

Higher Education Qualifications Framework in Flanders (Belgium)



2008

*A presentation for compatibility with the
Framework for Qualifications
of the European Higher Education Area*



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Introduction

The rationale for the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area is to provide a mechanism to relate national frameworks to each other so as to enable international transparency, international recognition of qualifications and international mobility of learners and graduates.

The first, second and third cycles established in the Bologna Process are the key elements of the overarching framework. These cycles can be best understood by reference to internationally acceptable descriptors which have been developed jointly by stakeholders across Europe – the so-called “Dublin descriptors”.

Qualification descriptors are designed to be read as general statements of the typical achievement of learners who have been awarded a qualification on successful completion of a cycle.

This document describes the Flemish Higher Education System and also compares it with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which was established during 19-20 May 2005.

More information regarding the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA is available at: <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/>

Additionally there is also a reference framework, the Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning. This Recommendation was signed on the 23rd of April 2008 by the Presidents of the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers, and is formally adopted. It creates a reference framework which will relate different countries' qualifications systems and frameworks together.

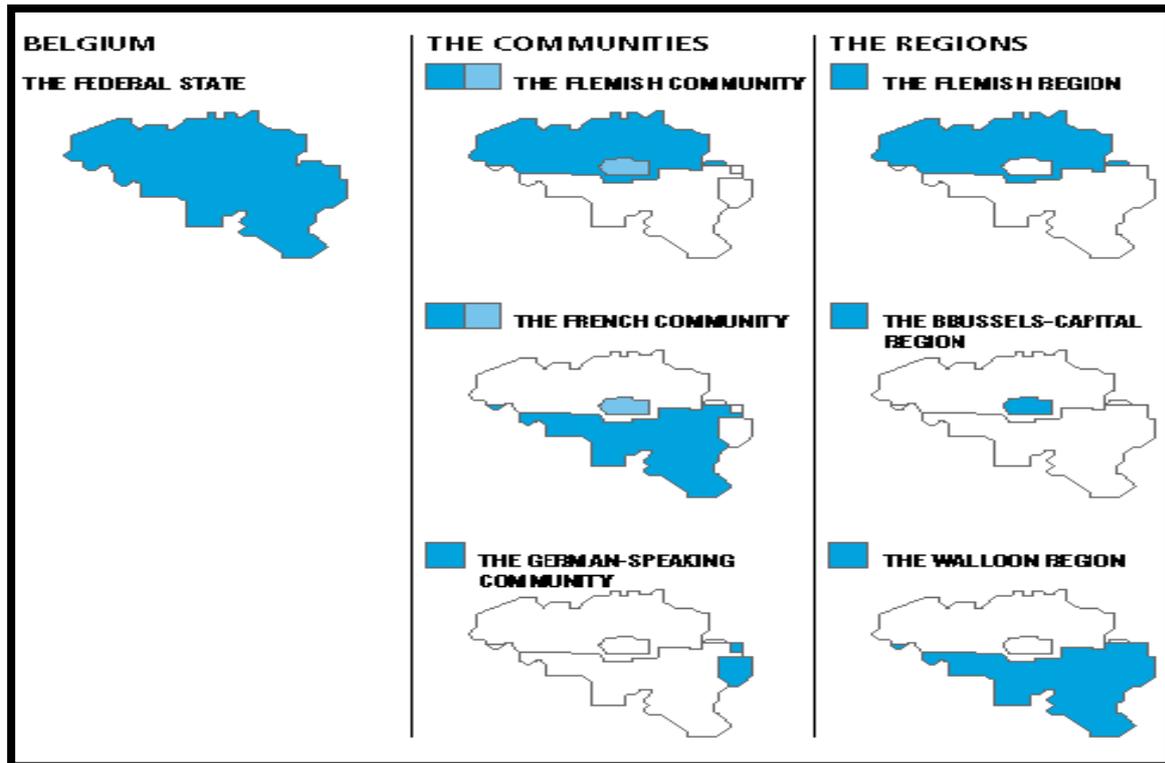
In Chapter 4 and in the appendix, the higher education qualifications in Flanders (Belgium) are also related to this European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF).

The EQF texts are available at http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/eqf/index_en.html

1. Flanders

Belgium is a federal state of three communities and three regions:

- the Flemish, French and German-speaking Community;
- the Flemish, Walloon and the Brussels-Capital Region;



Next to the communities and regions, there are also four language areas, namely the Dutch, French, German and bilingual (Brussels Capital) language area.

Since 1989 the Belgium's Dutch, French and German-speaking Communities have acquired full authority and competency for education.

