

Matching Practices for Secondary Schools – Belgium (French-Speaking Region)

Estelle Cantillon¹

Relevant country background

Education policies in Belgium are organized at the (language) community level. There are three language communities in Belgium: Dutch (Flemish Community), French and German. The Flemish Community and the French-speaking Community share responsibility for the delivery of education in the bilingual Brussels Capital Region and thus the two education systems overlap in Brussels (in addition to the European school system).

School education is compulsory and free from age 6 to age 18. Schools are all publicly funded (as long as they respect the curriculum of one of the communities) and are not allowed to charge registration fees.² Primary school covers age 6 to 12. Secondary school covers age from 12 to 18. Preschool for children aged 2.5 and above is also offered and publicly funded, but it is not compulsory.

There is differentiation among schools along religious lines (confessional versus non confessional schools), pedagogy, and organizing body (municipalities, provinces, state, not-for-profit organizations). Secondary education consists of three main tracks: general secondary education, technical education and vocational training. Some schools offer all three tracks but others offer only a subset of these tracks. Schools are organized in so-called networks (in French: réseaux; in Dutch: netten) which are supersets of organizing bodies and play an essential role for teachers' career development.

¹Université Libre de Bruxelles – ECARES, Estelle.Cantillon@ulb.ac.be

² There is a small fringe of private schools (mainly international schools) that do not follow the curriculum of any of the communities and are thus not publicly funded. Unless mentioned explicitly, the rest of this text applies to the schools regulated by one of the language communities.

“Matching in Practice” is a research network that brings together the growing community of researchers in Europe working on the various aspects of assignment and matching in education and related labour markets.

These country profiles are part of a collective effort by network members to map matching practices across Europe

www.matching-in-practice.eu

Since enrollment is part of education policy, school enrollment policy is defined at the level of Communities, subject to respecting the national Constitution and in particular Article 24 that guarantees the freedom of choice. Until recently, school enrollment was largely unregulated: parents could ask for admission for their children to whichever school they wanted and school admission policies were left to individual schools. This led some schools to select insidiously their pupils (by discouraging some from enrolling or by starting registrations long in advance and unaware from parents from disadvantaged backgrounds, for example). These concerns partly motivated the introduction of school choice regulation in the Flemish Community starting in 2003 and in the French-speaking Community in 2007 (before that, a 2001 decree established parents' registration right conditional on accepting the school's pedagogical project). Ryelandt (2013) provides a historical and politico-legal perspective on the development of enrollment policy in the French-speaking Community.

Summary box

Organization of education	Mostly publically funded schools; tiny fringe of private schools catering mainly to expatriates.
Stated objectives of enrolment policy	Transparency, equality of access and treatment, prevention of school failure by promoting social, cultural and academic diversity in schools.
Who's in charge?	The CIRI (<i>Commission Interréseaux des inscriptions, Inter-network Registration Commission</i>), which depends on the CFB.
Admissions system in place since	2010-11 (with slight yearly modifications since then).
Available capacity	Reported by the schools to the CFB in January before the school year.
Timing of enrolment	Two weeks around March of the year for which admission is requested.
Information available to students prior to enrolment period	A website run by the CFB contains the addresses and key characteristics of all secondary schools, as well as detailed explanations on the construction of the composite index and the algorithm. There is no "league table" of schools. Many primary schools provide advice on "suitable" secondary schools.
Restrictions on preference expression	Parents can list up to 10 schools in decreasing order of preference. Children are eligible for admission at all schools as long as their parents agree with the educational project of the school.
Matching procedure	Multi-stage procedure with some decentralized and centralized aspects. The first stage procedure corresponds to the Boston (first-preference-first) mechanism. The second stage is a variant of the student-proposing Deferred Acceptance algorithm but with a tie-breaking rule that depends on the position of the school in students' wish list.
Priorities and quotas	Students can benefit from priorities (sibling, special need, ...) only at the school of their first choice. There is a quota of 20.4% for students coming from a socially disadvantaged primary school.
Tie-breaking	Ties are broken based on a student-specific composite index that depends on geographical and pedagogical characteristics, as well as (in the second stage) on the position of the school in the student's wish-list.

