foucault, 1978a, pp. 540–541). What is needed to achieve this aim is not a kind of (principled or deep) interpretation, nor a kind of narrative about the current state of affairs. It is a kind of 'cartography' (Deleuze, 1986) that 'maps' (Flynn, 1994) the present or, as Rose (1999, p. 57) puts it, an 'empiricism of the surface' focusing on what is said and what allows it to be said.

Finally, the analysis is an attempt to 'enhance the contestability' (Rose, 1999) of the current governmental regime by revealing its mode of power. In view of this, and based on the results of the analysis of the Flemish case, the concluding section of the article discusses whether the model of the 'panopticon' (Foucault, 1972/1989), that is a configuration where 'the few are observing the many', is still useful to describe the power relations at stake today. Following Mathiessen (1997), I want to develop the thesis that the model of the 'synopticon', that allows 'the many to observe the few', is better suited to describe the current power configuration.

Drawing upon these preliminary considerations, the following section illustrates first the current need for feedback information at the level of educational policy in Flanders. Based on a description of this context, the next section discusses the current processes of governmentalization in Europe and Flanders in order to analyse the role of performance, feedback and learning. Additionally, the changed relation between 'the state' and schools in the Flemish policy context will be discussed. Based on these

explorations, the final section is an attempt to grasp the kind of power involved in this governmental regime of performance.

### **The need for feedback information in Flanders**

In many countries information from the well-known ‘Programme for International Student Assessment’ (PISA) and ‘Trends in International Mathematics and Science Studies’ (TIMSS) has come to play a role at the level of national educational policy. Flanders (Belgium) is no exception with regard to this. The subtitle of the policy declaration (2004–2009) of the current Flemish Minister of Education (Vandenbroucke, 2004) is instructive here: ‘Today a champion in mathematics, tomorrow also in equal opportunities’.<sup>2</sup> Based on the good results of international, comparative studies, the document (Vandenbroucke, 2004, p. 8) claims that it is the task of educational policy to ‘consolidate and stimulate’ the high quality of education in Flanders, as well as to focus on the weaker performance with regard to ‘equal opportunities’ in education. With regard to the latter, and drawing on a recent PISA report, the policy document (Vandenbroucke, 2004, p. 15) highlights the strong influence of socio-economic status on the performance of students in Flanders compared with the average in other OECD countries. As a result, this information, combined with national statistics, is used to identify and justify problem areas for policy intervention in a specific way. Educational policymakers in Flanders see it as their task to enhance the quality of education, but ‘quality education’ is now framed as ‘international performance’ (Vandenbroucke, 2005). In a similar way, yet at the level of the European Union, these approaches are in evidence.

In the European context educational policy is still claimed today to be the responsibility of the member states (justified by the principle of subsidiarity). The European Union (Maastricht Treaty, 1992) is therefore required to limit its contribution ‘to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action ...’. Meanwhile, it has been noticed that the idea of ‘quality education’ (Dale & Robertson, 2002, p. 25; see also Murphy, 2003) has permitted the European Commission to influence in a particular and subtle way national educational systems.

By using the ‘open method of coordination’, and in order to meet the goals of the Lisbon strategy, benchmarks or ‘reference levels of European average performance’ have been introduced with regard to education and training (Lisbon European Council [LEC], 2000, §37).<sup>3</sup> It is claimed that although this set of reference data is based on comparable data, it should ‘not define national targets’. Yet the Council (Council of the European Union, 2003, p. 4; see also Council of the European Union, 2005) expects that these benchmarks will be used by national governments to orient their educational policy. With regard to Belgium/Flanders, and similar to the results of PISA, this is indeed the case (see also Leterme, 2005).

An example is the benchmark introduced with regard to the number of early school leavers: ‘By 2010, an EU average rate of no more than 10% early school leavers should be achieved’ (Council of the European Union, 2003, p. 4). This benchmark

is used as well at the level of Flemish educational government to identify weaknesses in the performance of the Flemish educational system and to formulate policy measures (Vanderpoorten, 2003; Vandenbroucke, 2004, p. 14). Another example is the benchmark concerning lifelong learning. A figure of 12.5% participation in lifelong learning of the adult working age group by 2010 is put forward as a target (Council of the European Union, 2003, p. 5), and used by the Flemish government (Vandenbroucke, 2004, p. 14) to assess their present performance and to take initiatives for its optimization.

Similarly with regard to international reports, the open method of coordination illustrates that Flanders comes to understand in a particular way its governance responsibilities as well as the entity to be governed. 'Europe' enters the policy context of Flanders through the development of educational quality standards that are being expressed in data on performance indicators, and additional information on best practices. As a result, domains as well as objectives of educational policy increasingly have a European, comparative dimension. Moreover, as the case of Flanders clearly indicates, this global and European framework of educational quality is welcomed and even perceived as a necessity. For instance, the Minister of Education (Vandenbroucke, 2005, 2006a) in Flanders stresses:

An information-rich environment ... is notwithstanding essential for educational policy in Flanders... Are enough data, indicators and benchmarks available at the level of central policy to shape central government and to monitor local policy? ... Are we able to check our policy based on the best practice of other countries?

Although the minister (Vandenbroucke, 2005) argues that Flanders has made great progress in what he calls the 'professionalisation of educational policy' based on 'international stimuli', more data and feedback are perceived to be indispensable.

It is important to understand, however, what kind of policy and what kind of state/agency perceives 'professionalisation through information' as indispensable. Therefore, I will analyse in more detail current processes of governmentalization, and the implied governmental regime.

