



## SUMMARY SHEETS ON EDUCATION SYSTEMS IN EUROPE

### FRENCH COMMUNITY OF BELGIUM

#### I. Description of education system

##### 1. Education population and language of instruction

In 1993/94, 36.8% of the population belonged to the 2-29 age-group. In 1995/96, 979,033 pupils and students were enrolled in full-time education. The language of instruction is French.

##### 2. Administrative control and extent of public-sector funded education

In 1995/96, 49% of pupils in primary and normal secondary education attended a public-sector school (governed by the French Community itself, or one of its provinces or *communes*), while 51% attended a grant-aided private school, which received the major part of its financial allocation from the Community.

The Government of the French Community is the top-level authority for education in the Community (and, in this capacity, establishes its structures, curricula and methods, and manages its schools), also laying down regulations for the schools that it subsidizes. They include schools governed by other public authorities (the provinces or *communes*), or private persons (independent schools governed by a private person belong to the private sector, and constitute what is known as 'free education'). For entitlement to a subsidy, schools are expected to comply with regulations relating to their organizational structure, security, health standards and courses.

The private sector in its strictest sense, which comprises schools that receive no subsidy from the French Community, but which may be recognized by it (as in the case of just one school up to now), is very small.

The Community inspectorate for schools ensures that the administrative authorities responsible for them fulfil their obligations and, in particular, make appropriate use of the public resources they receive. It oversees the entire system, with the exception of higher education institutions offering more than a single stage of studies. Respect for appropriate norms in the latter is based on a system of self-evaluation. The universities and the *Hautes écoles* (or 'higher schools') are also subject to the broad oversight of French Community government commissioners and an inspector of finance who ensure compliance with financial laws and regulations.

##### 3. Pre-primary education

Education at this level, which is free of charge, is not compulsory. It is part of the continuous educational pathway along which pupils acquire the grounding necessary to become full members of society and continue their studies (the pathway thus begins with the kindergarten and the first eight years of compulsory schooling).

Pupils enter this level of education at the age of two-and-a-half, and leave it in the month of June in the year of their sixth birthday.

##### 4. Compulsory education

###### (a) Phases

Primary education	6-12 years of age
Secondary education	12-16 or 18 years of age

Education is compulsory between the ages of 6 and 18. It is full-time until the age of 15 or 16, and in principle includes six years of primary education. If young people have not completed the first two

years of secondary education by the age of 15, they may be obliged to continue their full-time schooling until they are 16.

If they have completed (though not necessarily satisfactorily) their second year of full-time secondary education, 15-year-olds no longer have to attend full-time compulsory schooling. The requirements of part-time compulsory schooling are satisfied if adolescents continue full-time secondary education, or if they undertake part-time vocational secondary education, or some form of recognized training that satisfies the requirements of compulsory schooling.

The six years of primary education are divided into separate stages of two years each. The most widespread form of secondary education (known as 'type I') also includes three stages each lasting two years. Within the first of these stages, a further year is provided for pupils who, at the end of the second year, have not reached the level corresponding to certain basic standards of knowledge, and who wish to continue in the transitional or qualification streams of general, technical or artistic education.

#### (b) Admissions criteria

Primary education normally begins in September of the year in which children reach the age of 6. There is no special condition governing admission. In general, children are aged 12 when they enter secondary education. They can usually begin their first year if they have obtained their *certificat d'études de base* (the CEB, or certificate of primary education). In both primary and secondary education, parents can freely choose their child's school. Access to compulsory education is free of charge.

#### (c) Length of the school day/week/year

Primary and secondary school activity covers five days a week from Monday to Friday in both morning and afternoon, with the exception of Wednesday afternoon in primary school. It may start from 8 o'clock in the morning and last, in principle, until 5 p.m. All pupils have at least one hour free in the middle of the day. Teaching is organized into periods of 50 minutes. In primary education, all pupils have 28-31 such periods a week and, in secondary education, 28-36 periods a week. The school year comprises 37 weeks (182 days).

#### (d) Class size/student grouping

Primary education is organized into six classes. When the school population is not big enough to form a class for each age-group, pupils are placed in classes corresponding to the stage of primary education they have reached. Teachers give lessons in all subjects, except those responsible for physical education and languages, who are subject specialists.

In secondary education, each class corresponds, in principle, to an age-group and the teachers are subject specialists.

#### (e) Curricular control and content

In primary education, pupils have, in accordance with the law, to acquire linguistic skills by being taught a modern language other than French, and also through 'immersion', by being taught in a (modern) language of instruction other than French. The law also states that they must have lessons in religious or moral instruction, reading, writing, arithmetic, the elements of language, geography, the history of Belgium, drawing, the natural sciences, hygiene, singing, physical education, road safety and handicrafts.

In 'type I' secondary education, a compulsory common curriculum in the first two years involves the following:

- all pupils have to study religion or ethics, French, mathematics, history and geography, a foreign language, sciences and physical education;
- pupils have to choose further subjects from a range of options including education using technology, artistic education, mathematics and other possibilities.

