

Chapter 5

Belgium: Complex System, Differentiated Development

5.1 Education System

Basically there is no Belgian education system. Instead, there are three: the Flemish, French and German-speaking communities each have their own.

Belgium consists of three regions and three language communities and has no less than seven governments. Luckily, for education purposes it is quite clear who is responsible. Responsibility has been decentralized to the different communities.¹ This results in three systems: Flemish, French and German-speaking (see Fig. 5.1). As there is only a very limited offer of higher education in the German-speaking community, two systems are relevant for higher education.² In international education comparisons and statistics, the Flemish and French communities of Belgium are usually dealt with separately (Box 5.1).³

Belgians are generally quite happy with their education system. Results are around average in the PISA report on 15-year-olds' achievements, although there are wide variations within the country. For example, science score is an above-average 518 for the Flemish community while the French community scores a below-average 487 (OECD 2013).

All communities have a system with a compulsory primary school until the age of 12, followed by different types of secondary education. Each school type is

¹Only the determination of the starting and finishing ages for compulsory education, minimum requirements for diploma conferrals and the pension system are still federal matters (Eurydice 2014 – Flemish community overview).

²In the small German-speaking community, there is no university or university of applied sciences. Therefore educational provisions in this community are not discussed in the remainder of this chapter.

³For example, there are three separate entries in Eurydice's Eurypedia encyclopedia and the Flemish and French communities' systems are also dealt with separately in the World Data on education by UNESCO (IBE reports).