### **Processes of governmentalization in Europe and Flanders**

Although my main interest is the role of the state (Flanders), let me first focus on some features of the current role of Europe, in particular with regard to education. As mentioned earlier, the European Union conceives its task as one of developing educational quality. However, the EU limits its governmental actions by claiming to respect the responsibility of member states. As such, the EU (LEC, 2000, §41) represents this limited role as a 'catalyst' in order to establish 'an effective framework for mobilising all available resources for the transition to the knowledge-based economy'. Within the scope of the Lisbon strategy this limited role is an 'economic' role in two different ways (Foucault, 2004a, p. 253). First, it is economic, for it reflects upon its own governmental practices in economic terms—that is, governmental interventions are 'economised' by taking into account and using existing governmental practices

(member states). Second, it is economic, for it conceives of these practices in economic terms as resources that should be ‘managed’ in a particular way in order to reach the strategic goals. And as far as these strategic goals are themselves to a large extent economic (e.g. the knowledge economy), at this level a kind of economic government can also be noticed.

This catalyst or enabling role is exemplified very well in the open method of coordination. Through the open method of coordination, member states, and all other partners (professionals, private and public institutions) that are mobilized for these strategic goals, come to understand themselves as ‘calculative’ agencies being part of ‘calculable spaces’ (Haahr, 2004, p. 219). These ‘calculable spaces’ of benchmarks, performance indicators and best practices orient the performance of member states (and their institutions and policies) in a competitive environment (see Radaelli, 2003, p. 19). As such, the freedom and responsibility presupposed in the principle of subsidiarity is a particular kind of freedom and responsibility—that is, a freedom that encompasses the responsibility to calculate and mobilize resources and the virtue to optimize one’s performance in view of common targets. Furthermore, part of this role of Europe is the construction of a new identity of the European Commission: ‘an institution capable of legitimately and authoritatively passing out grades to member states, thereby establishing their relative forwardness or backwardness in terms of virtue’ (Haahr, 2004, p. 223). The open method of coordination hence opens up the space to reflect upon the role of the Commission in ‘managerial’ terms, with one of its main tasks being the management (collection, presentation, distribution) of information on performance.

Instead of regarding Europeanization as a gradual process of integration ultimately resulting in a kind of ‘etatisation of Europe’, the developments mentioned above help to understand it in terms of a ‘governmentalisation of Europe’ (Masschelein & Simons, 2003; Walters, 2004; see also Foucault, 1978a, 1981). The emergence of a managerial mentality and procedure reconfigures the role of Europe as well as the entities to be governed (such as the member states and their knowledge economies and education policies). What takes shape is an ‘art of European government’ that constitutes the European union, its institutions and experts, as central agencies of ‘coordination’—that is, of managing the conduct of member states (Barry, 1994). In this regard, it would be more precise to regard this development as the ‘*management-alization*’ of Europe.

In order to have a clearer understanding of the governmentalization of the state/Flanders, it is important to discuss in more detail the specificity of the ‘calculable spaces’ in which member states frame their national system of education. As the title of the policy declaration in Flanders—‘Today a champion in mathematics, tomorrow also in equal opportunities’—suggests, the Flemish educational system is ranked with other (European) systems with regard to its performance. As a consequence, policy in Flanders affirms that educational systems are commensurable, and can be compared and measured on a single scale and with regard to their performance or output. In this context of ‘performativity’, as Lyotard (1979) discussed some time ago, the criteria of efficiency and effectiveness become of

central importance. 'Good education' is framed as effective and efficient performance with regard to specific indicators (e.g. achievements with regard to mathematics, reading literacy, number of early school leavers, and so on) and calculated on the basis of European/global average performance (Commission of the European Communities, 2004, 2005, 2006; Desjardins *et al.*, 2004). A particular kind of information becomes indispensable if one is positioned within such calculable spaces of efficiency and effectiveness: that is, comparative information on one's performance in relation to a specific norm or average. This kind of evaluative information is defined (in cybernetics) as feedback and its function is to control the operation of a system 'by inserting into it the results of past performance' (Wiener, in van Peursen *et al.*, 1968, p. 57; see also McKenzie, 2001, p. 70). As calculating agents, member states and in particular Flemish government come to experience feedback as indispensable at two related levels.

On the one hand, comparative information evaluates the performance of a state's past and present educational policy and can be used to re-orient educational policy and to optimize its performance. As such, information generated through the European coordination method and other international assessment instruments is welcomed in Flanders in order 'to have a better understanding of one's own educational policy' (Vandenbroucke, 2004, p. 25) and it is perceived as a kind of stimulus for the 'professionalisation of educational policy'. However, this process of professionalization has a particular focus: educational policy itself is framed as performing in an international, competitive environment and it is perceived as committed to a 'process of competitive self-improvement' (Haahr, 2004, p. 223). On the other hand, and within this new field of competition, feedback on the performance of national educational systems justifies and reinforces the role and tasks of national government in terms of performance management. The issue of 'equal opportunities', for example, is used as an indicator of the system's performance, and information on this indicator evaluates whether resources are mobilized in an optimal way. As such, central policy in Flanders becomes a kind of 'performance targeted policy' (Vandenbroucke, 2006a) in an international/European, competitive environment. At this level, feedback is indispensable to orient the management of processes of competitive self-improvement of an educational system. And the urgent need for additional performance indicators and an information-rich environment, currently expressed by Flemish policy makers, can be regarded as a logical outcome of this managerial attitude.