The Flemish Community is responsible for education in the Flemish Region and also responsible for the Flemish institutions within the territory of the Brussels-Capital Region.

The only official language of the Flemish Community is Dutch, which is also the teaching language.

Flemish education is divided into levels:

- elementary education
- secondary education
- post-secondary education
- higher education.

This report describes the higher education system (First, Second and Third cycle) of the Flemish Community of Belgium, "Flanders".

2. Higher Education in Flanders

2.1. Higher education bodies

2.1.1. Flemish Ministry of Education and Training

Mr. Frank Vandenbroucke, deputy Prime Minister of the Flemish Government is Flemish Minister for Work, Education and Training.

Cf. <http://www.ministerfrankvandenbroucke.be>

The Higher Education Policy Unit belongs to the Department of Education and Training of the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training and is responsible for policy development and evaluation of higher education. In cooperation with the higher education institutions and other organisations the Higher Education Policy Unit improves, develops and stimulates proactive initiatives regarding higher education and research.

Cf. http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/wegwijs/departement/inhoud/hoger_onderwijs/opdracht.htm

NARIC-Flanders, is the recognition and information centre of Flanders within the framework of the European Commission, the Council of Europe and UNESCO. It is in charge of the academic recognition of foreign higher education qualifications and the professional recognition of teachers based upon the applicable European Directive. It belongs to the Agency for Higher Education, Adult Education and Study Grants of the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training.

Cf. <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/NARIC/default.htm>

2.1.2. VLHORA

The VLHORA, the Council of Flemish University Colleges, was established in 1996 and was awarded the statute of public utility institution by law in 1998. The VLHORA gives advice to the Flemish authorities on all policy aspects regarding university college education, applied research, social services and the practice of the arts. Moreover the VLHORA organises and stimulates consultation between the institutions on all issues related to the university colleges.

Cf. <http://www.vlhora.be/>

2.1.3. VLIR

In 1976, the Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR) was set up as an autonomous public body with its own institutional status. The council consists of members who represent the Flemish universities. It defends the interests of the universities and gives advice to the Flemish government on university matters (consultation, advice and recommendations). In addition, the council organises consultation between the universities.

Cf. <http://www.vlir.be/>

VLHORA and VLIR organise and coordinate external quality assurance through the external reviews of programmes.

2.1.4. VVS

Student participation in higher education is regulated by the Law of 19 March 2004, which also regulates the legal status of students.

The National Union of Students in Flanders (Vereniging van Vlaamse Studenten - VVS) concludes association agreements with the various student organisations which promote the interests of the students at the different institutions for higher education. There are also other student organisations at local levels, but they do not represent the students as a whole.

Cf. <http://www.vvs.ac>

2.1.5. SERV

Flanders Social and Economic Council (Sociaal-Economische Raad van Vlaanderen, or SERV) is the consultative and advisory body of the Flemish social partners. The SERV comprises ten employer representatives (from BB, Unizo, Verso and Voka — Flanders' Chamber of Commerce and Industry) and ten representatives from the Flemish trade unions (ABVV, ACLVB, and ACV).

Cf. <http://www.serv.be/>

2.1.6. VLOR

The VLOR is the Strategic Advisory Council for the education and training policy of Flanders. It plays a role in the policymaking process. The council operates independent of the Department of Education and Training and of the competent Minister.

The General Council discusses all educational issues with an impact on the whole education system or on more than one level.

All stakeholders in the field of education and training are represented in the VLOR.

Cf. <http://www.vlor.be/>

2.1.7. NVAO

NVAO, Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie, is the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders. The organisation was established by international treaty.

The NVAO independently ensures the quality of higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders by assessing and accrediting programmes, and contributes to furthering this quality.

In addition, NVAO contributes to raising quality awareness within higher education and advancing the position of higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders in the national and international context.

NVAO achieves its mission, by:

- the accreditation of programmes offered by higher education institutions;
- the initial accreditation of programmes that are not yet offered and/or registered;
- the contribution towards stressing the distinctive features of programmes or institutions by assessing the specific quality features at the request of institutions.
- the advancement of both the European and the international dimension in Dutch and Flemish accreditation and maintaining international contacts in order to reach agreement and cohesion.
- undertaking other tasks commissioned by the Dutch-Flemish Committee of Ministers;
- Contributing to the public debate on the developments in higher education within the scope of NVAO's primary tasks.

NVAO also intends to fulfil a pioneering role in the development of quality assurance and accreditation in Europe.

In both the Netherlands and Flanders, NVAO engages in intensive consultation with institutions of higher education, experts, umbrella and professional organisations, students, employer's organisations and labour unions. NVAO endeavours to be proactive, to engage in dialogue with institutions, students and the labour market.