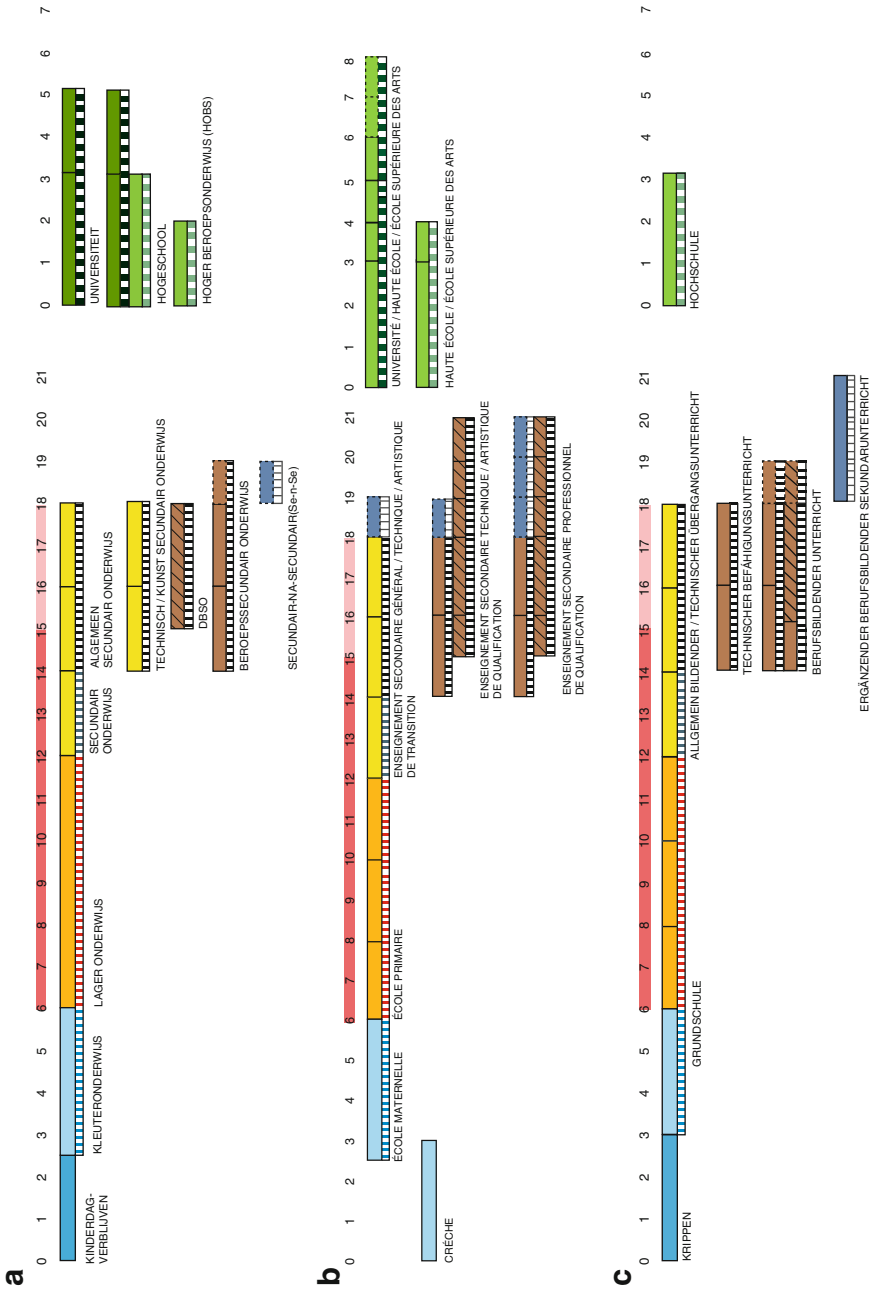


Fig. 5.1 Structure of education systems in Belgium. **(a)** Flemish community. **(b)** French community. **(c)** German-speaking community (Eurydice 2014) see Fig. 3.1b for standardized legend

Box 5.1: Belgium – The Basics

- 11.2 million inhabitants
- Capital: Brussels
- Federal monarchy
- Education is governed by the Flemish, French and German-speaking communities, each with their own government

organized in three ‘cycles’, normally taking 2 years (see Fig. 5.1). After the first cycle of secondary education, around age 14, differentiation is made into four types of education.⁴ From all levels, progression into higher education is possible, but from the vocational stream this is rare (Vlaamse Overheid 2014; Federation Wallonie-Bruxelles 2014) (Box 5.2).

Box 5.2: Education in Belgium

- Compulsory between the ages of 6 and 18 or until graduation from secondary school
- Governed by the Flemish, French and German-speaking communities
- Primary education (6–12 years) and secondary education (12–18 years) each organized in three cycles
- Four general types of secondary education
- Universities in Flemish and French communities, organization of rest of higher education landscape is in development
- Secondary school diploma gives general entrance to higher education, with a few exceptions
- Compulsory education free, higher education tuition fees regulated by governments

⁴In the Flemish community, the four types are General Secondary Education (GSE) which aims to provide a broad theoretical education and prepares pupils for higher education; Technical Secondary Education (TSE) which focuses especially on general and technical theoretical subjects, provides practical classes and prepares pupils either for a professional career or for higher education; Artistic Secondary Education (ASE) which combines a general and broad education with active artistic practice and prepares pupils either for a professional career or for higher education; and Vocational Secondary Education (VSE) which allows pupils to acquire specific vocational skills combined with a general education. Progression to higher education is possible but rather rare (Eurydice 2014, chapter 6.1). In the French community, focus is more on the stages: From the third year onwards, education takes four different forms (general, technical, artistic and vocational) and consists of two streams (the transition stream and the qualification stream). The transition stream prepares pupils for higher education whilst also offering opportunities to enter the labor market, whereas the qualification stream prepares pupils to enter the labor market while also enabling them to continue their studies in higher education (Eurydice 2014, chapter 6).

Generally speaking, most regular schools recognize high ability with acceleration, enrichment projects and streaming (Freeman 2002a, p. 84). In the Flemish community, an extensive infrastructure for gifted children and youngsters in primary and secondary education exists. There are research centers, such as the Centre for giftedness research in Antwerp, which has recently been renamed Exentra,⁵ different associations focusing on spreading information,⁶ lobbying and/or organizing activities.⁷ While there are no recognized special schools for gifted children, a number of schools run so-called ‘kangaroo classes’. Here, gifted children at the school come together 2–4 h per week to work on special projects (Infolijn Onderwijs 2014).

In the French community, a parents’ association is also very active.⁸

In general, a secondary school diploma⁹ gives access to higher education. There are a few exceptions, for studies which are very popular. In Flanders, entrance exams are organized for dentistry and medicine. In the French community, some measures restrict student numbers in popular studies such as veterinary science and psychology. For arts colleges, special admission criteria apply.