Thus, as far as (optimal) conduct is conceived as (optimal) performance, at the level both of educational policy and of the educational system, feedback is needed in order to direct this conduct. In short, government or the 'conduct of conduct' currently takes the form of 'feedback on performance', and the collection and distribution of feedback information becomes a powerful steering mechanism (Bröckling, 2006). At a more general level, and I will illustrate this in more detail in the next section, government through 'feedback on performance' in Flanders can be regarded as a feature of a general transition from the 'welfare state' to the 'competition state' (Yeatman, 1993; Cerny, 1997) or 'performative state' (Ball, 2000).



### **Feedback, learning and ‘co-opetition’ in Flanders**

The current mode of government as ‘feedback on performance’ in a competitive environment helps to understand the emergence of new ‘managerial virtues’ of Flanders in its role as calculating agency. These virtues are: (a) a readiness to learn from comparison; (b) to benchmark; (c) to collaborate in order to compete, and to be proactive or offensive.

(a) Feedback is needed for national government in order to orient itself within a competitive environment, but primarily it seeks to feed the process of ongoing self-improvement. Here ‘learning’ enters the scene:

If the knowledge society is to become a reality, all actors in the education and training process have to be ready to learn; and mutual learning, as implicit within an ‘open method of co-ordination’ is a way of increasing the quality of service delivered to the citizen. (Council of the European Union, 2001, p. 16; see also Council of the European Union, 2002, p. 5)

Yet it is important to keep in mind that this ‘readiness to learn’ is from the very beginning framed within a competitive environment where learning outcomes are derived from the best performing policies and educational systems. What is at stake is ‘learning from comparison’ and for the optimal organization of input, process and outcome or the optimal mobilization of resources. As a result the ‘need for feedback’ and the ‘need for learning’ reinforce each other. The present policy declaration of the Flemish Minister of Education (Vandenbroucke, 2004, p. 25)—in need of feedback, as I mentioned earlier—uses, for instance, the notion of ‘policy imitation’ or expressions such as ‘learning from others to make progress in achieving one’s own objectives, learning from the successes of others, as well as from their failures’. Thus, as a competition or performative state, the Flemish government not only reflects upon the task and object of government in managerial terms, but also regards learning as an indispensable economic force or resource to re-orient and optimize performance.

It is important to stress that in this governmental context of the competition state learning is conceived in a very particular way. It is regarded as a solution for processes of change within a competitive environment—that is, as a solution for innovation and improvement. As a result, to experience oneself (as a policy maker, expert, organization, social partner, and so on) as being part of a competitive environment is to experience change through learning as a fundamental and natural process that can and should be regulated, directed or managed. Furthermore, (mutual) learning is not only perceived as a process to secure the optimal performance of each member state, but at the same time as a process to secure the overall economic (and social) performance of Europe (in comparison to the USA and Japan) (Vandenbroucke, 2002).<sup>4</sup> In short, ‘learning’ (and its discourses and procedures) recodes or frames the project of Europeanization or policy coordination in a particular way. In terms of optimal performance, ‘good conduct’ is regarded as what can and should be learned, and as what presupposes a ‘readiness to learn’.

(b) The combination of the ‘need for feedback’ and the ‘need to learn’ in a competitive environment helps in understanding the importance of benchmarks and

examples of best practice. During the second part of the twentieth century, benchmarking developed from a specific business technique (a ‘comparative statistical activity’), a theory of (strategic) management (‘competitive benchmarking’), to a central component of policy development and implementation (Arrowsmith *et al.*, 2004, p. 315; Larner & Le Heron, 2004, p. 215). The present Minister-President of Flanders (Leterme, 2006) explains the governmental importance of benchmarking very well:

Our Flemish welfare is in the year 2006 more than ever a relative issue in space: we are a high performing, open economy in an increasingly globalised world with open borders. Therefore, the Belgian horizon cannot be our benchmark. Our most important trade partners and competitors have done radical conversions ... . We were down in too many international classifications.

The Minister-President clearly assumes a spatial, or rather ‘environmental’, understanding of Flanders (and its economy) in a global, European environment and commensurability at the level of (economic) performance: ‘Where do we sit in relation to others?’ (Larner & Le Heron, 2004, p. 227). A typical feature of this ‘environmental’ understanding is that ‘good conduct’ (with regard to economic policy, for example) is no longer about acting in accordance with general principles or norms (and, for instance, in accordance with a country’s historical mission). Instead, it is about mobilizing one’s resources in view of an optimal performance in comparison with the performance of others. Hence, specific targets or benchmarks are needed as a kind of ‘global positioning’ and in order to set a momentary level of optimal performance. The (five) benchmarks or ‘reference levels of European average performance’ with regard to education and training are illustrative here.