Description of current practices

The current “Community-wide” system has been in place since academic year 2010-11, with only minor changes since (changes apply mainly to practical aspects of the procedure and to the formula for the tie-breaking rule). It combines decentralized aspects (parents submit their application in person at the school of their first choice; schools for which demand does not exceed supply can allocate all of their seats, other schools are allowed to allocate 80% of their seats before sending the remaining applications to the central registration commission, the CIRI) with centralized aspects (common priority criteria, common quotas, centralized “optimization of preferences”). Specifically:

Schools report capacities to the French-speaking Community (CFB) in January

In February, parents receive a **single form** for each of their children in age to register in secondary school. Parents can rank up to 10 schools on the form. The form contains a visible part (individual data and name of the most preferred school) and an invisible part (names of schools ranked 2 and lower) that is opened only if needed.

Parents must submit the form in person to their first choice school during a two-week period in the Spring.

1. First stage matching – Matching of first choices at the school level:

1. If the number of applications received during the enrollment period is lower than 102% of the reported school capacity, the school can confirm all applications received to parents. The school reports the number of remaining places, including the number of children coming from a socially-disadvantaged primary school, to the CIRI.
2. If the number of applications received is higher than 102% of the reported capacity, then the school allocates 80% of its seats using the following criteria:
 1. 20.4% quota for students coming from a socially disadvantaged primary school (such students have priority over all other students for these quota places, they are allocated first).
 2. Priority classes (in decreasing order): (1) student has a sibling in the school; (2) student lives in a care-taker facility; (3) special need student; (4) boarding school student; (5) children of teachers.
 3. Within each of these priority classes, ties are broken using a student-specific composite index based on 4 geographical criteria and 3 pedagogical criteria. A website (<http://inscriptions.cfwb.be>) helps parents compute their own composite index and an independent website, <http://www.carte-decret.be>, provides since March 2014 a visualisation how the composite index changes with residence.
3. The school confirms these registrations for 80% of its seats to the parents and sends the unmatched wish-lists, together with data on the accepted applications, to the CIRI.

2. Second stage matching – Centralized matching by the CIRI:

1. As in the first stage, a quota of 20.4% for students coming from socially disadvantaged primary schools applies. Students are ranked at each school which they list according to the following criteria:

1. Priorities: Students can benefit from the above priorities (sibling, special need, ...) only at the school of their first choice.

2. Tie-breaking within each priority class: The tie-breaking rule uses the same 4 geographical criteria and 3 pedagogical criteria as in the first stage but, in addition, gives a different weight according to the position of the school in the wish-list (from 1.5 to the first choice to 1 for the 6th and below choices). The document “explanations to parents” (in French) below provides an example.

2. The matching algorithm is the student-proposing deferred acceptance algorithm (except for the fact that priorities are in part determined by the rank of the school in the rank-order list).

3. Students whose request is handled by the CIRI are told the result in May.

3. Clearing: After the first and second stage allocation, schools with remaining capacity accept applications on a first-come first-served-basis. A website (<http://www.inscription.cfwb.be/>) provides up-to-date information concerning the state of saturation at all schools (full, not full, not full but less than 10 places left) to help parents without schools for their children identify alternatives.

The website <http://www.inscription.cfwb.be/> provides comprehensive information about each steps of the procedure, the priority criteria and the construction of the composite index.

Performance

There has not been any official evaluation of the current enrollment policy beyond simple statistics: for the 2011-12 academic year, 42,709 students submitted a form for 62,778 places. 94.6 % received a place in the school of their stated first choice and 98% got a place in one of the schools in their wish list at the end of the enrolment period. By September 1, 2011, 163 (0.3%) students were still officially without a school and 13% of schools were at capacity. The problem is particularly acute in Brussels (39% of schools at capacity). An official evaluation is expected in 2012.