Belgian universities generally have a good reputation. KU Leuven is the world’s oldest surviving catholic university, founded in 1425. In 1970, it was split in a Flemish (Leuven) and a French (Louvain) university. The Flemish part is the largest university in Belgium with over 46,000 students. In international rankings, Ghent and Leuven universities score in the top-100 (ARWU 2013).¹⁰ In the Flemish community, the other main type of higher education institution is locally known as *hogeschool*. In English it is called university college, which can lead to confusion, as they are very different from university colleges in the Netherlands. All recognized Flemish university colleges are associated with a university, following a recent structure change.¹¹

⁵The former name was Centrum voor Begaafdheidsonderzoek. The organization’s website is www.exentra.be

⁶For example, parents’ association Hoogbegaafd Vlaanderen maintains a list of schools that offer extra opportunities to gifted children. It can be found at www.hoogbegaafdvlaanderen.be/06_HB_op_school/scholen.html

⁷For example the organizations Bekina and Mensa (see key links in Appendix 2). More associations can be found in Infolijn Onderwijs 2014.

⁸EHP-Belgique, offering information, lobbying and organizing activities.

⁹*Diploma van Secundair Onderwijs/Certificat d’Enseignement Secondaire Supérieur.*

¹⁰In the 2013–2014 Times Higher Education World Ranking, KU Leuven was the highest-placed at position 60, with Gent following at 83. In the Academic Ranking of World Universities 2013 (Shanghai List) Gent is the best at place no. 85.

¹¹After extensive public discussion, the Flemish government decided in 2010 to integrate the academic university college programmes in the universities from the academic year 2013–2014. Now only the universities will be able to offer academic programs. The university colleges will only be able to offer professional bachelor programs (and associate degrees), as they are to transfer their academic bachelor and master programs to the universities or integrate them in the universities (Eurydice 2014, chapter 7.1). Apart from this, there are some more small ‘Registered Institutes of Higher Education’.

In the French community, there are two types of HEIs apart from universities: colleges (*Hautes Ecoles*) and arts colleges. A new system was due to be introduced in late 2014, reforming the structure and organizing the institutes in five geographic clusters (Eurydice 2014, chapter 7.1).

There is one institute recognized by all communities, the Royal Military Academy. Finally, there are some universities that do not fall under Belgian jurisdiction but are recognized in a foreign country: for example Boston University Brussels. These institutions are excluded from this overview.

Contrary to education, research is partly under federal policy and is also conducted at federal scientific institutions. These are regulated by the Belgian Science Policy Office (BELSPO).

5.2 Culture and Policy Towards Excellence

It is difficult to make general statements about Belgium and this also applies to the culture and policy towards excellence. However, three observations can safely be stated:

1. Attention for excellence in Belgium has come later than in the Netherlands;
2. Focus on excellence is stronger in the Flemish community than in the French community;
3. Excellence in education is hardly supported by policy or funding from any level of government (Box 5.3).

Box 5.3: Key Players in Excellence

The following institutions are the most important players in the field of talent and excellence in education:

- The ministries of Education of the Flemish and French communities
- The Interuniversity Councils of both communities
- Exentra, the centre for giftedness research based in Antwerp
- Parents' associations Hoogbegaafd Vlaanderen and Bekina (Flemish) and EHP-Belgique (French)

Belgium exhibits a tradition of egalitarianism, but not as strong as, for example, the Nordic countries. The educational policy goals in the French community refer more to equality measures than in the Flemish community (IBE 2012¹²), where 'a thoroughly personal education' also exists as a main goal.

¹²This follows from a comparison of both communities' texts.

In the Flemish community, the problems of gifted children are a much-discussed subject, but there are no official policies, apart from the legal possibility to accelerate in primary school. In 2006, a group of parliamentarians proposed to make more provisions for gifted children in the schools (Vlaams Parlement 2006), but this was dismissed. As a result no special legislation on excellence in education exists. General legislation allows schools some freedom to organize their own initiatives for talented pupils, but there is no funding available.