Together with other accreditation organisations, NVAO verifies to what extent their policies are based on the same approach and procedures as those laid down in the Dutch and Flemish accreditation frameworks.

Cf. <http://nvaio.net/>

2.2. Higher education legal framework

The signing of the Bologna Declaration in 1999 led to a radical new reorganisation and the implementation of the Bologna Declaration in Flanders was shaped by the

- Law on Higher Education Reform (structuurdecreet) of 4 April 2003,
- Law on Participation (participatiedecreet) of 19 March 2004,
- Law on Flexible Learning Paths (flexibiliseringsdecreet) of 30 April 2004.

2.3. General objectives of the higher education programmes

All higher education programmes were transformed into the Bachelor-Master structure.

Professional Bachelor's programmes have the objective to bring students to a level of general and specific knowledge and competences required to perform a particular profession or group of professions independently. A professional Bachelor's programme can therefore lead directly to a place on the labour market.

The main objective of the **academic Bachelor's** programmes is that students will go on to a Master's programme. Thus, they are geared towards bringing the students to a certain level of scientific or artistic knowledge and competences, required for scientific or artistic work in general, and towards a specific field of sciences or arts in particular. Preparing students for the labour market is only a secondary objective.

Some Bachelor's programmes are a follow-up to another (professional) Bachelor's programme. This follow-up programme is geared towards the broadening of or specializing in competences acquired during the initial Bachelor's programme.

Master's programmes have the objective to bring students to an advanced level of scientific or artistic knowledge and competences required for scientific or artistic work in general, and to a specific domain of sciences and arts in particular, which is required for autonomous scientific or artistic work or to apply this scientific or artistic knowledge independently in one or a group of professions.

Some Master's programmes are considered as advanced or further studies.

The qualification of Doctor is granted by a panel of researchers after a public presentation of the Doctor's thesis in which the writer/researcher/student has demonstrated to be able to conceive new scientific knowledge based on independent research. The doctoral thesis should have the potential to lead to publications in scientific journals.

Only people who have been conferred the title of Bachelor, Master or Doctor, pursuant to the Law on Higher Education Reform of 4 April 2003, may carry the corresponding title of Bachelor, Master or Doctor and the legally protected abbreviations "dr" and "PhD".

The learning outcomes of all these programmes are outlined in chapter 3 "cycle descriptors".

2.4. Higher Education Institutions

In Flanders, the higher education institutions are made up of statutory registered higher education institutions and registered institutions.

The **statutory registered institutions** are institutions for higher education which are recognised by law and which can bank on government funding for their education and research.

These institutions are listed in the Higher Education Register.

Cf. <http://www.highereducation.be>

The statutory registered institutions are:

- the university colleges and the universities
- the Faculteit voor Protestantse Godgeleerdheid Brussel (Faculty of Protestant Theology Brussels) and the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit Heverlee (Faculty of Evangelical Theology Heverlee)
- the other officially registered institutions: Vlerick Leuven Gent Management School, the Instituut voor Tropische Geneeskunde (Institute of Tropical Medicine) and Universiteit Antwerpen Management School

Quite a remarkable institution is the transnationale Universiteit Limburg (the transnational University Limburg - tUL). This university was founded under a treaty between the Netherlands and Flanders and is therefore a bi-national institution.

In Flanders it is a statutory registered institution which forms part of the Flemish universities via the Universiteit Hasselt (University Hasselt).

Only the statutory registered universities and university colleges may call themselves "universiteit" and "hogeschool" and use this designation.

The **registered institutions** for higher education are private institutions which are officially recognised on the basis of a successful registration procedure:

- the initial accreditation procedure by the NVAO
 - followed by the review of the institution by the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training.
- Candidate institutions must demonstrate their financial solvability and must enter into a cooperation agreement with a higher education institution, in order to guarantee that students can complete their studies at the contracting higher education institution in case the registered institution in question ceases its activities.

Cf. <http://nvaio.net/>

Their accredited Bachelor's and Master's programmes are included in the Higher Education Register.

Cf. <http://www.highereducation.be>

An **Association** is an official cooperation between one university and one or more university colleges. University colleges that, in an association with a university, offer programmes with academic orientation are currently undergoing a process aimed at strengthening the link to research, i.e. embedding programmes in research.

The institutions may assign certain powers of decision to the association.

There are 5 associations in Flanders.

Associations have indeed several competences, but do not award degrees. Degrees are awarded by the universities and university colleges themselves.

