



BELGIUM (FLEMISH COMMUNITY)

INFOPACK - RECOGNITION OF LEARNING PERIODS ABROAD IN GENERAL SECONDARY EDUCATION

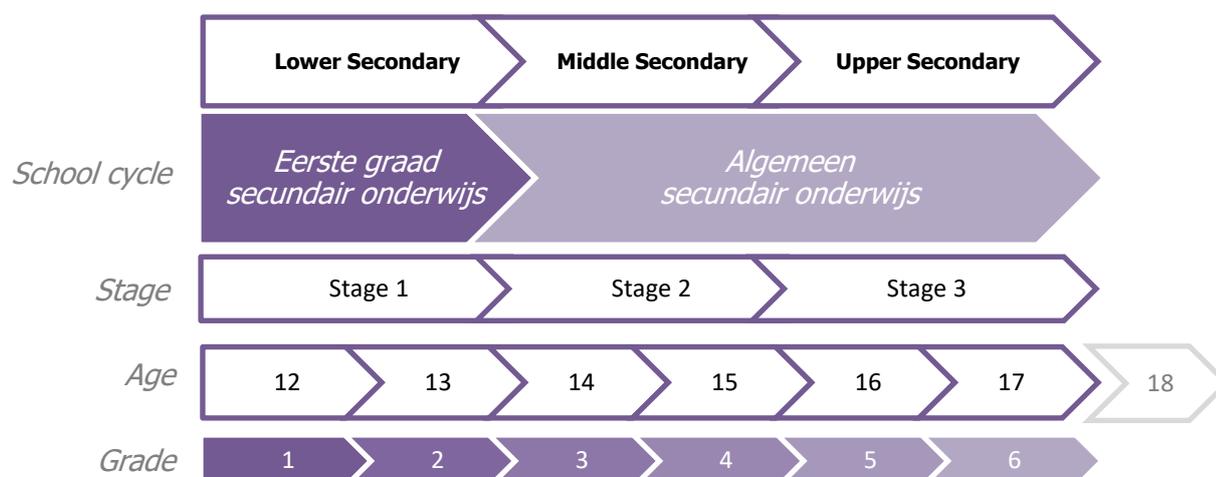
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The information below gives an overview of procedures¹ for the recognition of learning periods abroad in general secondary school. It can be consulted by pupils, as well as their families and teachers, who are or plan to be involved in long-term individual pupil mobility programmes abroad. Please note that this general overview does not include details on different programme types (which may be run by governmental agencies, civil society organisations, private companies or schools themselves) and such information can be obtained directly with the provider of the respective mobility programme.

¹ Based on data gathered in February 2021.

GENERAL SECONDARY SCHOOL SYSTEM



Education is compulsory until 18 years of age. Secondary school is a six-year cycle divided into three stages (*graad*) of two years each. General Secondary Education (gse) is offered in the 2nd and 3rd stage.

Within gse, there are different study options in each stage². All options share the same basic courses (e.g. Dutch mother tongue, history), with the same number of lessons per week. In addition to these basic courses, each option has specific subjects (e.g. more sciences and economics in the option Economics-Sciences or more Modern Languages and Latin in the option Latin-Modern Languages). At the end of each stage (*graad*), so after the 2nd, 4th and 6th grade, the school provides a certificate (*attest*) on the basis of the decision of the class council (*klassenraad*), which states the possibilities for the following grade, namely whether you can continue with the same studies, change option or not pass the year³.

At the end of the 3rd stage it is also possible for gse pupils to follow a 3rd year of school: universities offer a preparatory year for certain studies such as mathematics and arts (optional for pupils).

Graduation and Certification

At the end of the 6th grade, after having successfully completed the last two years of study (3rd stage) in the same type of education and option of studies, the *klassenraad* decides whether a pupil passes and is awarded an upper secondary education certificate (*Certificat d'Enseignement Secondaire Supérieur (CESS)/ Diploma van Secundair Onderwijs*), which is issued by the school⁴.

² See the list of options in Dutch here at Onderwijskiezer – Education selector https://www.onderwijskiezer.be/v2/secundair/sec_3graad_aso.php

³ *A-attest* means that pupils can continue in the same option or that they can choose another option for the next grade (the *klassenraad* might give advice, but this is not binding), *B-attest* means the options are limited and it is binding. *C-attest* means that pupils have to repeat the year. The *klassenraad* can advise to repeat the year following the same option or to change to a different one.

⁴ Eurydice, National Education systems, Belgium Flemish Community, Secondary and Post-Secondary Non-Tertiary Education https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/secondary-and-post-secondary-non-tertiary-education-3_en

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The upper secondary education certificate (CESS) provides access to higher education, although for some studies there is an entrance exam.

For more information on the structure and features of the different national education systems in Europe please see the Eurydice overview: National Education Systems | Eurydice (europa.eu).

