



AN OVERVIEW OF EDUCATION ON FLEMISH BELGIUM

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An Overview of Education on Flemish Belgium ACII

The Flemish schools in Belgium are among the top performers in the OECD, having scored among the top ten in two of the three subjects tested. Belgium devolved responsibility for schooling to its four regional governments over the past twenty years. In Flanders, devolution has continued with increasing numbers of the schools operated by non-governmental entities. Almost 70 percent of Flemish schools are now publicly-financed private schools. The development of umbrella groups and "clusters" of schools to make management of these schools more efficient is a notable development. Another recent reform effort has focused on modularizing secondary vocational education and aligning skill certifications for young people and adults.

Background

Belgium is divided ethnically into the Dutch-speaking Flemings, the French-speaking Walloons, 70,000 German-speaking residents of the eastern cantons and bilingual Brussels. While Belgium retains a federal government, responsibility for much of domestic policy has been devolved to regional governments since 1970. Flanders, the Dutch speaking areas, are the majority population with almost 6 million of Belgium's 10 million citizens. There is a regional government for Flanders which oversees economic, employment, environmental, infrastructure and agricultural issues. There is also a Community government for Dutch-speaking areas (which includes Flanders and parts of Brussels) with oversight for education, welfare, public health and culture. The devolution of power to the regions was accompanied by a change in the constitution in 1994 making Belgium a federal state.

Division between the Flemish North and the French South are deeply ingrained in Belgian society. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the French regions had an industrial boom and were more affluent and politically dominant while Flanders remained poorer and agricultural. The last half-century has marked a turnaround, with rapid economic development of Flanders and a corresponding shift in political and economic power.

A parliamentary democracy, Belgium has been governed by successive coalitions of two or more political parties. The centrist

Christian Democrats were traditionally the leading party of the ruling coalition since the 1980s. In 1999, however, a new coalition led by the Flemish Liberal Party took power with a six party coalition that included the Socialists and the Greens. The Greens suffered significant defeats in the 2003 elections and the current ruling coalition is dominated by the Liberals and the Socialists. The Prime Minister is Liberal Part leader Guy Verhofstadt.

Belgium's industry is concentrated mainly in the populous Flemish area in the north. With few natural resources, Belgium must import substantial quantities of raw materials and export a large volume of manufactures, making its economy unusually dependent on the state of world markets. Roughly three-quarters of its trade is with other EU countries. The government has succeeded in balancing its budget, and income distribution is relatively equal. Economic growth in 2001-03 dropped sharply because of the global economic slowdown, with moderate recovery in 2004. Job creation is a major issue in Belgium

The Flemish Education System

Governance and Funding

The Belgian constitution guarantees a right to education for 12 years for all citizens. It requires that students attend full time through age 15 and part time thereafter. It also sets minimum standards for a school diploma and regulates pensions for teachers. All other school affairs are managed at the Community level. The Flemish Minister of Education and Training is responsible for the education system from nursery to university education. There is also a Flemish Education Council, which is an advisory body for all education matters. It is made up of officials from the education department, representatives of the governing bodies and parents.

The federal constitution also guarantees "freedom of education" which means that any person has the right to organize education or establish an educational institution. It also gives parents freedom of choice about where their children go to school. In Flanders, any "governing body" can operate a school. Most receive government funding, as long as they meet attainment targets and meet minimum operational standards (like having sufficient textbooks, etc.) The

organizing body can appoint staff, choose teaching methods and develop curricula.

There are four types of schools:

- **Community schools:** These are schools operated by the Flemish Community. They account for about 15% of schools. These schools are "neutral", in that they are not part of a particular religion or education philosophy. In 1989, as part of the effort to devolve authority for education, the authority to organize community schools was removed from government.
- **Subsidized publicly run schools:** These are operated by the municipal and provincial governments. The schools are operated by two umbrella groups: the Education Secretariat of the Association of Flemish cities (OVSG) and the Flemish Provincial Education (POV). These schools account for 16% of schools.
- **Subsidized private schools:** These are operated by religious and other non-profit organizations. The majority are Catholic schools. These account for 68% of schools.
- **Non-subsidized private schools:** There are a small number of non-subsidized schools, accounting for about 1% of schools.