The administrative authority responsible for a school may submit its own primary and secondary education curricula for ministerial approval. These curricula have to be drawn up in accordance with certain basic standards of knowledge (which should be achieved by the end of the first stage of secondary education), and with final levels of attainment corresponding to the end of secondary education, which apply to all sectors. Administrative authorities that do not have their own curriculum have to use the official curriculum of the French Community. Curricula followed in the grant-aided

sector are approved by the government after consulting with the *Commission des Programmes* (committee on curricula).

(e) **Assessment, progression and qualifications**

In primary education, each administrative authority may decide on its own assessment procedures and the way results will be communicated, provided they comply with the relevant legislation. Pupils are assessed by each teacher on the basis of his or her own aims and individual teaching. A school report sent to parents informs them about their children's results and progress at school, as well as their attitude and approach to learning and the development of their personality. Examination results supplement this formative assessment. The decision as to whether pupils have satisfactorily completed their school year is taken by the class teacher, often in consultation with the school head and, sometimes, the other teachers. The CEB is obtained at the end of the sixth year of primary education.

In secondary education, each school administrative authority may adapt its assessment methods to the different levels and forms of teaching, the various areas of subject specialization and circumstances peculiar to the school environment. Neither of the first two years may be repeated.

A *certificat d'enseignement secondaire du deuxième degré* (certificate of the second stage of secondary education) is awarded to pupils who have successfully completed the first two stages. An upper secondary education certificate (the CESS, or *certificat d'enseignement secondaire supérieur*) is awarded to pupils who have successfully completed the final two years of general, technical or artistic secondary education. For pupils undergoing vocational education, the final years lead to a qualification certificate.

The Ministry organizes no examination common to all schools. It acknowledges their responsibility for awarding qualifications, provided the latter are formally approved. The inspectorate is responsible for ensuring that standards in education are upheld.

## 5. Upper secondary and post-secondary education

(a) **Types of education**

Part-time education	15/16-18/19 years of age
Apprenticeship/training	15/16-8/19 years of age

Pupils who leave full-time education at the age of 15/16 have to remain in compulsory part-time education, or undergo apprenticeship or training until they reach the age of 18.

(b) **Admissions criteria**

Pupils aged 16 (or those aged 15 who have completed two years of secondary school) may enter part-time technical or vocational education, or training covered by the period of compulsory schooling. At this level, education is free and parents may choose the school or other institution their child attends.

(c) **Curricular control and content**

The management of institutions for part-time education are responsible for their curricula. Courses for pupils in part-time education combine general education with preparation for employment. Apprentices receive practical training three or four times a week, and on other days attend practical or vocational theoretical classes.

(d) **Assessment, progression and qualifications**

Part-time education is recognized and may result in the award of a certificate equivalent to the one obtained at the end of full-time schooling. Apprenticeship leads to a 'vocational aptitude' certificate and/or a certificate of apprenticeship awarded on the basis of continuous assessment and a final examination. The teaching staff decide which students can receive these qualifications.

Pupils who have regularly attended a *Centre d'Éducation et de Formation en Alternance* (CEFA, or centre for linked work and education or training) receive certificates testifying to their vocational skills, or a qualification certificate equivalent to the one awarded in full-time education. A certificate of intermediate qualification in the lower stage of part-time education is awarded to pupils who, for at least two school years, have regularly attended classes in the same area of study in part-time vocational lower secondary education.

This certificate is awarded by the *conseil de classe* (committee of teachers).

## 6. Higher education

### (a) Types of institution

A distinction may be drawn between university and 'non-university' higher education. Short and long university courses do not form a continuous path. Students in one or the other are involved in two distinctly different kinds of course reflected in differing course structures and teaching methods.

'Non-university' higher education courses provided in the *Hautes écoles* may also be short or long and, in the latter case, are of the same nature and level as university courses.

### (b) Access

Students choose freely the institutions in which they wish to enrol. To enter any form of higher education, students have to hold a CESS (see above). Those who do not can take a special exam for entrance to university.

Admission to courses for the qualification of *ingénieur civil* (civil engineer) is subject to an entrance examination or the submission of an academic record. The French Community does not apply a *numerus clausus*. However, since the 1997/1998 academic year, measures to limit access have been introduced in medicine: an examination for selection purposes is now held on completion of the *candidat* (preparatory university degree), with arrangements to help those who are not selected to continue their studies in other related disciplines.

### (c) Qualifications

Short higher education leads to the qualification known as *gradué* in different areas of study (such as agricultural, economic, social and artistic fields). Long courses in non-university higher education prepare students for such qualifications as *ingénieur industriel*, *ingénieur commercial* (industrial or commercial engineer), *licencié* (licentiate), *architecte*, etc.

University education leads to the award of the *licence* (four- or five-year degree), and third-stage (postgraduate) qualifications including doctorates.

## 8. Special education

Special education caters for children aged between two-and-a-half and 21 who suffer from a handicap which prevents them from following normal courses in education. This provision is divided into eight categories corresponding to specific handicaps. While it has been incorporated up to a point into normal education, most of it is the responsibility of special schools.