In Belgium there is a Constitutional freedom of education. This implies that institutions, which are totally private may offer any kind of education, but they may not call their qualifications Bachelor, Master or Doctor/PhD.

Only people who have been conferred the title of Bachelor, Master or Doctor, pursuant to the Flemish Law on Higher Education Reform of 4 April 2003 may carry the corresponding title of Bachelor, Master or Doctor and the legally protected abbreviations "dr" and "PhD".

2.5. Admission requirements

2.5.1 Bachelor's programme

The following qualifications give direct access to a Bachelor's programme:

- the Flemish Diploma of Secondary Education,
- a foreign qualification which is recognised as being equivalent by a Flemish Law, a Belgian Law, the European Directive or an international agreement.

There is no "numerus clauses" in Flanders, however, every student who wishes to register for Dentistry and Medicine must pass an entrance exam.

Students who are keen to follow higher artistic education must first pass a skill test (artistic entrance exam) if they wish to enter a programme in the fields of study 'Audiovisual and Visual Arts', 'Music' and 'Performing Arts'.

An assessment of the knowledge of the teaching language may also be required.

The board of the institution may, pursuant to the regulations, facilitate the access to a particular Bachelor's programme on the basis of deviatory admission requirements, solely based on humanitarian grounds; medical, psychological or social grounds; the overall level of the candidate, which is assessed by the board of the institution.

The regulations on the deviatory admission requirements may be obtained from the institution and have to be stipulated in their Education and Examination Regulation.

A student who has already obtained a Bachelor's degree can enter another Bachelor's programme without having to take up all the credits of that programme.

Higher education institutions may only admit students to advanced Bachelor's programmes if they have already obtained a Bachelor's degree.

Institutions may restrict direct access to these programmes to graduates of Bachelor's programmes with specific programme characteristics, and may impose a preparatory programme on graduates of other Bachelor's programmes as a prerequisite for admission. The contents and work load of these preparatory programmes are determined by the institution and may vary according to the degree of content relatedness between the student's previous education and the advanced Bachelor's programme in question.

2.5.2. Master's programme

A Bachelor's degree, obtained through an academic Bachelor's programme, gives direct access to at least one Master's programme.

A Bachelor's degree, obtained after following a professional Bachelor programme, gives access to a Master's programme. The higher education institutions may require a bridging programme. A bridging programme consists of a minimum of 45 and a maximum of 90 credits, which can be brought back to 30 credits based on the results of a test.

The higher education institution may also take into account the competences of the student like informal learning, non-formal learning and professional experience (eerder verworven competenties – EVC) and also the previously obtained qualifications (eerder verworven kwalificaties – EVK) of the student.

This may further reduce the bridging programme or even grant a full exemption.

In Flanders, Master's programmes should be concluded with a Master's thesis, which consists of a minimum of 15 ECTS and a maximum of 30 ECTS.

A student with a Master's degree can enter another Master's programme without having to take up all the credits of that programme.

Advanced Master's programmes are only accessible to people who have already obtained a Master's degree. Direct access may be restricted to graduates of Master's programmes with specific programme characteristics (e.g. type of specialization). Institutions may request holders of other Master's degrees to follow a preparatory programme as an admission requirement. The contents and workload of the preparatory programmes are determined by the institution and may vary according to the content relatedness between the student's prior education and the advanced Master's programme in question.

2.5.3. Doctorate

In general, people who wish to obtain a doctorate must already hold a Master's degree.

The university may however request that the applicant passes an aptitude test to assess whether he is a suitable candidate to carry out scientific research in the field in question and whether he will be able to translate the results of this research into a dissertation.

However, also students who did not obtain a Master's degree may be admitted to doctoral programmes. In that case, the university may request that the student either sits a skills test to assess whether he would be a suitable candidate for a doctoral thesis or takes an exam on components of academic education, which are determined by the university.

2.6. Learning agreements

Students who enrol for a number of credits enter into a learning agreement with the institution. The Law on Flexible Learning Paths creates three types of learning agreements.

2.6.1. Degree contract

The student enrolls for a number of credits with a view to obtaining a degree or enrolls for a complete bridging or preparatory programme, in which these learning paths are possible:

- 60 credits per academic year
- less than 54 credits per academic year (part-time programme)
- other model learning paths drawn up by the higher education institutions
- personalized learning paths: students enrol for a certain number of credits.

2.6.2. Credit contract

The student enrolls for a number of credits with a view to obtaining a credit certificate for one or several programme components.

2.6.3. Exam contract

The student only enrolls for the examinations, with a view to obtaining a degree or a credit certificate for one or more programme components.