Based on these benchmarks, and statistical data on performance indicators, a table with the ‘best performers in the five benchmark areas’ as well as information on progress of each performer (member state) is distributed in order to stimulate ‘learning from best performance’ (Commission of the European Communities, 2005, pp. 19–20). As such, benchmarking and comparative information functions as a particular type of feedback and is a stimulus for a particular kind of learning. What is ‘fed back’ in benchmarking, and used, for example, by the Flemish government, is evaluative information on one’s performance compared with the (average) performance of competitors and with regard to specific indicators. Benchmarking therefore functions as a kind of calculative ‘practice of comparison’ (Larner & Le Heron, 2004, p. 218) that satisfies the need for feedback (at the level of the Flemish government, for example). But it also reinforces the experience of learning as being a fundamental resource in the process of competitive self-improvement:

Considering that a number of EU Member States are already achieving world-best performances in a number of areas, whereas others are faced with serious challenges, there is real added value available in exchanging information on best policy practice at European level. (Commission of the European Communities, 2006, p. 9)

What has to be learned first and foremost is to understand why some are better performers—that is, why and how some manage in a more optimal way the mobilization of

available resources. As a result, the calculative practice of benchmarking leads to the identification of so-called 'best practices', and more specifically the willingness to know 'background variables' and 'context' that explains the 'added value' (see also Desjardins *et al.*, 2004, pp. 2, 90). Whether learning indeed occurs, and at what level, is not the main concern of this analysis. The main point is that framing 'good conduct' as optimal performance and competitive self-improvement, exemplified by the Flemish government, results in the competitive translation of problems into learning problems.

(c) Finally, 'global positioning of performance' and 'mutual learning' through benchmarking involves a managerial virtue that combines in a particular way an attitude of collaboration and competition. The information exchange, and mainly the information on benchmarks and good practices (e.g. on member states that are performing well), functions as feedback information for each of the member states so that they can orient themselves in an international environment and assess and re-orient/consolidate their performance. But in order to maximize this competitive environment, at the same time member states collaborate with each other: as partners in order to formulate common objectives; as suppliers of information to calculate averages (on best performance), to understand best performance; and as peer reviewers. Thus, collaboration is needed in order to have feedback information at one's disposal and in order to be able to monitor, assess and optimize one's own performance. This combination of collaboration and competition works as a procedure of 'co-opetition' (Brandenburger & Nalebuff, 1996), and this procedure is closely related to a shift in general attitudes at the level of national government.

In the welfare state, the classic distinction between 'conservative' and 'progressive' was used to classify political attitudes and policies. What both labels presuppose is a kind of 'temporal' or 'historical' understanding of society—that is, the classification in terms of progress or conservation has a temporal dimension. However, the new phase in the governmentalization of the state primarily involves an 'environmental' understanding of society and the establishment of global performance indicators and competitive self-improvement: 'where do we sit in relation to others?' (Larner & Le Heron, 2004, p. 227). This environmental and global, competitive understanding of educational policy in the competition state seems to give birth to new political attitudes: a distinction and tension between a reactive/defensive and a proactive/offensive attitude. The policy declaration of the Flemish government, for example, stresses the importance of a 'proactive' stance of Flanders and of a 'European and international strategy' in order to use the support of Europe in developing and collecting suitable performance indicators (Vandenbroucke, 2004, p. 25). This is clearly a 'political' message of the Minister of Education to those who hold a kind of reactive and even defensive attitude towards Europeanization and globalization. However, in defending the priority of the local environment this reactive attitude also presupposes an environmental perception.

In conclusion, drawing upon the case of Flemish educational policy I have described some central features of the current governmentalization of Flanders

(related to the governmentalization of Europe). What emerges is a governmental rationality that renders both educational policy and the educational system intelligible in terms of performance in a competitive, international environment, that frames the state as a competition or performative state with a managerial and enabling role, and that regards optimal performance as a governmental target. And through benchmarking and the collection of good practices at an international level the new governmental state explicitly tries to satisfy its need for feedback, and tries to orient itself within a competitive environment of nation states, but first and foremost the competitive state seeks to learn from comparison for the sake of optimal performance.

### **The changed relation between the state and schools in Flanders**

In order to have a more detailed understanding of this governmentalization of the state/Flanders with regard to education, it is necessary to focus also on transformations within the state itself. Within the scope of this article, I limit myself to a short exploration of two policy instruments recently adopted or proposed in the Flemish policy context: these are ‘testing grounds’ and ‘periodic assessments’ (Vandenbroucke, 2004). Both instruments explain how ‘feedback on performance’ is also at a local level an important ingredient of the present mode of government or ‘conduct of conduct’.

With the instrument of testing grounds, the Flemish government offers a selection of schools the (legal) autonomy and resources to experiment with innovations concerning specific targets. The Flemish government adopted this instrument as well as these targets from an influential reform project (inaugurated and implemented by a team of representatives from the economic, social, cultural and educational sectors) that focused on the reorganization of Flemish secondary education in view of the challenges of the (European) knowledge society (Bossaerts *et al.*, 2002; Van den Berghe & Bossaerts, 2004). Drawing upon the European Lisbon strategy as well as specific challenges in the Flemish context, this project formulated strategic development axes (e.g. flexible learning trajectories for all, entrepreneurial schools with a broad societal function, structural cooperation between education and the labour market, companies with attractive working conditions, and so on) and for each axis specific targets to be met by 2010. These targets were adopted by the Flemish government and added to topics stressed in the policy declaration—‘tomorrow also a champion in equal opportunities’. These targets and topics are not (quantitative) benchmarks in a technical sense, yet they are clearly inspired by the Lisbon strategy and ‘Education and Training 2010’. This short clarification of the context of the use of ‘testing grounds’ helps to explain how it relates to a changed rationalization of the role of both central government and schools.

