

NATIONAL REPORTS 2004 – 2005

Country:	Belgium -Flemish Community
Date:	21.01.2005
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1. Main achievements since Berlin***1.1. Give a brief description of important developments, including legislative reforms***

The reform outlined in the Decree on the structure of higher education (2003) and the Decree on flexible learning in higher education (2004) was actually put in place at Flemish higher education institutions from the academic year 2004-2005 on. The new structure will gradually replace the older one definitively.

2. National organisation***2.1. Give a short description of the structure of public authorities responsible for higher education, the main agencies/bodies in higher education and their competencies (For example, do higher education institutions report to different ministries?)***

In Belgium, since 1989, education is not a federal matter any more. Instead there is a complete devolution of competences for education to the (linguistic) Communities. In the Flemish Community of Belgium the Ministry of the Flemish Community is responsible for higher education. Two departments are involved : (1) Education Department, more particularly the Administration of Higher Education and Scientific Research, for all higher education matters and issues of institutionally driven research; (2) Department of Science Innovation and Media for broader research issues.

In addition, there is an autonomous accreditation agency that works on transnational basis together with the Netherlands.

2.2. Give a short description of the institutional structure

(For example, number of public/private universities/other HE institutions or numbers/percentage of students in public/private sector. To what extent are private and State higher education institutions covered by the same regulations?)

In the Flemish Community of Belgium there are 31 publicly funded higher education

institutions: 6 Universities, 1 transnational University (in cooperation with the Netherlands), 22 other higher education institutions (Hogescholen) and 2 postgraduate university institutions. Privately funded higher education is still a marginal phenomenon. The quasi totality of recognised higher education institutions are publicly funded, although not necessarily pertaining to public law (many publicly funded institutions actually pertain to private law). Since the decree on the structure of higher education (2003) it is possible for privately funded institutions to apply for registration and accreditation, provided that they comply with the general quality standards set out for Flemish higher education as a whole. One of the results of the transformation process since the Decree on the Structure of Higher Education is the officially registered co-operation between a university and one or more hogescholen, known as "association". Its purpose is to evolve into co-operating entities on education and research, and the development of fine arts. Other actions are to harmonise the fields of study as well as to create bridges between bachelor's and master's studies.

2.3. Give a brief description of the structure which oversees the implementation of the Bologna Process in your country

(National Bologna group, thematic working groups, composition and activities, stakeholder involvement)

The Flemish Education Department is in charge for dissemination of information relevant for the implementation of the Bologna process, including on international issues.

Rectors' conferences and the Flemish Students Association play an important role.

Working groups established by the 2 Rectors' Conferences (Flemish Interuniversity Council and Flemish Hogeschool Council) play an important role. These working groups are generally composed of representatives of higher education institutions' staff, students and public authorities. Since July 2004 a Flemish Bologna Promoters team has been established with members from the Flemish Interuniversity Council, the Flemish Hogeschool Council, and the Flemish Students Association.

Note : for all matters of legislation on educational issues the Flemish Government is bound to seek for advice of both the Flemish Education Council and the Social-Economic Council of Flanders, thus involving the main stakeholders in the decision process.

3. Quality assurance

The following questions have been included in the template at the request of the Working Group on Stocktaking.

3.1. National quality assurance systems should include a definition of the responsibilities of the bodies and institutions involved.

Please specify the responsibilities of the bodies and institutions involved.

- Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Agency (NVAO)

The accreditation organisation is financed by the Netherlands (60 %) and by the Flemish Community (40 %)

The agency has four major tasks: (i) accreditation of existing bachelor-master programmes; (ii) ex ante evaluation of new programmes to check whether they meet the basic quality standards; (iii) assessment, on demand of the institution, of specific quality aspects of the programme; and (iv) the promotion of the European and international dimension in Dutch-Flemish accreditation and the development of international contacts in order to achieve co-ordination and collaboration.

- Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR) and Flemish Hogeschool Council (VLHORA)

VLIR and VLHORA are legally responsible for organising and monitoring the quality assurance scheme for respectively universities and hogescholen. They design the system, develop and update the protocols and guidelines, appoints the expert panels, receives the reports of the panels, publishes them, etc.

- Higher education institutions

The institutions have the legal obligation to engage in internal quality assurance mechanisms and to participate in external quality assessments. They are also collectively responsible, since they own the system jointly and have to collaborate in VLIR or VLHORA..