INFORMATION FOR PUPILS GOING ABROAD FROM BELGIUM (FLEMISH COMMUNITY)

Age and grade

Legally, it is possible for pupils to go abroad in the 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th year of upper secondary school. However, as the learning period abroad is generally not recognised, traditionally, pupils went abroad on a full school year exchange programme after their secondary education, repeating the final year of their studies abroad, and taking a gap year before enrolling in university or entering the labour market. However, in many countries it is not possible to be hosted with peers at the age of 18, as schools do not accept exchange pupils in the final grade(s).

The general trend now is for pupils in the 4th or 5th year to go abroad for a trimester, or a semester, as this allows enough time to catch up to be able to pass the yearly exams in June.

Registration in the sending school

You need to be enrolled in your school in Belgium if you go to an exchange, as this is required for the financial allowance parents receive from the government for your education.

Schools have discretion to set their own rules regarding your enrolment in a long-term exchange and its duration, as there is no general guideline. Some schools only allow trimester exchanges. For some schools, you cannot go on exchange during the first year of a stage (so in 3rd or 5th year) since this is when you chose a new option of studies. Other schools might argue that they do not want pupils to go away in the 4th or 6th year since these are crucial years in which certificates (*attests*) are awarded.

The *klassenraad* and/or the school principal advise whether you can go abroad, based on school performance and their knowledge of you. Permission is essential if you want to enrol in the same school on your return: some pupil exchange organisations require that the school principal and your family sign a contract stating that you will be re-admitted to the same school.

Funding for the sending school

Every school receives funding for the following year on the basis of the number of pupils present on 1 February. Therefore, since pupils on exchange are often not present in the sending school on that date, the school might lose its funding if there are checks⁵.

⁵E. Briga, 'Recognition of school study periods abroad in Europe: An overview and policy recommendations. European Federation for Intercultural Learning', EFIL, Brussels, 2018.

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RECOGNITION OF LEARNING PERIODS ABROAD

The following information addresses learning periods abroad lasting either up to 6 months, or a full school year. According to the analysis conducted, there is no information available on recognition procedures accessible for pupils spending a period abroad of more than 6 months and shorter than a full school year. In fact, mobility programmes foreseeing these timings and durations are not usually offered.

The same procedures are applied, irrespective of which country the learning period is spent in (EU or non-EU).

Please note that in the case of a mobility within a school-to-school partnership⁶ (e.g. Erasmus+) the learning agreement between sending and host school can be used as a tool for recognition for periods abroad of any duration, although there is no evidence that it can be successful for the recognition of a full school year abroad.

In Belgium (NL) there is no official recognition of learning periods abroad, and the class council decides on the conditions under which pupils will be re-admitted.

There are significant differences between schools: some recognise what pupils have learnt abroad, while others might ask the pupil to take some (or all) exams that were foreseen in the home school. Some schools require that pupils commit to following (remotely) additional courses/tasks provided by their home school and offer to access an online learning platform while on exchange, where teachers upload materials of classes and information. Some schools integrate the exchange into a subject (e.g. foreign language) and the pupils need to provide a presentation for their school and fellow classmates, to share how the exchange affected their career. However, this only replaces one of the many exams/evaluations during the year in the given subject.

In order for the school to be able to assure that the attainment targets are met by the pupil, a binding written agreement can be drafted before departure between the pupil, parents and school. Some pupil exchange organisations make it a condition that such an agreement is signed.

The contract is concluded at the end of the previous school year for exchanges starting in September, and includes information on how the attainment targets will be achieved, how these will be assessed and how the re-integration will be organised with regards to the content of the different courses: what exams the pupil needs to take, what content the pupil will need to catch up on, what help the pupil will get from teachers.

As pupils need to take exams in December and June and the procedure for recognition of credits varies from school to school, the contract is essential for exchanges of any duration.

Periods of between 2 and 6 months

Usually, if you go abroad for a trimester or semester, you are re-admitted to your class upon return given that you were enrolled in your home school as a regular pupil before departure. The class

⁶ within a school-to-school partnership, learning outcomes are usually recognised based on a learning agreement developed between the schools concerned.

council has the right to make this decision⁷. The class council might ask for a school attendance certificate from the host school.

If you have been on a trimester or a semester abroad and you come back by April, you will need to pass the final exams in June to be admitted to the next grade. If you are abroad during the second semester, the school could decide to organise exams for you in August.

Should you fail exams at the end of 6th grade, your home school might allow you to sit exams again in August.

A full school year

If you intend to go abroad for a full school year, you have the possibility, through the binding agreement you sign with the school prior to departure, to sit exams in June or August, or to fulfil assignments provided by the school accordingly. An additional class council meeting (*toelatingsklassenraad*: admittance class council) takes place in August or at the beginning of September to decide whether you can move on to next grade.