Through local experiments, central government no longer regards innovation of the educational system as a top-down process. Instead, its role is conceived in managerial terms as creating opportunities for schools to optimize their performance concerning specific targets (for instance in private–public cooperation). Furthermore, the results

of these local projects can be used to orient future educational policy (Vandenbroucke, 2004, p. 21). But more importantly, schools engaged in an innovation project have to be prepared to open themselves up to the other schools in order to create opportunities for ‘mutual learning’ (Van den Berghe & Bossaerts, 2004, pp. 102–103). What is needed is a system of ‘permanent evaluation and progress’ for continuous ‘distribution and circulation of information’ on successful performance or good practices (‘what has proved to work’). Hence, a major task of central government is to combine ‘performance targeted policies’ with the stimulation of innovation, and improvement through the exchange of feedback information for schools (Vandenbroucke, 2006a). Similarly, with regard to member states in the European context, schools in the Flemish context are required to understand themselves in environmental terms—that is, as performing in a competitive environment and in need of permanent feedback information in order to orient organizational learning and innovation for optimal performance. ‘Feedback on performance’ as a mode of government is even more clearly organized with the implementation of ‘periodic assessments’.

The present Minister of Education claims that similar to central educational policy (at a European level), local school policy is in need of an ‘information-rich environment’ (Vandenbroucke, 2005, 2006a). Without such an environment, it is impossible for schools to know their effectiveness and to improve their performance. Therefore, a system of ‘periodic assessments’ (testing the scores of pupils on attainment targets on a regular basis) is used to create this environment. The argument of the minister (Vandenbroucke, 2006b) is illuminating at this point:

Assessment of education has been developed in order to offer reliable information at the level of the whole country and not at school level. In the future however, I also want to use these assessment tests to offer schools learning opportunities... . Schools are in need of more information about the factors that explain differences in performance between pupils and schools... . In order to get this information out of assessment tests at the level of the whole country, a more complex research diagram is needed allowing researchers to construct an informative story that offers a learning opportunity for all schools—including those schools who are not in the sample... . Schools are not just asking for more feedback on their results. They also want valid and reliable assessments that are normalised on a large scale and that enables them to position themselves.

Similar to member states in the European context, this illustrates very well how central government regards its role towards schools that are in ‘need of feedback’. What is established is a calculative space of effectiveness and efficiency in order to make one’s functioning as a school intelligible in terms of performance and to engage the school in a (competitive) project of self-improvement: ‘We want to provide schools with a mirror through which they can benchmark their own performances against those of schools that have the same or similar pedagogic and student profile’ (Vandenbroucke, 2006a). Mutual learning, based on the stories of best performing schools, is regarded by the Minister of Education as a solution for optimal change in a competitive environment. Hence, a centralized collection and distribution of feedback information on performance becomes also a major component in the governmentalization of Flanders.

### **Concluding remarks: on power and its dangers**

The analysis of the European context and the circumstances of current educational policy in Flanders explains that the ongoing circulation of information is of strategic importance in the current mode of government. The strategy at stake is to secure an optimal performance for each and all, and acts upon the 'need for feedback' and 'will to learn' of the actors involved. As the policy documents clearly indicate, this 'need for feedback' and this 'will to learn' are experienced as natural. However, they should not be regarded as organizational or anthropological universals. Although conceived in this way, these are 'singular, historical experiences' emerging within the current regime of 'conduct on conduct' (Foucault, 1984b, p. 13). The 'need for feedback' (on one's performance) and the 'will to learn' (in order to improve one's performance) are both the effect and instrument of a competitive state that seeks to secure optimal performance.

As indicated earlier, the current need for feedback information and learning in the case of Flanders can be regarded as an illustration of the general shift to a 'competition state' or 'performative state'. In order to have a more profound understanding of this shift and its consequences, further research is needed. It is important, for instance, to critically examine 'the contradictions of neo-liberal governance' within the competition state (and probably also at the level of Europe), such as the social polarization of the school population due to the marketization in education (Robertson & Dale, 2002). Furthermore, it could be helpful to compare the Flemish case with other cases and to develop a more integrated framework in order to understand 'globalisation effects' and 'processes of global convergence' (Rizvi, 2004). Finally, and this is the perspective for my concluding remarks, it is interesting to focus in more detail on the exercise of power in the present regime of 'conduct of conduct'. The identification of the type of power at stake should be regarded as an attempt to 'enhance the contestability' (Rose, 1999) of the governmental regime that seeks to govern us.

As indicated earlier, the main component of this regime is a particular 'conduct' or self-government of schools on the one hand, and a particular 'conduct' of the central state on the other hand. Part of this self-government is to control one's performance (as a school, as a state) by using information from the environment that circulates through information media. This mode of self-control and self-surveillance does not merely function according to the disciplinary strategy of the 'panopticon' (Foucault, 1972/1989, p. 270). Modern panoptical power seeks to discipline human beings through an internalized gaze of the other (i.e. the normalizing gaze of experts). Like inmates in a prison, pupils in a school, labourers in a factory and patients in a clinic come to understand themselves in terms of normality under the gaze of experts (teachers, managers, doctors). My thesis is that the exercise of power today is not that of the classic panopticon, but a self-imposed, reversed panopticon or 'synopticon'. I will briefly elaborate this thesis.

The panopticon refers to a form of power that works through the observation and surveillance of the many by the few, and where the few (those in power) are often not

visible. According to Foucault (1972/1989, p. 298), this modern form of power is quite different from the classic form of power in the spectacle. In the spectacle of public punishments, as well as in the theatre, for example, the many observe the few and this observation is meant to control the masses. Mathiessen (1997, p. 219) refers to this as the ‘synopticon’ and argues that our present ‘viewer society’ combines both ‘panoptical and synoptical’ mechanisms:<sup>5</sup>

Increasingly, the few have been able to see the many, but also increasingly, the many have been enabled to see the few—to see the VIPs, the reporters, the stars, almost a new class in the public sphere.