People in the field (parents association, youth associations, school networks, ...) seem to agree that the process is run smoothly but have highlighted several “deviant behaviors” such as schools discouraging parents to submit their forms with them, and they have raised the concerns that the objectives of social diversity and transparency are not met.

Recent policy change

The existing school enrollment policy in the French-speaking Community follows two years of failed attempts at alternative procedures: a first-come first-served policy (for registration to the 2008-09 academic year) that resulted in long queues in front of popular schools, and a decentralized variant of the school-proposing deferred acceptance algorithm, with coarse priorities and a (school-level) random tie-breaker (for registration to the 2009-10 academic year) that resulted in multiple registrations and

artificial congestion that took months to resolve. Both policy failures led to backlash from parents associations and other lobbies, and the resignation of the Minister of Education in charge.

The current system is in place since 2010-11 with slight changes since then but it remains controversial and all political parties are proposing changes to the policy in their program for the general elections in May 2014.

Perceived issues

Enrollment policy has been a hotly debated topic in French-speaking Belgium since 2007. Therefore it is easy to find forums, opinion pieces and analyses of the current and past policies (a very active critique of the current enrollment policy is the association ELEVeS³).

Regarding the current enrollment policy, four open issues stand out in the public debate.

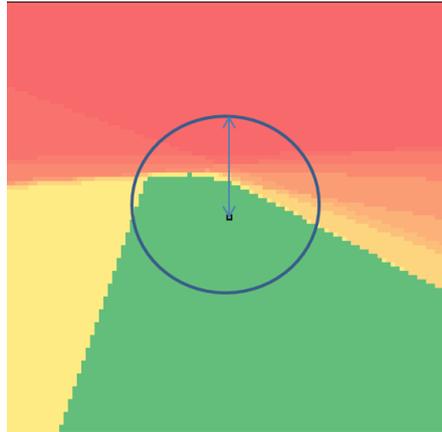
First, the policy has not increased social diversity any significantly, if at all, and some schools report a decrease in diversity in their intakes.⁴ This can partially be explained by the way the social diversity objective was implemented (a single, rather than a double quota) and the fact that the “socially disadvantaged” indicator is based on the mean school composition of the primary school attended rather than on characteristics of the individual student (see Cantillon, 2013).

Second, the adequacy between the demand and the supply of school seats is particularly problematic in Brussels. Total capacity is an issue. The introduction of an enrollment policy has had the benefit of putting the spotlight on this problem (but the dual responsibility of the French-speaking and Flemish communities for education provision in the Brussels metropolitan area continues to slow down finding a solution). Congestion is also an issue with most students wanting to go to the same schools and some schools not receiving any first choice applications.

Third, the criteria used to compute the composite index for tie-breaking have been under intense scrutiny. In March 2014, a group of parents set up a website, www.carte-decret.be, that illustrated how the geographical criteria impacted the value of the composite index in sometimes unexpected ways. This is due to the fact that the geographical criteria are mostly based on the distance rank of the primary school (within the school network to which it belongs) that the child attended as well as the distance rank of the target secondary school (again within the school network). Ranks generate perpendicular bisectors and depending on the location of different primary and secondary schools, the composite index can drop by large amount within short distances. Distance ranks can also be quite unrelated to distances as various maps on the www.carte-decret.be website illustrates (see example map below where the color code indicates the value of «distance to primary secondary school criterion» (highest in green, lowest in red): People living within the same distance of the school can get very different scores).

³ <http://www.eleves.be/>

⁴ See e.g. the press release from the confessional school network, SEGEC, on November 2010. http://enseignement.catholique.be/segec/fileadmin/DocsFede/Actualites/101116_communique_enquete_inscriptions.pdf



Source: www.carte-decret.be

Last but not least, there are some reports of irregular behavior by schools and parents induced by the current enrollment policy: underreporting of capacity, active discouragement of some parents to submit their application form at their schools, false addresses, and so on.⁵

In addition, there are three parallel enrollment policies operating in Brussels, the one for Dutch-speaking schools, the one for French-speaking schools and the one for European schools, without any coordination between the three. Non synchronized timing in creates artificial saturation in the system organizing registrations early (the Dutch speaking schools); double registrations generate late cancellations until late in the summer.