The French community first conducted a research project on the needs of gifted children in schools in 1999. Subsequently, an inter-university network¹³ was established with three roles: giving information to the public,¹⁴ facilitating research and disseminating research findings (Brasseur et al. 2001). However, this network was discontinued in 2012 after community funding ended (Federation Wallonie-Bruxelles 2012). In the same year, three parliamentarians made a proposal to officially recognize the needs of gifted children in schools (Parlement de la communauté Française 2012). In January 2014, a debate was held in the French community's parliament on the question: Why should the specific needs of young people with high potential be officially recognized? No decisions on the issue have been taken at the time of writing (Box 5.4).

Box 5.4: Local Terminology

The word 'honors' is used in Belgium, but there are also other terms in use to refer to (programs for) gifted and talented children and students:

- *enfants/jeunes/élèves/étudiants à haut potentiel* (children/youngsters/pupils/students with high potential)
- *élèves talentueux* (talented pupils)
- *surdoués* (highly gifted)
- *hoogbegaafd* (highly gifted)
- *talentvolle studenten* (talented students)
- *leervoorsprong* ('ahead in learning')

At the universities, there are some specialists in the field of gifted education and talent development. In January 2014, Hasselt University established a chair for the study of gifted children in schools and gifted adults in the workplace (Furniere 2014).¹⁵

¹³It was called *Réseau interuniversitaire d'écoute et d'accompagnement des jeunes à haut potentiel et de leur entourage*.

¹⁴This part of the job was carried out in the Centre d'écoute et d'accompagnement des JHP (centre for listening and accompaniment of youngsters with high potential).

¹⁵Tessa Kieboom, who also leads Exentra, the Centre for giftedness research in Antwerp, was appointed as one of the chairs.

5.3 Honors Programs per University

The higher education sector in Belgium is currently undergoing great reforms. While stability exists at the university level, the educational reform progresses soundly at the level of universities of applied sciences. Therefore, we limited the search for honors programs to the universities. In total, six programs were found, three of which are at Ghent University. An overview of universities with programs is shown on Map 5.1. Table 5.1 depicts all Belgian universities.

Since 2010, Flemish universities have developed honors programs. Some small programs have been running for a few years. The first university-wide program in Ghent started in 2013. So far, the only French university offering an honors program is Université Catholique de Louvain, which participates in an inter-university honors program with two other universities.

5.3.1 *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven*

Founded in 2013, the honors program at KU Leuven's Faculty of Law strives to acquaint students with top-notch lawyers and broaden their horizons, encouraging them to think beyond law. The top 20 students (measured in grade point average) are invited to participate in the program. Over 90 % of students accept the invitation.¹⁶



Map 5.1 Belgian universities with honors programs, 2014

¹⁶When the slots are not entirely filled, the next top students are invited.

Table 5.1 Honors programs at Belgian universities

University	Community	No. of students ^a	Webpage	Honors program
Katholieke Universiteit (KU) Leuven	Flemish	46,068	Kuleuven.be	Yes
Ghent University (UGent)	Flemish	36,117	Ugent.be	Yes
Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL)	French	25,990	Uclouvain.be	Yes
Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB)	French	23,968	Ulb.ac.be	No
University of Liège (ULg)	French	19,204	Ulg.ac.be	No
University of Antwerp (UAntwerp)	Flemish	17,166	Uantwerpen.be	Yes
Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB)	Flemish	10,427	Vub.ac.be	No
University of Mons (UMons)	French	6,586	Umons.ac.be	No
University of Namur (UNamur)	French	5,646	Unamur.be	No
Hasselt University (UHasselt)	Flemish	2,987	Uhasselt.be	No ^b
Saint-Louis University Brussels	French	2,583	Fusl.ac.be	No
Total		196,742		

^aSources: Vlaamse Overheid 2014 for Flemish universities (numbers for 2013), CREF 2014 for French universities (numbers for 2010). Numbers for Université de Mons include Université de Mons-Hainaut and Facultés Universitaire Catholique de Mons (FUCaM)

^bAt Universiteit Hasselt, an honors program is in development

To compile this table, first the websites of all universities were searched with keywords to find honors programs. Then they were all approached by e-mail and/or phone to ask if they had any special provisions for talented students, matching our working definition. All institutions eventually replied. Most of this work has been carried out by honors student Melina Ghasseminejad

Apart from the top 20, there are also five ‘wild card slots’. They are meant for students who do not score as high but are socially involved either in- or outside the university. These students are selected on the basis of a cover letter describing their motivation. During the academic year, students participate in eight interactive, work field-related honors classes, provided by well-known lawyers and scholars. There are also excursions to national or international institutions. Upon successful completion of the program, the participants receive an extra certificate. KU Leuven explicitly refers to ‘the Dutch tradition’ in their description of the honors program.¹⁷ In autumn 2014, the program expanded because of its success. In addition to last-year bachelor students, it now includes first-year master students (Table 5.2).