It can be argued that the governmental regime of performance indeed combines in a subtle way elements of both individual surveillance and mass spectacle in a kind of synopticon.

The instruments of information offer images of performance or best practice and organize a kind of spectacle. The arena of education, and its performance, is rendered visible to all. Thus, instruments of information function as a kind of *mass media* that allow the many (schools, states) to watch and observe the few (see Vinson & Ross, 2001). What is being watched in this reversed panopticon is a spectacle or arena of the best performers or those representing in an exemplary way optimal performance or ‘good conduct’. Yet, at the same time, it is through this spectacle, and its potential of feedback, that each of those who are watching comes to know their own performance. As such, the spectacle of performance orientates each and all, puts schools and states in a position in which they are able to monitor and orient themselves, and it creates the information-rich environment that is regarded today to be indispensable in order to satisfy the need for feedback and learning for optimal performance. Above all, the spectacle of performance puts states and schools into a position in which they long themselves to become an image of ‘good performance’, to be part of the ‘happy few’ being watched and admired by the many, and to be a ‘champion’ themselves.

To conclude, the current governmental regime seems to be first and foremost accompanied by the power mechanism of mass spectacles and its images of best performance, through which each school and individual is able to orient and optimize their own performance. Of course, because power is involved in the governmental regime of performance, this is not necessarily bad, but is potentially dangerous (Foucault, 1984d, p. 386). And it is especially dangerous because the message becomes: ‘perform, or else’ (McKenzie, 2001), and because it becomes very difficult for us, in how we reflect upon ourselves and upon education, not to be part of it.

### **Acknowledgement**

The author expresses his gratitude to the K. U. Leuven Research Council for the receipt of a postdoctoral research grant in order to conduct the research reported in this article.

## Notes

1. The analysis is limited to the current state of affairs in Flanders, for with regard to education (and other competencies), the Flemish government has a high level of independence within the federal state of Belgium.
2. The quotes from Flemish policy documents and reports are translations of the author.
3. For a detailed analysis of this method, see Radaelli, 2003; Arrowsmith *et al.*, 2004.
4. Whether learning is indeed effective, and at what level, is another question I do not discuss here (see Radaelli, 2003, p. 29).
5. Mathiessen (1997, p. 219) clarifies his use of the term 'synopticon' as follows: 'The concept is composed of the Greek word *syn* which stands for "together" or "at the same time", and *opticon*, which, again, has to do with the visual. It may be used to represent the situation where a large number focuses on something in common which is condensed'.

## Notes on contributor

Maarten Simons is lecturer and post-doctoral researcher at the Centre for Educational Policy and Innovation, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium. His research interests are educational policy and political philosophy with special attention on governmentality and schooling, autonomy and higher education and performativity in education. Together with Jan Masschelein, he is the author of *Globale Immunität. Ein kleine Kartographie des Europäischen Bildungsraum* (2005, Berlin/Zurich, Diaphanes). He is the co-editor of the book titled *Europa anno 2006. E-ducatieve berichten uit niemandsland* (2006, Leuven, Acco) and the special issue *The Learning Society from the Perspective of Governmentality* (2006, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*), and the author of several articles in journals and edited books.

## References

- Arrowsmith, J., Sisson, K. & Marginson, P. (2004) What can 'benchmarking' offer the open method of co-ordination?, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 11(2), 311–328.
- Ball, S. J. (2000) Performativities and fabrications in the education economy: towards the performative society, *Australian Educational Researcher*, 27(2), 1–23.
- Ball, S. J. (2003) The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity, *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(2), 215–228.
- Barry, A. (1994) Harmonization and the art of European government, in: C. Rootes & H. Davis (Eds) *Social change and political transformation* (London, UCL Press).
- Bossaerts, B., Denys, J. & Tegenbos, G. (Eds) (2002) *Accent op talent: een geïntegreerde visie op leren en werken* (Koning Boudewijnstichting) [*Accent on talent: an integrated vision on learning and working*] (Antwerpen, Garant).
- Brandenburger, A. & Nalebuff, J. (1996) *Co-opetition* (New York, Doubleday).
- Bröckling, U. (2006) Und...wie war ich? Über feedback [And ... how was I? On feedback], *Mittelweg*, 36(2), 26–43.
- Cerny, P. (1997) Paradoxes of the competition state: the dynamic of political globalisation, *Government and Opposition*, 32(2), 251–271.
- Commission of the European Communities (2004) *Progress towards the common objectives in education and training: indicators and benchmarks*. Commission Staff Working Paper, Brussels, 21 January (SEC [2004] 73).