In 1995/96, around 3.9% of pupils in primary and secondary education attended institutions of this kind.

## 9. Teachers

Pre-primary and primary teachers have to have a teaching qualification awarded on completion of three years in a teacher training institution. As a rule, primary school teachers give classes in all subjects. Secondary schools teachers are subject specialists. There is a difference between the (three-year non-university) qualifications for lower secondary teachers and the (four-year university) qualifications for those who teach at upper secondary level. Teachers in higher education generally hold a doctorate. All schoolteachers are employees of the administrative authority responsible for their school. Initial recruitment is on a temporary basis, but may lead to their permanent appointment.

## II. Recent reforms and current priorities

The recent reforms carried out in the French-speaking Community are set out in three Decrees:

### 1) The 'Mission' Decree

This Decree, dating from July 1997, defines the general aims of compulsory education for all educational sectors, divides progress through education into stages, and specifies that certain knowledge or abilities should be attained at the end of each stage. This reference to specific knowledge and skills should make it possible to achieve desirable standards of quality and performance in the school system.

The Decree also advocates the implementation of a well-defined approach to education implying specific plans for teaching which, in turn, comprise school plans. It sets out what is meant by these concepts:

The **educational approach** refers, in compliance with the aims set out in the Decree, to all those values of society, along with its preferred pattern of development and other bench marks, which enable the administrative authorities for schools (or bodies that represent them or coordinate their activity) to define their educational aims;

**The plan for teaching** identifies the teaching objectives and methodologies that should be adopted by the foregoing authorities (or bodies) in putting their educational approach into effect;

**The school plan** sets out all forms of teaching activity and specific initiatives that teaching staff at a school intend to introduce jointly with all the interests and partners concerned, so that the educational approach and teaching plans of the administrative authorities for schools can be implemented.

Furthermore, the Decree explains for the first time what is meant by education free of charge, and extends to all educational sectors the principle of a 'participation council' for each school.

#### **a) Free education**

The general principle is that no registration fee should be required.

It should also be emphasized that annual flat-rate operational subsidies are awarded to cover the costs of school operational activity and equipment, as well as the free distribution of school textbooks and supplies to pupils in compulsory education.

#### **b) Participation councils**

Schools administered by the French-speaking Community have had councils for participation since the end of the 1980s. The Decree institutes such Councils for all schools. The councils are intended to carry out the following tasks:

- discuss the school plan;
- amend and supplement the plan;
- submit the plan for approval by the authorities;
- evaluate its implementation periodically;
- suggest adaptations;
- submit an opinion on the report on activities drawn up every year for each school by its administrative authority.

This participation council includes statutory members, elected members and members representing the social, cultural and economic community close to the school.

The elected members include representatives of the teaching staff, educational, psychological, social and paramedical ancillary staff, and parents, pupils and employees.

## **II) The Decree on positive discrimination**

Since the start of the 1990s, the French-speaking Community of Belgium has introduced a number of measures aimed at combating school failure and dropout. Following up the July 1997 'Mission' Decree (discussed above), parliament adopted a more detailed Decree in June 1998, whose aim has been to increase the likelihood that all pupils 'will have the same opportunities for social and career advancement'. This Decree brings together a number of provisions, some of which had been in existence for several years. By so integrating them, it aims to ensure that the resources awarded are used to better effect, and that policies are more transparent and easier to assess.

Two types of measures are set out in the Decree:

The first set of measures concerns certain schools that benefit from so-called "positive discrimination" provisions. These schools are selected in accordance with objective socio-economic criteria and

receive increased human and financial resources (at least BEF 360 million for primary education and at least BEF 310 million for secondary education). In addition, the Decree confirms the setting up of a school mediation service aimed at fostering, maintaining and restoring a climate of trust between the pupils, the parents and the school staff. The Decree also establishes a Commission for Positive Discrimination entrusted, *inter alia*, with coordinating all projects.

The second set of measures concerns all schools and is aimed at preventing violence and combating absenteeism. These measures come within the scope of previous provisions, which are thereby clarified and reinforced.

### **III) The Decree on basic education**

Adopted in July 1998, this Decree redefines the aims of ordinary and special nursery and primary education, and specifies the resources to be mobilized for these levels. Through a whole series of measures relating to the organization of schools (changes in annual teaching days, in the calculation of the pupil/teacher ratio and the resultant allocation, and in the timetable of teachers and pupils), as well as by means of language learning through immersion, the Decree aims to:

- ensure that virtually all schools teach a modern language other than French;
- enable schools that so wish to provide certain courses and teaching activities in the timetable, in sign language;
- encourage schools to organize courses three times a week to help stateless, foreign or immigrant pupils become more proficient in the language of instruction;
- oblige the authorities that administer schools to set up a consultative body for each school, catchment area, administrative area or entity, depending on the sector concerned.

For more detailed information on education systems in Europe, you may consult the EURYDICE data base, EURYBASE (<http://www.eurydice.org>)