- Student involvement

Students play an active role in the management and quality monitoring of study programmes. The Decree on the Structure of Higher Education stipulates the inclusion of a student in each programme review team..

- Involvement of social partners

Some self-assessment reports, especially in disciplines that are closely linked to the labour market and professional associations, pay attention to the opinions of socio-economic stakeholders. When this is the case, employers can express their criticisms, demands and expectations regarding the study programmes and their graduates..

3.2. National quality assurance systems should include a system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures.

Describe the system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures, if any.

PRINCIPLES

The main characteristics of the new accreditation system in Flanders will be that:

All programmes in the new bachelor-master degree system will have to be accredited in order to ensure their basic quality for the students, stakeholders and society.

Accreditation will follow the bachelor-master degree system. This implies that the binary divide in programmes, which is maintained in the Flemish degree system at bachelor level, will lead to different accreditation standards and criteria.

Accreditation will be given to programmes if there are sufficient guarantees that they meet the basic standards and criteria.

Accreditation will be given on the basis of the results of existing external quality assurance schemes, co-ordinated by VLIR and VLHORA. Visitation panels will have to comply with the accreditation frameworks.

Accreditation will have 'external effects on the public recognition of the programme and its degree. Publicly funded institutions cannot offer a non-accredited programme.

New programmes will have to submit themselves to a specific kind of ex ante accreditation procedure, organised by the accreditation organisation.

Note : the prerequisite for an accreditation system functioning on the basis of these principles is a strongly independent accreditation agency.

PROCEDURE

A university or hogeschool asks a quality assessment agency (Flemish Internuniversity Council or Flemish Hogeschool Council) to carry out an evaluation and peer review according to its protocols, which meet the requirements of the accreditation agency.

Programmes carry out a self-assessment and produce the self-assessment report that will be transmitted to the review panel.

The actual external review and site visit take place.

At least six months before the previous accreditation for a programme comes to an end, the institution submits a request for a new accreditation that includes its self-assessment report and a recent (not more than one year) external quality assessment report.

The accreditation organisation examines the report and takes a decision within three months following the request. Before the decision is formally confirmed it is presented to the institution, which has two weeks to react.

The accreditation organisation publishes its decision.

Accredited programmes will be listed in the official "higher education (programmes') register".

In total, the process will take about a year and a half. Legislation stipulates that accreditation is granted to a programme for a period of eight years.

Institutions have the legal right of appeal to accreditation decisions in court.

3.3. National quality assurance systems should include international participation, co-operation and networking.

Are international peers included in the governing board(s) of the quality assurance agency(ies)?

Since the systematic introduction of quality assurance mechanisms in higher education (Decree on Universities 1991 and Decree on Hogescholen 1995), the framework allowed the integration of international cooperation in the peer reviews. The evaluation boards usually had a composition with at least one foreign expert (often from the Netherlands). Also several transnational peer reviews were set up involving the evaluation of programmes from both the Netherlands and the Flemish Community of Belgium. Under impuls of the Bologna process, the quality assurance system was extended to accreditation procedures and from the first preparatory action, cooperation was sought with the Netherlands, resulting eventually in two comparable accreditation systems in the two countries and the establishment of a joint Dutch-Flemish accreditation agency (formally in operation since 2004). This agency has international cooperation in its mission statement. Dutch-Flemish cooperation initiated the Joint Quality Initiative (in the framework of which the so-called "Dublin descriptors" for bachelor and master level programmes were developed) and also played an important role in the establishment in 2003 of the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA). ECA functions as a platform in preparation for future automatic mutual acceptance of accreditation decisions of its members and has recently agreed on a code of good practice in the light of its main objective.

It has to be noted that the Decree on the Structure of Higher Education leaves the possibility for the acceptance of quality judgments by foreign quality assurance and/or accreditation bodies.

Please add any general comments, reflections and/or explanations to the material on quality assurance in the stocktaking report.

The Dublin Descriptors, defined by the JQI for bachelors and masters, are integrated in the Decree on the structure of higher education (2003) as minimum requirements for bachelor

and master degrees.

4. The two-cycle degree system

The two-cycle degree system is covered by the stocktaking exercise. Please add any comments, reflections and/or explanations to the stocktaking report.