Existing data

The official website <http://www.inscription.cfwb.be/> provides a list of all secondary schools and their state of saturation after the second stage of the procedure until early Fall. There is no publicly available data on the enrollment procedure.

Legal texts

A list of all legal texts on which the regulation of education in the French-speaking community (with links) is based is available at <http://www.enseignement.be/index.php?page=25230&navi=12>. The list contains all revisions of the enrollment policy (the Enrollment Decree is part of the “*Missions Decree*”).

Other resources and references

Explanations to parents [link to Belgium-CFB-explanation: http://www.matching-in-practice.eu/administrator/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&task=download&id=1_e913b4cc3a6117011b3fbd2882abf6de]

Aggregate statistics on the education system in the French-speaking Community – ETNIC: <http://www.statistiques.cfwb.be/index.php?lg=en>

Ryelandt, Nathalie (2013), Les décrets “inscriptions” et “mixité sociale” de la Communauté française, Courrier Hebdomadaire du CRISP, 2188-89, 118 pp.

⁵ See e.g. the reports and news on Infor Jeunes’ website: <http://inforjeunes-bxl.be/category/enseignement/>

MiP Country Profiles downloadable from matching-in-practice.eu

MiP Country Profile 1. Cantillon, Estelle (2011), [Matching practices for elementary schools – Belgium \(French-speaking region\)](#).

MiP Country Profile 2. Kübler, Dorothea (2011), [University admission practices – Germany](#).

MiP Country Profile 3. Irving, Rob (2011), [Matching practices for entry-labor markets – Scotland](#).

MiP Country Profile 4. Kiselgof, Sofya (2011), [Matching practices for universities – Ukraine](#).

MiP Country Profile 5. Biró, Péter (2011), [University admission practices – Hungary](#).

MiP Country Profile 6. Biró, Péter (2012), [Matching practices for secondary schools – Hungary](#).

MiP Country Profile 7. Chen, Li (2012), [University admission practices – UK](#).

MiP Country Profile 8. Chen, Li (2012), [University admission practices – Ireland](#).

MiP Country Profile 9 Cantillon, Estelle and Koen Declercq (2012), [University admission practices – Belgium](#).

MiP Country Profile 10. Chen, Li (2012), [Matching practices for elementary schools – Ireland](#).

MiP Country Profile 11. Chen, Li (2012), [Matching practices for secondary schools – Ireland](#).

MiP Country Profile 12. Manlove, David (2012), [Matching practices for primary and secondary schools – Scotland](#).

MiP Country Profile 13. Merlino, Luca Paolo and Antonio Nicoló (2012), [Matching practices for elementary schools – Italy](#).

MiP Country Profile 14. Merlino, Luca Paolo and Antonio Nicoló (2012), [Matching practices for secondary schools – Italy](#).

MiP Country Profile 15. Merlino, Luca Paolo and Antonio Nicoló (2012), [University admissions practices – Italy](#).

MiP Country Profile 16 Hiller, Victor and Olivier Tercieux (2013), [Matching practices in secondary schools – France](#).

MiP Country Profile 17 Calsamiglia, Caterina (2014), [Matching Practices for elementary and secondary Schools – Spain](#).

MiP Country Profile 18 Lauri, Triin, Kaire Põder, and André Veski (2014), [Matching practices for elementary schools – Estonia](#).

MiP Country Profile 19. Salonen, Mikko A.A. (2014), [Matching practices for secondary schools – Finland](#).

MiP Country Profile 20 Terrier, Camille (2014), [Matching practices for secondary public school teachers – France](#).

MiP Country Profile 21 Basteck, Christian, Katharina Huesmann, and Heinrich Nax (2015), [Matching practices for secondary schools – Germany](#)

MiP Country Profile 22 Cantillon, Estelle (2015), [Matching practices for secondary schools – Belgium \(French-speaking region\)](#).