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NATIONAL REPORT

QUALITY IN ULLL

Country: Belgium (Flanders)

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Introduction

This report provides a brief overview about university lifelong learning and quality assurance in lifelong learning in higher education institutions in Flanders. The content is mainly based on research conducted in the framework of the QACEP project¹. Every partner of the QACEP consortium had to fill out a questionnaire. A comparative analysis was made to establish a common understanding amongst all partners on what is meant by continuing education programmes, on their characteristics and on the main challenges and issues of quality assurance with regard to this kind of programmes. For this national report, we refer to the questionnaire completed by KU leuven.

University Lifelong Learning in the national context

Lifelong Learning

Belgium is a federal state with three main levels of government: the federal state, the communities and the regions. Competences for education in Belgium lie mainly with the communities. In this national report we will focus on education in Flanders, which encompasses both the Flemish region and the Flemish community. Flanders recognizes the importance of lifelong learning. Since the 1990's lifelong learning has a prominent place on national and international policy agendas. Following the 2000 Memorandum on Lifelong Learning – the response from the European Commission to the Lisbon strategy formulated by the European Council - , the Flemish government approved an action plan on lifelong learning ('Een leven lang leren in goede banen') on 7 July 2000. This plan was the first step towards a framework that integrated and coordinated a range of different initiatives developed by different ministries. Since 2005 a structural basis has been developed for an integrated policy on education, training and employment, geared towards stimulating lifelong and lifewide learning and towards tightening the link between education, training and non-formal education, on the one hand, and the labour market, on the other hand.

Both in the most recent and previous Government Strategies (2004-2009 and 2009-2014) and in the policy notes of relevant ministers responsible for Education and Training, Work and Culture, there are multiple references to engagements with regard to lifelong and lifewide learning.

In Flanders, several lifelong learning training programmes come under the common denominator continuing education. It comprises both formal and non-formal education and offer courses at very different levels. Other than universities and/or university colleges, the programmes are offered by a variety of organisations:

¹ www.qacep.eu

- Second chance schools offer an alternative way to get a secondary school degree.
- Social-cultural organisations organise continuing education mainly in nonprofessional / general interest topics.
- Adult education centres provide a range of basic and general vocational and non-vocational education programs.
- Flemish public employment institution (VDAB) organises vocational training
- Unions and employer organisations organise training mainly on human resources management and legislation.
- Professional bodies and the sectoral training organisations organise vocational training.
- Government also organises information sessions about new legislation. These initiatives are rather exceptional.
- Finally there are a lot of private initiatives that organise mainly vocational training, basic as well as advanced.

University Lifelong Learning

When it comes to **university lifelong learning** we apply the definition developed by EUCEN in the framework of the BeFlex project:

“ULLL is the provision by higher education institutions of learning opportunities, services and research for: the personal and professional development of a wide range of individuals - lifelong and life wide; and the social, cultural and economic development of communities and the region. ULLL is at university level and research-based; it focuses primarily on the needs of the learners; and it is often developed and/or provided in collaboration with stakeholders and external actors”.

In Flanders universities and university colleges (hogescholen) offer tertiary education. After signing the Bologna declaration, higher education institutions adapted their programmes to the Bachelor - Master structure. As part of the reform, the Flemish universities and university colleges organised themselves in five associations. An association is an inter-institutional co-operation between one university and one or more colleges of higher education. There are five associations in Flanders:

- KU Leuven Association: <http://www.associatie.kuleuven.be>
- Antwerp University Association: <http://www.associatie-antwerpen.be>
- Brussels University Association: <http://www.universitaireassociatiebrussel.be>
- Ghent University Association: <http://www.augent.be>
- Limburg University Association: <http://www.auhl.be>

The Decree of 4/04/2003 on the restructuring of the Higher Education in Flanders (known as the Higher Education Act) allows Higher education Institutions to organise continuing education and determines that postgraduate programmes need to have at least 20 credits. The Decree was a major step forward in adjusting the higher education offer to non-traditional student's publics. 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 general, continuing education provided by universities and university colleges in Flanders can be divided in the following types:

- Advanced Bachelor programmes
- Postgraduate programmes
- Certified continuing education programmes
- Continuing education with proof of attendance

Other possibilities of university lifelong learning are:

- Participation in individual courses from the Ba and Ma programmes (Flexibility Decree)
- Bachelor programmes in evening classes
- Study Centres 'Open Universiteit'
- University of the Third Age
- Lecture series, seminars and workshops open for all

Quality assurance in higher education in Flanders

In the development of quality assurance in higher education, two items of legislation are crucial as far as the universities are concerned: the 1991 act on the universities in the Flemish Community (Universities Act) and the Higher Education Act (2003) mentioned earlier. The Universities Act (1991) assigns responsibility for the internal and external quality assurance of education to the universities themselves. Thus each university is responsible for internal quality assurance within the institution. Additionally, each university is required to submit its bachelor and master programmes (not postgraduate programmes or other types of Continuing Education programmes) to an external assessment on an eight-yearly basis and to act on the findings and results of this external assessment.

The task of organising these external assessments has been entrusted to the Quality Assurance Unit of the VLIR (Flemish Interuniversity Council), which has been the consultative and advisory body of the universities since 1976. The external quality assurance system serves a twofold purpose: it is intended to help improve the quality of university education, and the universities are required to account for the way in which they address quality and quality assurance in the context of a programme.

The essential features of the assessment system are that it takes a programme or cluster of programmes as its starting-point, that it is organised along interuniversity lines and that it starts with a critical self-evaluation which the programme coordinators are required to write. A panel of independent experts composed in consultation with the universities then visits the programme(s), forms a judgement on their quality and formulates recommendations for improvement. The process is concluded with the publication of a public assessment report.

In 2003, the Higher Education Act introduced the system of programme accreditation by the NVAO for the Bachelor and Master programmes. Whereas the quality assurance system and regulation is elaborated quite detailed for bachelor and master level programmes, this is not the case for continuing education programmes partly induced by the fact that they are not funded by the government in the same way as bachelor and master programmes are.