See charts in annex.

5. Recognition of degrees and periods of study

Recognition of degrees and periods of study is covered by the stocktaking exercise. Please add any comments, reflections and/or explanations to the stocktaking report.

MUTUAL ACCEPTANCE

In the Flemish Community, the awareness is growing that the concept of "recognition" should be made operational through the introduction of mutual acceptance of degrees based on quality judgments and/or accreditation decisions of quality assurance and accreditation bodies that meet the commonly shared European (and wider international) standards.

NEED FOR A EQF

NARIC Flanders functions as a part of the Education department and is i.a. in charge of recognition issues. It welcomes the planned establishment of an overarching qualification framework for higher education and believes strongly that this will lead to a more flexible attitude to recognition across Europe.

ECTS

A Flemish credit system based entirely on the ECTS has been applied to university programmes since 1991 and to non-university higher education programmes since 1994. The new Decree on the Structure of Higher Education (2003) endorses the compatibility of the existing credit system with ECTS.

LISBON RECOGNITION CONVENTION

As soon as Belgium, as a federal state, has signed the Lisbon Recognition Convention this Convention will immediately apply in Flanders. However, on 17 July 2003 the Flemish Government already officially approved the Lisbon Recognition Convention and the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention were incorporated in the 2003 Decree on the Structure of Higher Education.

DIPLOMA SUPPLEMENT

In Flanders a compulsory Diploma Supplement has been awarded automatically at university level since 1991 and at non-university level since 1994.

In combination with the credential itself, the Flemish Diploma Supplement provided information on the nature, level, content and status of the studies that were pursued, together with a description of the Flemish higher education system.

The Council of Europe, UNESCO and the European Commission recognised the Flemish Diploma Supplement as a 'good practice' and jointly created in 1998 an international model similar to the Flemish Diploma Supplement.

The 2003 Higher Education Act endorsed the concept of a Diploma Supplement and the Flemish Diploma Supplement is now adapted to the international one. Students may now

apply for an English version of the Diploma supplement (in addition to the Dutch version) which is delivered free of charge.

6. Doctoral studies and research

6.1. Give a short description of the organisation of third cycle studies

(For example, direct access from the bachelor level, balance between organised courses, independent study and thesis)

Access to doctoral studies can in principle be granted after completion of the master programme. Doctorate degrees can only be obtained at universities and are research-related. Candidates are admitted on individual basis, taking into account the quality of their research proposal. Universities may require that the doctorate student takes some courses (doctoral training programme) in addition to carrying out his/her research project.

6.2. What are the links between HE and research in your country?

(For example, what percentage of publicly-funded research is conducted within HE institutions?)

PUBLIC/PRIVATE FUNDING

Public funding in the Flanders consists of 6 major funding streams:

- core funding of universities for teaching and research;
- an agency for basic university research (research council)
- an agency for strategic basic research (not limited to the universities);
- an agency for technological and industrial research and development;
- 3 technological institutes (information technology, biotechnology and energy and environmental technology);
- contractual socio-economic research and policy research.

According to the most recent statistical data available (reference year 2001) Flanders spented 2.5 % of its GDP in research and development, of which 0.6 % from public sources and 1.9 % from private sources.

The Flemish Government has, however, committed itself to apply the standard proposed by the Barcelona European Council to spend 3 % of the GDP for research and development. The objective is that the public sector would contribute by 1/3 and that 2/3 would be provided through private sources.

There are no reliable statistical data available on the actual share of the universities in these percentages. Due to their frequent collaboration with industry their research they can - according to the nature of the project - be funded by public sources, private sources or a mixture of both.

ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN UNIVERSITIES AND HOGESCHOLEN

An important step in order to strengthen the link between research and teaching at all higher education institutions, was the establishment of so-called "associations", i.e. consortia of a university with other higher education institutions. Master degrees can only be delivered by a non-university institution in the context of such association.

QUALITY ASSURANCE

The accreditation system will only address programmes and will thus cover only the educational functions of universities and hogescholen. However, since both the Flemish Interuniversity Council and the Flemish Hogeschool Council evaluation and peer review

schemes address the other missions of higher education institutions in their impact on teaching and learning processes, there is indirect reference to other functions in the definition of quality. It is clear that the degree of interwovenness of teaching and research will be an important criterion for assessing quality of the study programmes assessed.

