



# University Admission Practices – Belgium

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## 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. There is no German-language institution of higher education.

Following the Bologna process, the structure of higher education in the country has been significantly reformed in 2004. The reforms have consisted of a greater integration of different types of higher education and a common organization into three cycles, namely bachelor, master and doctorate (Flemish Higher Education Reform Act 2003 and Bologna Decree of the French-speaking Community, 2004). A bachelor program consists of 180 ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) which corresponds to 3 years of full-time studying. A master program consists of 60 or 120 ECTS, equivalent to 1 or 2 years of full-time studying.

Two types of institutions offer programs in higher education in Belgium: universities and colleges (colleges are called Hogescholen in Dutch, and Hautes Ecoles in French). Universities focus on research and teaching and offer academic bachelor, master and post-graduate programs including Ph.Ds. Colleges focus more on professional training and offer academic and professional bachelor and master programs. In addition, specialized architecture and arts schools also exist.

With the exception of a handful of small colleges, all universities and colleges in Belgium are publically funded. In Flanders, colleges receive subsidies based on their teaching activities (including the number of students) and universities receive subsidies based on their teaching activities and research output. In the French-speaking community, funding is based on the number of students but the total budget allocated to universities and colleges is fixed, irrespective of the number of students, so that, in practice, a university or college increases its funding only when it increases its share of students.

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The fees that universities and colleges can charge to Belgian and EU nationals are regulated (currently capped at 596.3 EUR per year in Flanders, and 835 EUR per year in the French-speaking community). These tuition fees represent only a small fraction of the total costs of higher education (about 3% in Flanders [2]). Students from lower income families can get a scholarship and reduced tuition fees.<sup>2</sup>

The supply of degree programs is also regulated. Not all institutions are allowed to offer all programs. Conditional on being allowed to offer a degree program, there is usually no constraint on institutions to limit the number of seats.

Access to higher education is open to all students with a secondary school diploma. There are 4 types of secondary school education in Belgium: general secondary education, technical secondary education, artistic secondary education and vocational secondary education. Pupils who graduate from vocational secondary education have to study one extra year before they are allowed to start at college or university.

## Summary box

Organization of higher education	Publically funded universities and colleges.
Stated objectives of admissions policy	High participation in higher education. Democratization of higher education.
Who's in charge of admissions?	Individual institutions, within regulatory guidelines
Admissions system in place since	Small changes in recent years
Available capacity	No capacity constraints, except in select tracks
Timing of enrolment	Students who have a secondary school diploma can register until the beginning of the semester.
Information available to students prior to enrolment period	Students know all admission criteria.
Restrictions on preference expression	No restriction.
Matching procedure	Open access, except in select tracks.
Priorities and quotas	None, except in select tracks.
Tie-breaking	None, except in select tracks.

<sup>2</sup> Dassen and Lujten-Lub (2007) provide a detailed description of the supply and financing of higher education in Flanders, and Académie Royale de Belgique (2011) provides a detailed background on the funding situation for higher education in the French-speaking community.

# Description of current practices

The general principle underlying access to higher education in Belgium is one of **open access**: any student with the appropriate secondary school degree can register into any BA degree, at any university.

There are four exceptions to this general rule. First, there is, since 1996, a national **quota** on the number of students who can enroll in medical specialties, after 7 years of general training in medicine (medical training in Belgium is made of a BA and a 3-year MA in general medicine, followed by a compulsory complementary MA). The law defines how this quota is split between Flemish and French-speaking universities. The quota is tied to the number of internship positions and a national medical identification number. Universities manage the selection and allocation of candidates to medical specialties.

Partly to avoid congestion if more students finish their medical training than the available number of places, Flanders has introduced an entry exam for the BA in medicine in 1997. This exam, which is common to all Flemish universities, is meant to test students' cognitive and non-cognitive skills. In the first part, the student's knowledge of sciences is tested, while the second part tests the ability of a candidate to acquire and process information (see Janssen (2006) for details). Success rates are low: in July 2012, 16.6% of all participants passed the exam, while in August 2012 only 11.4% of all participants succeeded (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training [8]). Success in the exam gives the student the right to register in the medicine program of any of the Flemish universities. The entry exam is organized twice a year, at the beginning of July and at the end of August. Students who do not succeed in July can retake the exam in August. There is currently no equivalent system in the French-speaking community but different rules have been used in the past to limit the number of students in these degree programs (see below).

A second exception to the general rule of open access is the use of **entry exams** in some degree programs. In Flanders, an entrance exam for dentistry was introduced at the same time as the entry exam for medicine, and it follows a similar format. In the French-speaking community there has long been an entry exam for civil engineering studies (a similar test existed in Flanders but was dropped in 2004). The exam tests students' mathematical ability, at the level of the "mathematics option" of the general secondary school program. Around 75% of students succeed in the test and are therefore allowed to register. In both cases, the entry exam is a common to all universities and a student who passes the exam can register in any of the universities offering the degree program (identical admission criteria).

The third exception to the general rule concerns arts schools, which **audition** candidates and decide to admit them on the basis of these auditions. These auditions are best seen as contests, as the number of seats is limited in these programs.

