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FedDiverse - Ethnic Diversity in Federal Public Services

Why are ethnic minorities underrepresented among the employees of the federal public sector in Belgium? The FedDiverse project showed that they do not lack the motivation to serve the public good and they do not perceive advertisements for governmental jobs very differently. It appears, however, that ethnic minority applicants have lower selection rates than majority applicants across almost all selection tests, and that they experience fewer promotions. Nevertheless, ethnic minorities perceive the selection and promotion procedures as equally fair as their majority counterparts.

Context and questions of research

Ethnic minorities are still underrepresented at higher echelons of many organisations, including the public sector in Belgium. This status quo is problematic for several reasons. It is not only in the law but also ethical to provide fair job chances to any applicant, irrespective of the ethnic or national origin. Unfair procedures might discourage individuals to apply for jobs, trigger complaints, initiate legal cases, and negatively affect organisations' image as well as employer branding. Moreover, unfairness upon organisational access or career advancement (whether actual and/or perceived) also negatively affects individuals' wellbeing (low self-esteem and commitment; depression; dropout and turnover from employment). Furthermore, a homogeneous workforce undermines the good functioning of organisations, including increasing the level of innovativeness and meeting the needs of the increasingly diverse customers and stakeholders. Finally, governments ought to set an example to others by reflecting its society and its citizens.

The FedDiverse project identifies aims to analyse the ethnic diversity in the federal public services and identify factors that promote and inhibit ethnic diversity during the initial screening and later career stages. It investigates several aspects during the career path, from targeted recruitment (applicants' public service motivations and perceptions of job advertisements), fairness of tests (adverse impact) to job incumbents' career success (in both objective and subjective terms). Each time we monitor career chances for ethnic minorities vis-à-vis majorities at the federal public services.

Main findings

Almost all ethnic origin groups are underrepresented in the federal public sector compared to both the private sector and other public sector entities. The most underrepresented employees are the Bulgarian and Romanian groups, while Italian, French, Spanish and Maghreb groups are less underrepresented. In contrast to most other Sub-Saharan African groups, the Congolese origin group is *less* underrepresented in the public sector versus the private sector. In the federal public sector overall, men are overrepresented in both the Belgian origin and non-Belgian origin groups. This general picture hides substantial internal differences. Some employers, such as the *armed forces* or the *police* are dominated by men whereas in *public services and administrations* and *public social security institutions* women comprise the majority of employees. The gender balance within the overall federal public administration differs, however, per origin group. Groups of East-Asian, Sub-Saharan African, as well as Maghreb origin show the strongest gender imbalances.

Whereas ethnic *composition* typically refers to the proportion of a population belonging to a particular ethnic origin (e.g., a non-European origin or specific ethnic group), ethnic *diversity* also takes into account the number of different groups involved within an institution. The ethnic diversity has improved in each of the federal institutions between 2017 and 2021. Overall, in 2021, federal institutions of *public utility and scientific institutions* were the most diverse, while *federal parliamentary institutions* were the least diverse.

Next, we examined to which extent ethnic minorities are less motivated to work for the government. More precisely, we investigate the public service motivation (PSM), which assesses the motivation of people to contribute to society. Although not limited to public sector employment, previous research has shown that PSM is positively associated with public sector recruitment. Our analyses indicate that ethnic minorities, on average, come from cultural backgrounds which score higher on public service motivation. In other words, ethnic minorities overall do not lack motivation to serve the public good. Therefore, ceteris paribus, public sector employment should hold a greater, not lesser, attraction for them compared to Belgian ethnic majority members. This shifts the explanatory focus away from a 'cultural deficit' model and strongly suggests that other factors are more likely drivers of their underrepresentation.

In addition, this project investigated the role of job advertisements, and the extent to which ethnic minorities perceive these advertisements differently. Job advertisements are still the cornerstone of recruitment. Job advertisements are, however, not solely neutral messages but contain various signals. Intrinsic, extrinsic, or prosocial job attribute signals are commonly discussed as having an impact on candidate decision making. We found that there are only minimal ethnic differences in Belgium in the perception of job advertisement signals. Only a few minority groups preferred intrinsic job attributes signals over prosocial ones. Moreover, it appears that people of Maghreb origin are more attracted by multicultural framings of the diversity climate in the organization. Consequently, emphasizing a multicultural diversity climate (instead of a colourblind one) in job advertisements would increase the number of applications from this minority group. Furthermore, the results show that this would not come along with a lower attractivity or less applications from other ethnic groups (including the majority).

Focusing on the selection phase, the federal government uses cognitive ability tests on all organisational levels by means of abstract, numerical, and verbal reasoning tests. Our analyses indicated that all tests, except for the numerical reasoning test, show significant differences in selection rates, with ethnic minorities passing significantly less often than ethnic majorities. These differences were particularly observed among men (not women) and applicants older than 50 years (not younger applicants). Crucially, this disparity exists despite both minority and majority applicants perceiving the tests as equally fair.

Post-hire, ethnic minorities experience fewer promotions overall but achieve them at a faster rate than majorities. While ethnic background is not related to subjective career success, it was higher for women than for men and tended to be lower for older employees. Moreover, both objective and subjective career outcomes are positively influenced by

organisational factors such as perceived career support and mentoring, highlighting actionable areas for policy intervention.

Conclusion and recommendations

Although ethnic diversity is slowly increasing among the employees of the federal public services, ethnic minorities are still clearly underrepresented. To further improve the representation of ethnic minorities in the public sector, we make the following recommendations:

- A repeated monitoring of both the inflow (recruitment) and throughflow (career advancement and promotion) of ethnic minorities is essential for evidence-based policies. Here, it is essential to be sufficiently specific because broader classifications miss important nuance. For example, although the Congolese origin group is commonly subsumed within the broader category of Sub-Saharan African origin, the representation of the Congolese group is clearly different as opposed to the other Sub-Saharan African groups.

- The higher levels of public service motivation among ethnic minorities show that there is still a lot of potential that is currently underutilized in the recruitment for the public sector. However, in crafting the job advertisements it is not necessary to emphasize the prosocial job attributes of working for the federal public services. Instead, we recommend stressing intrinsic job attributes and multicultural framings of the diversity climate.

- Cognitive ability tests are essential tools to recruit candidates, and there appears to be no ethnic differences in the perceived fairness of these tests. Nevertheless, the ethnic disparities in most of the test results call for a critical reflection on the weight of (each of) these tests in the decision-making process of recruiting new employees.

- We recommend to (further) work on organisational support, mentoring, occupational expertise, ethnic acculturation, and perceived allyship in the federal public serves.

Read more

Leysen, B., Derous, E., Desmette, D. Verhaeghe, P.P. *FedDiverse. Federal Diversity in Federal Public Services. Final Report.* Brussels: Belgian Science Policy Office 2025 – 120 p. (BRAIN-be 2.0 - Belgian Research Action through Interdisciplinary Networks)

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