7. Mobility of students and staff

7.1. Describe the main factors influencing mobility of students from as well as to your country (For instance funds devoted to mobility schemes, portability of student loans and grants, visa problems)

EU mobility programmes are a main driver. The implementation of Socrates/Erasmus, and the introduction of the institutional contract has accelerated the process of establishment of international relation offices in each higher education institution.

Although Socrates/ERASMUS seems to have reached its critical threshold for university students, there is still some growth in the non-university sector (hogescholen). Also the participation at ERASMUS Mundus will increase (intercontinental) mobility.

7.2. Describe any special measures taken in your country to improve mobility of students from as well as to your country

Specifically for Socrates/Erasmus the Flemish Community offers top-up financing (in addition to the amount provided by the European Commission) to Flemish students on a means-tested basis. For incoming students, also many provisions exist. They can benefit from all social provisions on the same basis as the Flemish students. In addition, institutions may allocate a fixed percentage of the rooms in their own dormitories to foreign students, Dutch language courses are organised, many postgraduate programmes are also offered in English etc. Legislation is adapted to the establishment of joint programmes set up in the framework of ERASMUS Mundus. The successful participation of Flemish HE institutions seems to have a multiplier effect for setting up similar joint programme and thus boosting international curriculum development and international mobility.

7.3. Describe the main factors influencing mobility of teachers and staff from as well as to your country (For instance tenure of appointment, grant schemes, social security, visa problems)

Interinstitutional cooperation and exchange, joint curriculum development and joint research projects.

7.4. Describe any special measures taken in your country to improve mobility of academic teachers and staff from as well as to your country

Higher education institutions can autonomously decide on the recruitment of staff and the calculation of seniority. By consequence Flemish staff will be able to validate foreign experience and also there are no obstacles from a legal or a social point of view to recruit foreign staff, that furthermore will be allowed to teach in a widely understood language if not able to use Dutch as an instruction language.

8. Higher education institutions and students

8.1. Describe aspects of autonomy of higher education institutions

Is autonomy determined/defined by law? To what extent can higher education institutions decide on internal organisation, staffing, new study programmes and financing?

Since the Decree on Universities (1991) and the Decree on Hogescholen (1995) HE institutions are granted a large degree of autonomy. Lump sum financing was introduced, and the control on the budget switched from an ex ante to an ex post perspective. HE institutions can make their own decision in appointing staff and in deciding on seniority level based on prior professional experience (e.g. obtained abroad). They autonomously design the curricula (there is no "national curriculum") provided that they comply with the general quality standards. Under certain conditions (i.a. a check by the Accreditation Agency of their feasibility and relevance). they may be allowed to establish new study programmes.

8.2. Describe actions taken to ensure active participation from all partners in the process

See par. 2.3

8.3. How do students participate in and influence the organisation and content of education at universities and other higher education institutions and at the national level?

(For example, participation in University Governing Bodies, Academic Councils etc)

Two models exist for the involvement of students in institutional government :

- (1) the governing board of the HE institution is bound to seek advice from the Students' Council of their institution which has consultative prerogative in the decision making process;
- (2) students represent at least 10 % of the members of the HE institution's governing board. In that case the Students' Council has no consultative and advisory prerogative.

Students also participate as full members in the activities/working groups of the Rectors' Conferences dealing i.a. with issues of curriculum development. They are also involved in the internal and external quality assurance procedures of HE programmes.

9. The social dimension of the Bologna Process

9.1. Describe measures which promote equality of access to higher education

The Flemish Community has a open access policy to higher education. Any holder of a secondary school leaving certificate can be admitted to the programme of his/her choice in higher education. For a few disciplines (medicine, dentistry, fine arts, music and drama) there is an entrance test, but there is never any numerus clausus or fixus for access to these disciplines.

Tuition is kept relatively low (about €500/academic year for initial programmes).

Apart from this, about 1/3 of the students benefit from study grants attributed on mean tested basis. The grants are portable for studies in any country of the European Higher Education Area.

Each HE institution is legally expected to spend a part of its budget to social provisions for the students. These can include : cheap housing in student dormitories, student restaurant offering meals at affordable prices, medical, legal and psychological support, advice on study budgetting, study loans etc.