The fourth and final exception to the general rule of open access consists of **quotas for non-resident students** in some medical and paramedical studies in the French-speaking community. These quotas were introduced in 2006 as a result of the large influx of non-resident students (mainly coming from France): in some degree programs, non-resident students made up close to 80% of student enrollment. The quotas initially applied to 7 degree programs and capped non-resident students to 30% of total first year enrollment. In May 2011, the Constitutional court ruled these quotas discriminatory and hindering student mobility in the EU (decision 89/2011). The Court also ruled that non-resident quotas for

veterinary sciences, kinesitherapy and the MA in speech theory could nevertheless be maintained because the large influx of students in these specialties threatened the quality and availability of public health services in the country. For academic year 2012-13, medicine and dentistry were added to the list of degree programs subject to the 30% non-resident quota. These quota places are allocated to non-residents on the basis of a lottery system. Non-resident students can only apply to one institution. Applications in 2012-13 took place over three days on August 29-31.

## Recent policy changes

Until 2004, there was an entrance exam for civil engineering studies in Flanders. This exam was organized very much along the same lines as its current equivalent in the French-speaking community.

The French-speaking community has played with different systems to constrain student enrollments in medicine in light of the national quota on the number of medicine students admitted to the medical profession at the end of their 7 years. A *numerus clausus*, limiting access to the MA at the end of the BA degree, was in place between 1997-1998 and 2001-02. A *numerus clausus* at the end of the first year was in place between 2006-07 and 2008-09.

## Perceived issues

Restrictions on access to higher education in neighboring countries have made Belgium a net importer of European students (Van Bouwel and Veugelers (2009) [10]). This has raised concerns, especially in medical and paramedical studies in the French-speaking community, where the proportion of non-resident students has reached very high proportions. This phenomenon is not limited to the French-speaking community however. Over the last 10 years, the number of Dutch students at Flemish institutions has more than doubled [3]. Many Dutch students prefer to study in Belgium because of lower tuition fees and the lottery system in their own country. This influx of non-resident students has negative consequences on education budgets or on the subsidies that universities receive per student.

Another lingering issue concerns the tension between the general message about open access and the fact that in very few degree programs access is actually limited due to capacity (in most other programs, capacity is adjusted by changing amphitheaters or doubling the number of classes). Given the lack of formal rules for allocating this capacity, places are usually allocated on a first-come, first-served basis for these few degree programs and every year, unaware students get denied access because they waited too long to register.<sup>3</sup>

Ultimately, these recurring political issues are all related to the questions of the pros and cons of open access as the principle on which to organize access to higher education. Van Parijs (2007) summarizes the arguments, with references to some of the policy issues relevant to Belgium, such as the introduction of selection at entry, the use of quotas, and decentralized versus common admission criteria.

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<sup>3</sup> In 2012-13, places in speech therapy were taken up by French students at the very beginning of the registration season and there were news headlines about Belgian students who were refused access for lack of space.

# Performance

The policy of low tuition fees and open enrollment leads to a high participation rate in higher education. 42.2% of the population aged 24-29 had obtained a degree in tertiary education in Belgium compared to an EU average of 31.6% [5].

However, success rates are low at the end of the first year. More than 50% of students fail in their first year at university. According to a report of the Flemish Ministry of Education [6], students who start at a bachelor program obtain on average 61% of the credits in the first year of higher education in 2007-2008. Many students decide to switch to another program after the first year. Students who study medicine or dentistry obtain on average 90% of all credits at the end of the first year. The entrance exam in medicine and dentistry is an effective tool to increase success rates in these programs. In 2004, the Flemish government abolished the entrance exam for engineering to increase the supply of engineers. This resulted in lower success rates in the first year but the number of graduates did not increase. Low success rates are costly for public budgets and for the individual students who fail.

Despite its open access, higher education in Belgium also rates low when it comes to participation from lower socio-economic status groups (e.g. the 2005 global higher education rankings by the Educational Policy Institute).

## Existing data

Data about participation and success in higher education in Flanders can be found on the website of the Flemish Ministry of Education:

<http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/werken/studentadmin/studentengegevens/default.htm>

General higher education statistics in the French-speaking Community:

<http://www.enseignement.be/index.php?page=26464&navi=3253>

## Legal texts

Flemish Higher Education Reform Act, 4 April 2003

<http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/edulex/database/document/document.asp?docid=13425>

Bologna Decree from the French-speaking Community, 31 March 2004,

[http://www.gallilex.cfwb.be/fr/leg\\_res\\_01.php?ncda=28769&referant=I01](http://www.gallilex.cfwb.be/fr/leg_res_01.php?ncda=28769&referant=I01)

Non-resident Decree, French-speaking Community, 16 June 2006 (amended following decision by Constitutional Court on 30 May 2011),

[http://www.gallilex.cfwb.be/fr/leg\\_res\\_01.php?ncda=30746&referant=I02](http://www.gallilex.cfwb.be/fr/leg_res_01.php?ncda=30746&referant=I02)

Application circular for the non-resident decree, academic year 2012-12, available at:

[http://www.gallilex.cfwb.be/document/pdf/37580\\_000.pdf](http://www.gallilex.cfwb.be/document/pdf/37580_000.pdf)

Royal Decree regulating the medical supply, last adapted September 1, 2012

## Other resources and references

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## MiP Country Profiles downloadable from [matching-in-practice.eu](http://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](#).

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

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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 \(French-speaking region\)](#).