2.7. Tuition fees

Tuition fees are regulated by the Law on Flexible Learning Paths of 30 April 2004 (amended by the Law of 20 May 2005). The amount depends on whether the student qualifies for a grant, on the type of learning path and the number of credits involved, on the kind of degree programme (Bachelor's, Master's, bridging programme), and on whether the student is an EEA citizen.

2.8. Academic year

An academic year is a period of one year which starts at the earliest on 1 September and at the latest on 1 October and ends on the day before the start of the next academic year. However departure from this fixed one-year period may exceptionally be granted if the board of the institution decides to either bring forward or push back the start of the academic year. Most university colleges and universities operate a semester system, i.e. the academic year is divided into two separate teaching periods or semesters.

2.9. Curriculum

University colleges and universities have full competences over the curricula of their programmes. A curriculum consists of a coherent set of components. The content of the curricula corresponds with the award-type descriptors of the National Framework of Qualifications of Flanders.

Additionally the content of these curricula needs to take into account the requirements regarding certain functions or professions, determined by national and international legislation (e.g. the European Directive 2005/36).

2.10. Council for disputes about decisions on study progress

The Law on Participation of 19 March 2004 regulates the legal protection of students in study-progress decisions such as decisions on examinations and exam-discipline rules, the conferral of certificates of competence, the granting of exemptions, decisions compelling students to follow a bridging or preparatory programme and the enforcement of study-progress assurance measures.

To this end the Council for disputes about decisions on study progress (“Raad voor betwistingen inzake studievoortgangbeslissingen”) was created which is an administrative court at Flemish level.

In the first instance, disputes are dealt with in an internal appeal organised in the higher education institution. It is compulsory for this internal appeal procedure to be exhausted before an appeal can be presented to the Council.

The Council makes a final decision in short term (15 calendar days is the intended deadline), so that the student knows at a suitable time whether, and under what conditions he can continue his studies.

The student can object to a decision of the Council through the Council of State by means of an administrative appeal.

Cf. <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/raad/default.htm>

2.11. Credit system

The Law on Flexible Learning Paths gives students opportunities for changing between programmes and institutions, enhanced differentiation in respect of the types of programmes on offer, and opportunities for lifelong learning.

The curriculum of a programme consists of a coherence set of components. Such a component is a well defined unit of teaching, learning and evaluation activities aimed at acquiring well-defined competences regarding knowledge, skills and attitudes. A component can consist of one subject (in the traditional sense of the word) but can also consist of a cluster of subjects and learning activities.

An average full-time student would take up 60 credits per academic year, which represents a workload of 1500 to 1800 hours and a full attainment of the learning outcomes of the components involved.

The volume of a component is expressed in whole ECTS credits. One component comprises a minimum of 3 credits with a maximum of 12 components per 60 credits.

A student has completed a component and obtained the respective credit when an assessment or assessments demonstrates that he/she has satisfactorily acquired the relevant competences. In this respect, he/she is assessed on a scale from 0 to 20 (in whole numbers), with 10 being the pass threshold.

Every student is entitled to enrol at least twice for every course component and has the right to sit at least two exams per enrolment.

Successful completion of a component results in official recognition in the form of a credit certificate, which is issued for that particular component and does not take into account any other components which may feature in the student's learning agreement (see also 2.6).

Institutions may grant students exemptions on the basis of

- previously acquired qualifications (eerder verworven kwalificaties - EVK)
- and/or prior learning (eerder verworven competenties - EVC).

EVK is a previously acquired (foreign) qualification confirming that the holder has successfully completed a formal learning path, either or not through education.

EVC is the valorisation of prior learning, i.e. having acquired the knowledge, skills and attitudes which are obtained through non-formal learning, informal learning and work experience.

People may also obtain the degree of Bachelor and Master if the institution deems, based on the EVC and EVK, that the persons in question have acquired the necessary competences.

The following minimum study load was established:

- Bachelor's programme: 180 credits;
- Advanced Bachelor's programme: 60 credits (extra)
- Master's programme: 60 credits;
- Advanced Master's programme has minimum 60 credits (extra)

The Doctoral degree has no credit values assigned.

2.12. Diploma Supplement

Flanders was the first in Europe to introduce a statutory Diploma Supplement. This was introduced for universities in 1991 and for university colleges in 1994.

The Diploma Supplement contains details on the nature, level, context, content and status of the studies followed and a description of the higher education system.

The updated Diploma Supplement is based on a model developed by the European Commission, the Council of Europe and UNESCO/CEPES, which was using the Flemish one as good example. The Diploma Supplement provides independent data with a view to improving international transparency and fair recognition of qualifications for academic and professional purposes.