These groups of schools are referred to as "networks." The Flemish Community funds all costs for community schools and the costs of running and maintaining other schools, except for the non-subsidized private schools. All teaching personnel are paid for by the Community. Since 2003, "school clusters" have formed among nursery and primary schools to increase efficiency on management.

Nursery and Primary School

Nursery school is not compulsory, but is free of charge. It is offered to children over 2 1/2 years. Almost all children attend (90 percent of 3 year olds, 95 percent of 4 year olds and 100 percent of 5 year olds.) In many areas, nursery and primary schools are co-located.

Primary school serves children 6-12 years. Classes are organized by age, some also group by competence. Required primary subjects are: Dutch, World Orientation, Math, Music, Physics, Learning to Learn and Social Skills. French is usually added at the third grade level. At the end of primary school, children receive a certificate of primary education. There is no common exam for this certificate. Teachers do the assessment on their own.

Secondary School

Secondary school serves students 12-18 years old. Since 1989, there has been a "uniform structure" for secondary schooling. It is divided into three stages. The first stage is devoted to a core curriculum and lasts for two years. Subjects required include: Dutch, French, English, Math, History, Geography, Art, Science, Technical Education, Physical Education and Religion or Ethics. In the second stage students choose between four different types of programs:

- general secondary education (ASO)
- technical secondary education (TSO)
- secondary education in the arts (KSO)
- vocational secondary education (BSO)

They continue in this program through the third stage. There is a core curriculum for each program with increasing numbers of optional courses as students specialize. At age 15, students can transfer to part time education in a part time vocational school (DBSO), an entrepreneurship course or other recognized part time programs. A student receives a certificate of secondary education after completing six years of ASO, TSO, KSO or seven years of BSO. With this certificate, a student can enter any type of tertiary institute. Again, there is no common exam for the certificate.

Higher Education

Higher education was overhauled in 1993. The Higher Education Act of 1993 introduced a bachelor-master degree structure, established partnerships between universities and colleges, and established a structure to accredit training programs. As of 2004, there are two kinds of bachelor degrees: professional and academic. Professional bachelors are only offered at colleges while academic ones are offered through colleges and universities. Professional bachelors degrees are

intended for specific professions while academic bachelor degrees are intended for students who wish to move on to academic masters programs. Students with a professional bachelors degree can take a bridging program course if they want to move on to a masters programs, however. In recent years, a "professional masters" degree was established too, for higher-level training in a professional area. Entry requirements vary for different programs but sometimes include an entry exam.

Inspection

The Flemish Community has attainment targets for each level of education, except nursery school. These are subject-related and cross curricular. The targets are prepared by the education development service in the Ministry, approved by the Flemish Education Council and then ratified by the legislature.

There are five Inspection teams (one for nursery and primary, one for secondary, one for part-time, one for tertiary and one for pupil guidance centers). These teams conduct school or center audits. Each network has its own education advisors who can provide assistance to individual schools.

Colleges and universities carry out their own evaluations. In addition, committees of external experts also visit, coordinated by the Flemish Interuniversity Council and the Flemish Council for non-University Higher Education. In addition, higher education courses are now required to be accredited.

Special Education

About 5 percent of students attend special education classes. These students are served in special schools. At the primary level, there is a single type of special education school while at the secondary level programs are organized around the type of disability a student has. There is also an effort at the secondary level to mainstream students with additional support.

Adult Education

In 1990, Flanders created a network of 29 adult basic education centers specifically focused on basic education needs of adults (over 18) who are struggling with reading and writing. They also serve immigrants with Dutch language instruction. Courses are free.

Current Issues:

- Providing additional financial support for students from economically disadvantaged background for secondary and higher education;
- Providing additional support for schools serving students with disadvantaged backgrounds;
- Modularizing secondary vocational education and considering whether to extend modularization to other types of secondary education;
- Adding more practical training to teacher training programs;
- Aligning all technical credentials to create a uniform certification system;
- Creation of a new certificate (Skill Certificate of Professional Competence) to recognize skills learned outside of school.