In order to reduce drop-outs, first year students can benefit from a wide range of tutoring service helping them to bridge the gap between secondary and higher education.

Measures for mature students : see LLL section.

10. Developments in lifelong learning

10.1. What measures have been taken by your country to encourage higher education institutions in developing lifelong learning paths?

Decree on flexible learning in higher education (2004) was a major step forward. The establishment of a credit accumulation system is expected to create more flexibility for learners, especially those combining their studies with professional and/or family duties. The Flemish Government offers financial incentives to higher education institutions adapting their programmes to the needs of adult learners. In this context, at institutional level, pilot projects for work based learning in the framework of higher education and specific e-learning initiatives, have been set up.

10.2. Describe any procedures at the national level for recognition of prior learning/flexible learning paths

See also 10.1.

Decree on flexible learning in higher education (2004) creates a legal framework for the validation of prior learning and/or professional experience in two cases :

- access to higher education programmes
- shortening of study duration.

PROCEDURE

Each "association" (see section 2.2) has to install an agency for the validation of prior learning

1. Applicants have to introduce a portfolio presenting prior learning experiences.
2. Assessment by the validation agency of the "association" taking into account the learning outcomes of the programme applied for.
3. Issuing of a competence certificate.

11. Contribution to the European dimension in higher education

11.1 Describe any legal obstacles identified by your country and any progress made in removing legal obstacles to the establishment and recognition of joint degrees and/or joint study programmes

The 2003 Decree on the Structure of Higher Education legalised joint programmes, double degrees and joint degrees. Higher education institutions may organise joint programmes and allow their students to follow education at another higher education institution as being part of their Bachelor or Master programme.

Higher education institutions may award a Flemish degree (Bachelor or Master) together with a state recognised degree from a (or several) partner higher education institution(s) taking into account certain administrative conditions.

Higher education institutions may award a joint degree with one or more foreign higher education institutions. And in case this joint degree is not a "Bachelor" or "Master", the Flemish degree Bachelor or Master on top of it.

11.1.1. Describe the extent of integrated study programmes leading to joint degrees or double degrees

see 11.1 and 11.2 (transnational university). Multiplicator effect as a result of ERASMUS Mundus (see 7.2)

11.1.2. How have these programmes been organised? (joint admissions, mobility of students, joint exams, etc.)

see 11.1 and 11.2 (transnational university)

11.2. Describe any transnational co-operation that contributes to the European dimension in higher education

See also under the section of quality assurance : cooperation between the Netherlands and the Flemish Community.

The “transnationale Universiteit Limburg (tUL)” is a recognised university providing transnational education. The tUL got his legal status by the international Agreement between Flanders and the Netherlands signed in Maastricht on January 18, 2001 and ratified by the Flemish decree July 13, 2001. The 2003 Decree on the Structure of Higher Education entitles the tUL to award Bachelor and Master degrees which are automatically recognised in Flanders and the Netherlands.

11.3. Describe how curriculum development reflects the European dimension (For instance foreign language courses, European themes, orientation towards the European labour market)

Higher education institutions are autonomous for curriculum development. However, the legal framework facilitates international (joint) curriculum development and adaptation of the programmes to European standards, requirements or professional directives.

12. Promoting the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area

12.1. Describe actions taken by your country to promote the attractiveness of the EHEA

See also par. on mobility (i.a. multiplier effect of the successful participation in ERASMUS Mundus) and on joint degrees.

Specific measures to suit the needs of foreign students, including organisation of (mostly postgraduate) programmes in widely spoken languages, and offering foreign guest professors the opportunity to teach in a widely understood language.

The Decree on the Structure of Higher Education creates a framework in which HE institutions can seek for quality judgments from foreign QA and accreditation organisations, including organisations outside Europe, thus enhancing their visibility and trustworthiness on a global scale.

13. Concluding comments

13.1. Give a description of your national Bologna strategies

As the general framework has been set up and the implementation started this academic year, the main focus will be on the deepening on the process.

13.2. Give an indication of the main challenges ahead for your country

In the context of what was mentioned in the previous paragraph, the main challenge will be to raise the awareness for the Bologna process up to the level of the individual HE institution staff member and student. Other issue is the enhancement of the competitiveness of the higher education institution by the adaptation of their funding system, for which a draft Decree will be prepared in the course of 2005.