Possibility to take an exam on the whole curriculum to be admitted to the next school year

If you go abroad for a full school year during the last grade and you do not sign a contract with the school before departure, you might decide to take your final exams at the Exam Committee⁸ instead of repeating a year. These exams are based on the content of the whole 2nd or 3rd stage depending on when you were abroad, which means that even if you have passed the 3rd or 5th grade, you will still have to do exams about this content as well.

INFORMATION FOR PUPILS HOSTED IN BELGIUM (FLEMISH COMMUNITY)

Registration in the host school

You are usually placed in classes based on your age and interests for specific subjects or courses. Formally, you must be allowed in a certain year by a *toelatingsklassenraad* (class council of admittance) since you do not need a certificate from a Flemish school to be admitted to the next year. You can also be placed in the 6th grade. Host schools have two options for enrolling foreign pupils:

- 1) enrolling the exchange pupil as an 'extra' pupil (*vrije leerling*), in which case their curriculum can be adapted and they do not need to sit exams;
- 2) enrolling the exchange pupil as a regular pupil, in which case they must follow all courses, sit all exams and no special curriculum is foreseen. In this case, the host school receives funding for

⁷ Legal competences of director and Klassenraad Legal basis: articles 8 and 9 of this circular note omzendbrief SO 64 van 25/06/1999 (vlaanderen.be) which is based on 2 decisions of the Flemish government with themselves list the decree (legal) basis: Besluit van de Vlaamse Regering houdende de codificatie betreffende het secundair onderwijs [citeeropschrift: "Codex Secundair Onderwijs"] (vlaanderen.be)

Besluit van de Vlaamse regering betreffende de organisatie van het voltijds secundair onderwijs. (vlaanderen.be)

⁸ The Exam Committee allows a secondary school certificate to be issued by studying independently and without attending school: <https://examencommissiesecundaironderwijs.be/>

the hosted pupils. In some cases, the sending school/government requests the exchange pupil to be enrolled as a regular pupil because the pupil needs a transcript of marks and credits (e.g. to justify scholarships given for the exchange or for the recognition of the learning period abroad). If that is the case, pupils need to notify the host school before/upon arrival in Flanders.

In the past, the majority of pupils were enrolled as *vrije leerling*, however, the trend now is changing and more and more schools opt for the second possibility because of the funding that comes with your enrolment.

Some hosting schools have put exchange pupils in classes dedicated to non-Dutch-speaking newcomers⁹, which are usually meant for asylum seekers. However, this is generally not recommended because exchange pupils are not aiming to integrate in the Flemish education system to get a certificate, and therefore the purpose of their stay is completely different.

Funding for the host school

Funding for the host school is based on the number of 'regular' pupils enrolled. Therefore, the school does not receive any funding for 'free' hosted pupils, but if hosted pupils are enrolled as regular pupils on 1st February of the ongoing school year, the host school will receive funding.

Certification for hosted pupils

If you are enrolled as 'extra' pupil (*vrije leerling*)¹⁰, you can receive a document listing the subjects you took and the corresponding marks, but since this is not a certificate, it has no legal value for continuing education in Flanders.

If you enrolled as a regular pupil, you will need to sit all the exams after which the host school can provide a summary of your results and an overview of the subjects you have studied while in Flanders. At the end of the school year you will receive a C-attest, however this does not mean that you cannot continue in the next grade in your home school, as recognition of the learning period abroad depends on the documents required in the your home country.

In both cases, you can get a letter proving school attendance and some general comments on your behaviour and attitude at school.

Possibility of graduating in the host country during the exchange

In order to continue your studies in Belgium (NL), you need to be enrolled as a regular pupil during your mobility, and to receive an A-certificate at the end of the school year. If you are enrolled in a Flemish school in the 6th year, you are allowed to take the final exam and receive the certificate, however this is a rare practice.

⁹ Secondary education also comprises a reception year for non-Dutch-speaking newcomers (Onthaalklas voor Anderstalige nieuwkomers – OKAN). This year focuses primarily on the acquisition of the Dutch language to prepare non-Dutch speakers who arrive in Belgium (NL) before moving on to regular education.

¹⁰ Legal basis: omzendbrief SO 64 van 25/06/1999 (vlaanderen.be), art 3.11

TESTIMONIAL

Eleonora from Belgium-NL: 3 months to Italy

"This experience really expanded my horizons."

My motivation to go abroad was to learn a new language and to become more independent. It was harder than I had imagined to be away from home, even though the culture was not really new to me and I already spoke the language.

The best thing I took away from the experience was being accepted into a new family, including by the grandparents. Even today, 3 years later, I remain in contact with the family.

Recognition worked different than expected

Before I left for Italy, the school told me that I probably would not need to do the exams, which felt like a relief for me. When I came back, however, I was told to take the exams, which was a bit unpleasant, as I had to study the new learning contents on my own.

I highly recommend a stay abroad: it really helps to grow as a person and to be open to new experiences! In addition, you get the chance to build a close connection to a new family in your host country, as was the case for me.

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