¹⁷ See www.law.kuleuven.be/home/onderzoek/nieuws-onderzoek/honoursprogramma_2013

Table 5.2 Katholieke Universiteit Leuven – Honoursprogramma

<i>Organizing institution</i>	Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Faculty of Law
<i>Form</i>	Disciplinary program
<i>Target group</i>	Final (third) year bachelor students, first year master students from autumn 2014
<i>Admission</i>	By invitation and application
<i>Description</i>	Each year a group of 20–25 students is formed and follows two semesters of activities
<i>Founded</i>	2013
<i>Participants</i>	20–25 per year
<i>Website</i>	www.law.kuleuven.be/home/onderzoek/nieuws-onderzoek/honoursprogramma_2013

Table 5.3 Ghent University – Quetelet Colleges

<i>Organizing institution</i>	Ghent University
<i>Form</i>	Interdisciplinary program (university-wide)
<i>Target group</i>	Second- and third-year bachelor students
<i>Admission</i>	First selection based on study results, CV and motivation letter, followed by interview
<i>Description</i>	Each year a group of maximum 50 first-year students is selected to run activities over four semesters in their second and third bachelor year
<i>Founded</i>	2013
<i>Participants</i>	50 admitted per year
<i>Website</i>	www.ugent.be/student/nl/studeren/honoursprogramma/universiteitsbreed-programma

5.3.2 Ghent University

5.3.2.1 General

The Quetelet Colleges is a new university-wide program, the first of its kind in Belgium. All first year bachelor students may apply. Admission is based on grades and a cover letter, and finally an interview. In the Quetelet Colleges students participate in four modules spread over the second and third bachelor year. Every module consists of ten lectures, with a new theme every week. The specialist lecturer provides knowledge and insights and also discusses with the students. The theme of the first module is: ‘What is science?’ The second module revolves around ‘Science & Society’, and the third module is ‘The revolutions of the 20th century’. During the last module ten scientific or societal challenges of the twenty-first century are discussed. The students themselves put the last module together. To complete the program, students must attend all lectures, participate in discussions and write two short papers for each module. Upon completion of the program, students receive a certificate and a personalized letter of recommendation from the university rector (Table 5.3).

5.3.2.2 Specific

Before starting the university-wide program, Ghent University already had some departmental honors programs. The first is the interfaculty honors program in Life Sciences, in which different departments in this area work together in a program focused on scientific research. The second is the Honors Awards in Sciences program, focusing on broadening and deepening the studies. Students in both programs work individually.

The honors program in Life Sciences includes both general and specific components. The general part consists of lessons, lectures, and self-study. The lessons take place in the first semester. The specific part consists of project-related laboratory work and writing a scientific paper. Laboratory work can also be done abroad, for example in developing countries. Upon successful completion of the program, students receive a special certificate (Tables 5.4 and 5.5).

Table 5.4 Ghent University – Honors Program in Life Sciences

<i>Organizing institution</i>	Ghent University, Faculties of Veterinary Medicine, Medicine and Health Sciences and Pharmaceutical Sciences
<i>Form</i>	Interfaculty program – individual
<i>Target group</i>	Top 20 % bachelor students
<i>Admission</i>	First selection based on study results, CV and motivation letter, followed by interview
<i>Description</i>	Individual program where student does own research project in approximately 1 year: following lectures, lab work and writing of a scientific article, supported by personal tutor
<i>Founded</i>	2012
<i>Participants</i>	23 at time of writing
<i>Website</i>	www.ugent.be/ge/nl/voor-studenten/uitwisseling/honoursprogramme.pdf