More information regarding the Diploma Supplement is available at:

http://www.enic-naric.net/documents/THE_DIPLOMA_SUPPLEMENT.pdf

Every student in Flanders automatically receives a Diploma Supplement with his degree. The degree and the accompanying diploma supplement are intrinsically interlinked and are regarded as one single whole.

At the request of students, the statutory registered institutions for higher education will also furnish a free once-off copy of the degree and Diploma Supplement in English.

The degree and Diploma Supplement for programmes taught entirely in another language than Dutch are issued both in the teaching language and in Dutch.

2.13. Quality Assurance and accreditation

In Flanders, accreditation is a formal decision by the NVAO that a programme meets the predefined quality criteria. These criteria are laid down in NVAO's (initial) accreditation frameworks.

Accreditation is however only one part of the whole quality assurance system of higher education in Flanders. This quality assurance system consists of three parts: an internal part, an external part and the part where the formal decision is taken.

2.17.1 Internal Quality Assurance: the self-evaluation

The self-evaluation of the programme is organised by the higher education institution itself and results in the self-evaluation report

2.17.2. External Quality Assurance: external quality assessment

The self-evaluation report is the starting point of the external quality assessment. The result of the external quality assessment is the assessment report.

The external quality assessment is organised by the VLHORA (2.1.2.) and VLIR (2.1.3.).

VLHORA and VLIR organise these assessments by setting up an independent assessment panel of experts responsible for assessing all the programmes in a certain field of study. The assessment panel consists of experts in the field of study, experts in quality assurance, educational/pedagogical experts and experts in the international development of the field of study. Students are always involved and represented in the assessment panel.

2.17.3. The formal decision: accreditation

The Netherlands and Flanders have set up an independent accreditation organisation by international treaty, the Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatieorganisatie (NVAO). Cf. <http://www.nvao.net>.

Higher education programmes that have successfully gone through the external quality assessment sent their assessment report to the NVAO. The NVAO then evaluates the thoroughness of the external assessment and accepts or rejects its findings.

If the accreditation decision is **positive**, the programme is accredited. This means that the programme is included in the Higher Education Register. This registration means that the degree awarded by the programme is recognised by the national authority, Flanders. Additionally, accredited programmes can receive public funding and the students enrolled in these programmes can receive student support (e.g. grants). However, public funding and student support are normally not available for programmes offered by private institutions.

A positive accreditation decision by the NVAO is kept or listed in the Higher Education Register for 8 years.

If the accreditation decision is **negative**, the programme loses accreditation. This means the programme is deleted from the Higher Education Register and can no longer be offered. However there is a possibility of temporary recognition during a recovery period. After the negative accreditation decision, the institution has the opportunity to submit an application to the Flemish government for a temporary recognition. This has to be done within one month after the notification of the negative decision. A detailed plan for improvement has to be put forward together with the application. Following advice from the Recognition Commission, the Flemish government takes a decision within three months of the application. Temporary recognition may have a validity of one to three years.

In the NVAO's accreditation system, learning outcomes are made use of at three levels. A programme is expected to explicitly define its intended learning outcomes. These are the competences a graduate should acquire during his studies. An assessment panel first judges whether a programme's intended learning outcomes are in line with the required level and the subject of the programme. The level is evaluated by matching the intended learning outcomes to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area. Additionally, the assessment panel assesses whether these intended learning outcomes are in line with what is (inter)nationally expected of a programme in that subject.

NVAO secondly judges the potential learning outcomes. These are the competences a student can achieve in the programme as it is offered. This is mainly done by corresponding the content of the curriculum with the intended learning outcomes.

An example probably clarifies this better. If a programme defines laboratory skills as an intended learning outcome, the curriculum of the programme should explicitly cover this and give students the possibility to do laboratory work. If this isn't the case, there is of course no correspondence between the content of the curriculum and the intended learning outcomes. Certain input elements such as the facilities and the quantity and quality of the staff also contribute to the possible achievement of learning outcomes. These are therefore additionally assessed.

Thirdly, NVAO assesses the achieved learning outcomes. These are the competences a graduate has actually acquired during his or her studies. An assessment panel needs to read students' work such as essays, end of term papers and theses to be able to judge the achieved learning outcomes and then match those with the required learning outcomes. The required learning outcomes are of course the level-specific and intended subject-specific learning outcomes as defined by the programme and (positively) assessed by the panel

Accreditation is a prerequisite for awarding Bachelor's or Master's degrees education funding and study financing for students.

2.18. Lisbon Recognition Convention

The Lisbon Recognition Convention (LRC) has been jointly drafted by the Council of Europe and UNESCO.