- Commission of the European Communities (2005) *Progress towards Lisbon objectives in education and training (2005 report)*. Commission Staff Working Paper, Brussels, 22 March (SEC [2005] 419).
- Commission of the European Communities (2006) *Progress towards Lisbon objectives in education and training (report based on indicators and benchmarks, report 2006)*. Commission Staff Working Document, Brussels, 15 May (SEC [2006] 639).
- Council of the European Union (2001) *Report from the Education Council to the European Council: on the concrete future objectives of education and training systems*, Brussels, 14 February. Available online at: [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/doc/rep\\_fut\\_obj\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/doc/rep_fut_obj_en.pdf) (accessed 20 July 2007).
- Council of the European Union (2002) Detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe, *Official Journal of the European Communities*, C142, 1–22.
- Council of the European Union (2003) *Council conclusions on reference levels of European average performance in education and training (benchmarks)*, Brussels, 7 May. Available online at: <http://ec.europa.eu/education/doc/official/keydoc/2003/benchmark.pdf> (accessed 18 August 2006).
- Council of the European Union (2005) Council conclusion of 23 May 2005 on new indicators in education and training, *Official Journal of the European Union*, C141, 7–8. Available online at: [http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/lex/LexUriServ/site/en/oj/2005/c\\_141/c\\_14120050610en00070008.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/lex/LexUriServ/site/en/oj/2005/c_141/c_14120050610en00070008.pdf) (accessed 20 July 2007).
- Dale, R. (2004) Forms of governance, governmentality and the EU's open method of coordination, in: W. Larner & W. Walters (Eds) *Global governmentality: governing international spaces* (London, Routledge), 174–194.
- Dale, R. & Robertson, S. (2002) The varying effects of regional organizations as subjects of globalization in education, *Comparative Education Review*, 46(1), 10–36.
- Dean, M. (1999) *Governmentality. Power and rule in modern society* (New Delhi, Sage).
- Deleuze, G. (1986) *Foucault* (Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit).
- Desjardins, R., Garrouste-Norelins, C. & Mendes, S. (2004) *Benchmarking education and training systems in Europe: an international comparative study* (Stockholm, Institute of International Education, Stockholm University).
- Edwards, R. (2002) Mobilizing lifelong learning: governmentality in educational practices, *Journal of Education Policy*, 17(3), 353–365.
- Flynn, T. (1994) Foucault's mapping of history, in: G. Gutting (Ed.) *The Cambridge companion to Foucault* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press), 28–46.
- Foucault, M. (1972/1989) *Discipline, toezicht en straf: de geboorte van de gevangenis [Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison]* (Groningen, Historische Uitgeverij).
- Foucault, M. (1978a) La philosophie analytique de la politique [The analytical philosophy of politics], in: D. Defert, F. Ewald & J. Lagrange (Eds) *Dits et écrits III 1976–1979* (Paris, Gallimard), 534–551.
- Foucault, M. (1978b) La 'gouvernementalité' [On 'governmentality'], in: D. Defert, F. Ewald & J. Lagrange (Eds) *Dits et écrits III 1976–1979* (Paris, Gallimard), 635–657.
- Foucault, M. (1980) Entretien avec Michel Foucault [A talk with Michael Foucault], in: D. Defert, F. Ewald & J. Lagrange (Eds) *Dits et écrits IV 1980–1988* (Paris, Gallimard), 104–110.
- Foucault, M. (1981) 'Omnes et singulatum': vers une critique de la raison politique ['Omnes et singulation': towards a critique of political reason], in: D. Defert, F. Ewald & J. Lagrange (Eds) *Dits et écrits IV 1980–1988* (Paris, Gallimard), 134–161.
- Foucault, M. (1982) Le sujet et le pouvoir [The subject and the power], in: D. Defert, F. Ewald & J. Lagrange (Eds) *Dits et écrits IV 1980–1988* (Paris, Gallimard), 222–243.
- Foucault, M. (1983) Structuralisme et poststructuralisme [Structuralism and poststructuralism], in: D. Defert, F. Ewald & J. Lagrange (Eds) *Dits et écrits IV 1980–1988* (Paris, Gallimard), 431–457.
- Foucault, M. (1984a) Qu'est-ce que les Lumières [What is enlightenment?], in: D. Defert, F. Ewald and J. Lagrange (Eds), *Dits et écrits IV 1980–1988* (Paris, Gallimard), 562–578.