Table 5.5 Ghent University – Honors Award in Sciences program

<i>Organizing institution</i>	Ghent University, Faculty of Sciences
<i>Form</i>	Faculty program – individual
<i>Target group</i>	Bachelor students, from second year
<i>Admission</i>	Invitation based on study results, selection based on plan and motivation letter
<i>Description</i>	Students make an individual plan, which consist of two parts: a research project they set up on their own (supervised by a tutor) and a series of courses in a different study program than their own. End product is a paper or presentation.
<i>Founded</i>	2012
<i>Participants</i>	Unknown
<i>Website</i>	www.ugent.be/we/nl/onderwijs/has

5.3.3 University of Antwerp

Founded in 2011, the Honours College at the University of Antwerp focuses on the department (faculty) of Pharmaceutical, Biomedical and Veterinary Sciences. There are plans to offer a university-wide honors program in Antwerp (Gazet van Antwerpen 2012), but this has not started yet.

The goal of the Honours College involves allowing ‘talented students to reach their maximum potential’. Each year, all students who have obtained all their credits in their first year and scored at least ‘good’¹⁸ are invited for an information session at the start of their second year. Interested students apply with a cover letter describing their motivation; eventually 12 students are selected. Candidates must be motivated, have a broad academic interest, be ambitious and accept the challenge of doing ‘a whole lot of extra’. In their first semester, the theme is ‘exploring scientific research’. In their second semester and following summer vacation they undertake an individual honors research project, which is usually conducted during an internship. During the third and fourth semesters, students follow a series of interdisciplinary lectures and debates about science and society and also write a paper. Finally, students develop the results they obtained during the research project in further detail and present them in writing or verbally. This presentation could take the form of a discipline-oriented symposium or a 1-day congress, including a poster or an oral presentation, or of a scientific article, review or protocol. Upon successful completion, participants receive an extra certificate (Table 5.6).

Table 5.6 University of Antwerp – Honours College

<i>Organizing institution</i>	University of Antwerp, Faculty of Pharmaceutical, Biomedical and Veterinary Sciences
<i>Form</i>	Disciplinary program
<i>Target group</i>	Second-year bachelor students
<i>Admission</i>	Invitation/application/selection
<i>Description</i>	Each year a group of 12 students is formed which runs activities over four semesters and one summer
<i>Founded</i>	2011
<i>Participants</i>	24 in total, 12 per year admitted
<i>Website</i>	www.uantwerp.be/en/faculties/fbd/education/honours-college/

¹⁸In the Flemish system of grading, students can fail, pass, or get one of three levels of distinction, which roughly translate to good, very good and excellent. The first level of distinction (‘good’) is required to qualify for this program.

Table 5.7 Université Métropolitaine – Honours College

<i>Organizing institution</i>	Special collaborative project between KU Leuven – KULAK, UCL Mons and French university PRES Université Lille Nord de France
<i>Form</i>	Interdisciplinary program
<i>Target group</i>	Second- and third-year bachelor students
<i>Admission</i>	Application/selection
<i>Description</i>	Each year a group of maximum 40 students is formed who will follow summer school and work on a project and run activities during the academic year
<i>Founded</i>	2012
<i>Participants</i>	23 (academic year 2013–2014)
<i>Website</i>	www.metropolitanuniversity.eu

5.3.4 Inter-university Program

The Université Métropolitaine – Honours College is an extra-curricular program combining the development of scientific skills with discovering the borders with other disciplines. The program includes multiple partners; KU Leuven (KULAK campus), Université Catholique Louvain (UCL) in Mons and French university PRES Université Lille Nord de France. Together, they started an institute called Metropolitan University, which organizes the program. Forty spots annually exist, 10 for Mons, 10 for Leuven and 20 for Lille. Students from every discipline who are in their second or third bachelor year can apply. Selection is based on study results, motivation and language knowledge. Every institution organizes the selection for its own students. After the group is formed, they kick off with a 4-day summer school. Then they enter a ‘broadening module’. Under guidance of a professor, students work in a group around one of the themes of the summer course with the ultimate goal of writing a scientific article. Upon successful completion of the program, students receive a certificate signed by the three partner institutions (Table 5.7).

We have seen that honors programs are already developed at some Belgian universities and more may follow in the coming years. We now move to the last country in the Benelux: Luxembourg.

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¹⁹**Note:** Literature used to prepare this book is included on this list. Some of the entries are in local languages and have not been read completely by the researchers. Instead, they have been searched with keywords to retrieve relevant information.

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