The LRC aims to facilitate the recognition of qualifications granted in one Party in another Party. It provides that requests should be assessed in a fair manner and within a reasonable time. The recognition can only be refused if the qualification is substantially different from that of the host country - and the onus is on its competent authority to prove that it is.

“To the extent that a recognition decision is based on the knowledge and skills certified by the higher education qualification, each Party shall recognize the higher education qualifications conferred in another Party, unless a substantial difference can be shown between the qualification for which recognition is sought and the corresponding qualification in the Party in which recognition is sought.”

The Higher Education Law of 4 April 2003 confirms that the recognition of foreign higher education qualifications in Flanders follows the principles of the "Lisbon Recognition Convention" of 1997 laid down by the Council of Europe and UNESCO.

The Lisbon Recognition Convention was signed by Belgium on the 7th of March 2005.

On the 15th of December 2006 the Flemish Community has ratified the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

More information regarding the LRC is available at:

<http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/Commun/QueVoulezVous.asp?NT=165&CL=ENG>

3. Cycle descriptors

Flanders has introduced the Bachelor-Master structure for **all** the higher education programmes by the Law on Higher Education Reform of 4 April 2003.

The Flemish Ministry of Education and Training determined the level indicators and the award-type descriptors in the Law on Higher Education Reform of 4 April 2003. It is clear and demonstrable that the descriptors for higher education degrees in Flanders fit with the cycle qualification descriptors in the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area, because Flanders is using almost the same descriptors for qualifications in the Flemish Framework and the cycle descriptors of the Bologna Framework.

The Flemish Framework is required in law to be based on learning outcomes.

The use of ECTS was introduced by the Law on Higher Education Reform of 4 April 2003.

The following minimum study load was established:

- Bachelor's programme: 180 credits;
- Advanced Bachelor's programme: 60 credits (extra)
- Master's programme: 60 credits;
- Advanced Master's programme has minimum 60 credits (extra)

The Doctoral degree has no credit values assigned.

3.1. First cycle descriptors

3.1.1. Dublin descriptors – first cycle

- have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon their general secondary education, and is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study;
- can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional approach to their work or vocation, and have competences typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study;
- have the ability to gather and interpret relevant data (usually within their field of study) to inform judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues;
- can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences;
- have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy.

3.1.2. Bachelor level descriptors in Flanders

3.1.2.1. Bachelor's programmes with a professional orientation

Professional orientation implies that the programmes are aimed at (bringing students to) a level of general and specific knowledge and competences, based upon the application of scientific or artistic knowledge, creativity and practical knowledge.

More specifically, Bachelor's programmes with a professional orientation aim to bring students at the level of general and specific knowledge and competencies that are needed for the independent practice of a profession or a cluster of professions.

The specific level descriptors of Bachelor's programmes with a professional orientation are:

- general competences such as the capacity for logical thought and reasoning, the ability to acquire and process information, the ability for critical reflection and project-based work, creativity, the ability to perform simple supervision tasks, the ability to communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialists as well as laymen, and a positive attitude towards life-long learning;
- general professional competences like the ability to work together as part of a team, a solution-oriented attitude in the sense of being able to define and analyse independently complex problematic situations in professional practice, and the ability to develop and apply effective strategies to solve them, and to develop a sense of social responsibility in connection with the professional practice;
- specific professional competences at the level of a newly-qualified professional.

3.1.2.2. Bachelor's programmes with an academic orientation

Academic orientation implies that the programmes are aimed at (bringing the students to) a level of general knowledge and the acquirement of academic or artistic knowledge and competences, based upon the application of scientific or artistic knowledge, creativity and knowledge. Bachelor's programmes with an academic orientation are scientific research based.

More specifically, Bachelor's programmes with an academic orientation aim to bring students to the level of knowledge and competences that are needed for scientific or artistic functions in general and specifically, with as aim the access to the Master's programme.

The specific level descriptors of Bachelor's programmes with an academic orientation are:

- general competences such as the capacity for logical thought and reasoning, the ability to acquire and process information, the capacity for critical reflection, creativity, being able to perform simple management tasks, the ability to communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialists as well as laymen and a positive attitude towards life-long learning

- general academic competences such as a research attitude, knowledge of research methodologies and techniques and the ability to apply them adequately, the ability to collect the relevant data that can influence the formation of an opinion about social, scientific and ethical issues, appreciation of uncertainty, ambiguity and the limits of knowledge, and the ability to initiate problem-driven research
- an understanding of basic academic, discipline-related knowledge inherent to a certain domain of the sciences or the arts, systematic understanding of the key elements of a discipline which includes acquiring coherent and detailed knowledge that is inspired partly by the most recent developments in the discipline, and an understanding of the structure of the specialisation and its inter-relatedness with other specialities

3.1.2.3. advanced Bachelor's programmes

Advanced Bachelor's programmes are actually further studies and aim at deepening the knowledge and/or competences acquired in a professional Bachelor's programme.