- Foucault, M. (1984b) *Histoire de la sexualité 2. L'usage des plaisirs* [History of sexuality 2. The use of pleasure] (Paris, Gallimard).
- Foucault, M. (1984c) Foucault, in: D. Defert, F. Ewald & J. Lagrange (Eds) *Dits et écrits IV 1980–1988* (Paris, Gallimard), 631–636.
- Foucault, M. (1984d) A propos de la généalogie de l'éthique: un aperçu du travail en cours [On the genealogy of ethics: an overview of work in progress], in: D. Defert, F. Ewald & J. Lagrange (Eds) *Dits et écrits IV 1980–1988* (Paris, Gallimard), 383–411.
- Foucault, M. (2004a) *Naissance de la biopolitique. Cours au Collège de France (1978–1979)* [The birth of biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France (1978–1979)] (Paris, Gallimard/Le seuil).
- Foucault, M. (2004b) *Sécurité, territoire, population. Cours au Collège de France (1977–1978)* [Security, territory, population. Lectures at the Collège de France (1978–1979)] (Paris, Gallimard/Le seuil).
- Gordon, C. (1991) Governmental rationality: an introduction, in: G. Burchell, C. Gordon & P. Miller (Eds) *The Foucault effect: studies in governmentality* (London, Harvester Wheatsheaf), 1–51.
- Haahr, J. (2004) Open co-ordination as advanced liberal government, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 11(2), 209–230.
- Larner, W. & Le Heron, R. (2004) Global benchmarking: participating 'at a distance' in the globalizing economy, in: W. Larner & W. Walters (Eds) *Global governmentality: governing international spaces* (London, Routledge), 212–232.
- Leterme, Y. (2005) *Opvolging van de Lissabonstrategie : vooruitgangsrapport 2004. Mededeling aan de Vlaamse Regering* [Follow-up of the Lisbon Strategy: progress report 2004] (Brussels, Vlaamse Regering). Available online at: [http://docs.vlaanderen.be/buitenland/documents/eu/lissabon\\_vruitgangsrapport\\_2004.pdf](http://docs.vlaanderen.be/buitenland/documents/eu/lissabon_vruitgangsrapport_2004.pdf) (accessed 20 July 2007).
- Leterme, Y. (2006) *Toespraak van [Speech of] Minister-President Yves Leterme at reception of VOKA-Chambers of Commerce and Industry*, 24 January. Available online at: [http://www.voka.be/files/bestanden/2006-01-24\\_YL\\_nieuwjaar.pdf](http://www.voka.be/files/bestanden/2006-01-24_YL_nieuwjaar.pdf) (accessed 16 August 2006).
- Lisbon European Council (LEC) (2000) *Presidency conclusions*, Lisbon, 23–24 March. Available online at: [http://consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/00100-r1.en0.htm](http://consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/00100-r1.en0.htm) (accessed 20 July 2007).
- Liotard, J.-F. (1979) *La condition postmoderne* [The postmodern condition] (Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit).
- Maastricht Treaty (1992) Treaty on the European Union (29 July), *Official Journal of the European Communities*, C191.
- Masschelein, J. & Simons, M. (2003) *Globale immuniteit. Een kleine cartografie van de Europese ruimte voor onderwijs* [Global immunity. A small cartography of the European space for higher education] (Leuven, Acco).
- Mathiessen, T. (1997) The viewer society: Michel Foucault's 'Panopticon' revisited, *Theoretical Criminology*, 1(2), 215–234.
- McKenzie, J. (2001) *Perform or else: from discipline to performance* (London, Routledge).
- Murphy, M. (2003) Covert action? Education, social policy and law in the European Union, *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(5), 551–562.
- Olssen, M., Codd, J. & O'Neill, A.-M. (2004) *Education policy: globalization, citizenship, democracy* (London, Sage).
- Peters, M. & Humes, W. (2003) Editorial: the reception of post-structuralism in educational research and policy, *Journal of Education Policy*, 18, 109–113.
- Radaelli, C. (2003) *The open method of coordination: a new governance architecture for the European Union?* (Stockholm, Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies).
- Rajchman, J. (1991) *Truth and Eros: Foucault, Lacan and the question of ethics* (London, Routledge).
- Rizvi, F. (2004) Theorizing the global convergence of educational restructuring, in: S. Lindblad & T. Popkewitz (Eds) *Educational restructuring: international perspectives on travelling policies* (Greenwich, Information Age Publishing), 21–41.

- Robertson, S. & Dale, R. (2002) Local states of emergency: the contradictions of neo-liberal governance in education in New Zealand, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 23(3), 463–482.
- Rose, N. (1999) *The powers of freedom. Reframing political thought* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- Van den Berghe, W. & Bossaerts, B. (Eds) (2004) *Accent op talent : een agenda voor vernieuwing (Koning Boudewijnstichting) [Accent on talent: an agenda for innovation]* (Antwerpen, Garant).
- Vandenbroucke, F. (2002) *The EU and social protection: what should the European convention propose?*, paper presented at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, Köln, 17 June.
- Vandenbroucke, F. (2004) *Beleidsnota 2004–2009: Onderwijs en vorming: vandaag kampioen in wiskunde, morgen ook in gelijke kansen [School and education: today champion in mathematics, tomorrow also in equal opportunities]* (Brussels, Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap).
- Vandenbroucke, F. (2005) *Toespraak: Studiedag PISA2003 en TIMMS2003, grade 8, 13 mei 2005, aud. Hadevych [Speech: Study Day PISA2003 and TIMMS2003, grade 8, 13 May 2005, Hadevych room]*. Available online at: <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/beleid/toespraak/050513-studiedag.htm> (accessed 20 July 2007).
- Vandenbroucke, F. (2006a) Demand, parental choice and school autonomy. The Flemish case and beyond, paper presented at *International OECD-seminar*, 16 May.
- Vandenbroucke, F. (2006b) *Toespraak: Peilingen worden een cruciaal onderdeel van de bewaking van onze onderwijskwaliteit [Speech: Assessments will be a crucial part of the control of our educational quality]*, 7 March. Available online at: <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/beleid/toespraak/060307-peilingen.htm> (accessed 20 July 2007).
- Vanderpoorten, M. (2003) *Beleidsbrief onderwijs en vorming (2003–2004) [Policy letter on schooling and education (2003–2004)]* (Brussels, Vlaamse Regering).
- van Peursen, C., Bertels, C. & Nauta, D. (1968) *Informatie: een interdisciplinaire studie [Information: an interdisciplinary study]* (Utrecht, Het Spectrum).
- Vinson, K. & Ross, E. (2001) Education and the new disciplinarity: surveillance, spectacle, and the case of SBER, paper presented at a roundtable discussion during the *Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Foucault and Education SIG)*, Seattle, WA, April.
- Walters, W. (2004) The political rationality of European integration, in: W. Larner & W. Walters (Eds) *Global governmentality: governing international spaces* (London, Routledge), 155–173.
- Yeatman, A. (1993) Corporate management and the shift from the welfare to the competition state, *Discourse*, 13(2), 3–9.