3.2. Second cycle descriptors

3.2.1. Dublin descriptors – second cycle

- have demonstrated knowledge and understanding that is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with the first cycle, and that provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research context;
- can apply their knowledge and understanding, and problem solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts related to their field of study;
- have the ability to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgements with incomplete or limited information, but that include reflecting on social and ethical responsibilities linked to the application of their knowledge and judgements;
- can communicate their conclusions, and the knowledge and rationale underpinning these, to specialist and non-specialist audiences clearly and unambiguously;
- have the learning skills to allow them to continue to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous.

3.2.2. Master's level descriptors in Flanders

3.2.2.1. Master's programme

Master's programmes are aimed at bringing the students at the advanced level of knowledge and competences required for scientific or artistic work in general, and to a specific domain of sciences and arts in particular, which is required for autonomous scientific or artistic work or to apply this scientific or artistic knowledge independently in one or a group of professions.

The specific level descriptors of Master's programmes are:

- general competences at an advanced level such as the ability to reason and act in an academic manner, the ability to handle complex problems, the ability to reflect on one's own thoughts and work, and the ability to convert this reflection into the development of more effective solutions, the ability to communicate one's own research and solutions to professional colleagues and laymen, and the ability to develop an opinion in an uncertain context;
- general academic competences at an advanced level such as the ability to apply research methods and techniques, the ability to design research, the ability to apply paradigms in the domain of the sciences or the arts and the ability to indicate the limits of paradigms, originality and creativity regarding the continuously expanding body of knowledge and insight, and the ability to collaborate in a multidisciplinary environment
- advanced understanding and insight in scientific, discipline- specific knowledge inherent to a certain domain of the sciences or the arts, insight in the most recent knowledge in the subject/discipline or parts of it, the ability to follow and interpret the direction in which theory formation is developing, the ability to make an original contribution towards the body of knowledge of one or several parts of the subject/discipline, and display specific competences characteristic for the subject/discipline such as designing, researching, analysing and diagnosing;
- the competences needed for either independent research or the independent practice of the arts at the level of a newly-qualified researcher (in the arts), or the general and specific professional competences needed for independent application of academic or artistic knowledge at the level of a newly-qualified professional.

3.2.2.2. Advanced Master's programmes

Advanced Master's programmes are actually further studies and aim at deepening the knowledge and/or competences in a certain field of study.

The descriptors of the Master's programmes are equally valid for the Advanced Master's programmes.

3.3. Third cycle descriptors

3.3.1. Dublin descriptors – third cycle

- have demonstrated a systematic understanding of a field of study and mastery of the skills and methods of research associated with that field;
- have demonstrated the ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity;
- have made a contribution through original research that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work, some of which merits national or international refereed publication;
- are capable of critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new and complex ideas;
- can communicate with their peers, the larger scholarly community and with society in general about their areas of expertise;
- can be expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge based society;

3.3.2. Doctoral level descriptor in Flanders

The goal of the doctoral training through research is the training for an independent researcher who

- have demonstrated the ability to make a contribution to the development and the growth of knowledge body;
- have demonstrated the ability to produce new knowledge in a field of study or at the borders of different fields of study through independent research, including the fine arts and music.

The PhD thesis may result in national or international refereed publications.

4. European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning

As already mentioned the higher education institutions are responsible for developing the study programmes taking into account level descriptors and the relevant professional requirements.

As part of the External Quality Assessment procedure the experts define the academic reference points to which they evaluate and assess the quality of the study programme.

Following the Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning of 23 April 2008, Flanders is introducing a new Qualifications Structure.

This new structure will encompass the whole of education but it will not affect the cycle descriptors for higher education and keep the level indicators and the award-type descriptors of the higher education qualifications as it was stipulated in the Law on Higher Education Reform of 4 April 2003.

The new qualifications structure will however introduce subject descriptors, also in higher education. Each qualification in higher education will be linked to generic subject descriptors. These descriptors are comparable to the benchmark statements in the UK and will be developed and proposed by the higher education institutions through their representative organisations, VLIR and VLHORA.

The proposed subject descriptors will then be certified and validated by an international expert commission convened by NVAO.