

## *TNP3 / SUBPROJECT 2: Languages for enhanced opportunities on the European labour market*

### *NATIONAL REPORT ON BELGIUM*

*Limburgs Universitair Centrum*

*Updated: Universiteit Hasselt, 13.03.2007*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Belgium is located in the heart of Northern Europe and has **10.309.725 inhabitants**<sup>1</sup> and a total surface area of **32.545 km<sup>2</sup>**. Founded in 1831, Belgium is a constitutional, hereditary monarchy.

Today Belgium is a true federal state, reorganized into three Regions: Flanders (13.522 km<sup>2</sup>, 5.972.781 inhabitants), Wallonia (16.844 km<sup>2</sup>, 3.358.560 inhabitants) and the Brussels Capital Region (161,4 km<sup>2</sup>, 978.384 inhabitants) and three Communities (French, Dutch and German speaking population) each with their own legislative and executive competences. The regions are competent for all territory-linked matters (economy, environment, ...), whereas the communities are responsible for all person-linked matters (education, culture, ...). The Flemish region and Dutch-speaking community have formed one government: the Flemish government (residence in Brussels). The other regions and communities, have separate governments. As a result of this, Belgium counts 6 governments (federal state, region of Brussels and of Wallonia, French-speaking and German-speaking communities and the Flemish government).

The actual population growth rate is 0.16% with a birth rate of 10.59 births/1,000 population and the net migration rate amounts to 1.23 migrant(s)/1,000 population. For males life expectancy at birth is 75.42 years, whereas for female it is 81.67 years (2004 est.).

## **2 ECONOMY - EMPLOYMENT**

### **2.1 GENERAL INFORMATION**

Belgium may only represent 1 % of the total surface of the European Union<sup>2</sup> and 2.7 % of the European population; the economic position of Belgium in the EU is nevertheless a lot more significant. In 2000 the Belgian Gross Domestic Product (GDP) mounted up to 247 billion euros, or 2.9 % of the total GDP of the European Union. Therefore, we can say that the productivity in Belgium is a lot higher than in Europe and as a consequence that the material prosperity reaches a level higher than average. In 2000, for example, the wages per employee resulted to be almost 20 % higher than the average of the EU.

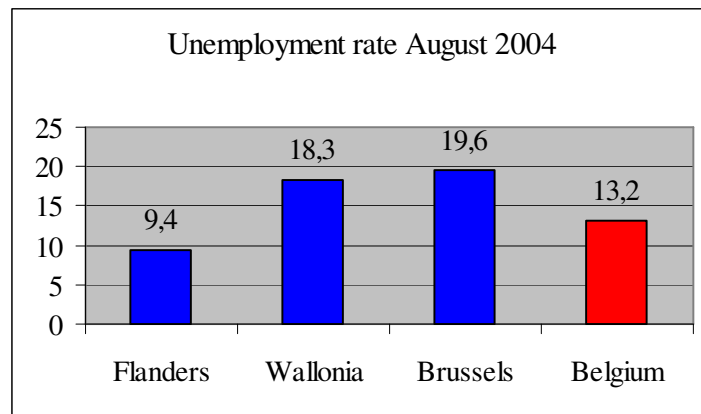
---

<sup>1</sup> 1st January 2001

<sup>2</sup> 1st May 2004

Indicators	2003	2004 (e)
Growth of the economy	+1,3%	+2,7%
Investments of companies	-2,3%	+3,5%
Investments of the state	+1,0%	+6,6%
Export	+1,7%	+3,8%
Import	+2,3%	+4,4%
<b>Inflation</b>	<b>+1,6 %</b>	<b>+2,1 %</b>

The last ten years Belgium has known on average an economic growth of 2.1 % whereas this growth only reached 2.0 % in the EU. During this same period, the prices only have increased moderately: the average inflation was 1.9 %; the inflation in the whole EU however was 2.8 %. Moreover Belgium has a surplus on the current account since 1985: this amounted to 3.5 % of the GDP in 2000. Concerning the government funds - on the other hand -, Belgium isn't such a model student: it has a high, yet decreasing, public debt/GDP (110.6 % in 2000) and just as the majority of the European countries, it has a high unemployment rate (13.2 % of the working population was unemployed in August 2004).



Furthermore a remarkably different unemployment rate is found in the three regions. In Flanders 9,4 % of the active population is unemployed whereas this rate amounts to 18,3 % in Wallonia - almost the double of Flanders - and in Brussels it is even higher: 19,6 %. We can also note an important difference in genders: 10,9 % of the male and 16,1 % of the female working population is unemployed.

## 2.2 AGRICULTURE-INDUSTRY

Belgium's economy is reliant on services, transport, trade and industry. The production of steel, chemicals, and cement is concentrated in the Sambre and Meuse valleys, in the Borinage around Mons, Charleroi, Namur, and Liège, and in the Campine basin. Liège is a major steel centre. A well-established metal-products industry manufactures bridges, heavy machinery, industrial and surgical equipment, motor vehicles, rolling stock, machine tools, and munitions. Chemical products include fertilizers, dyes,

pharmaceuticals, and plastics; the petrochemical industry is concentrated near the oil refineries of Antwerp.

Textile production, including cotton, linen, wool, and synthetic fibres; carpets and blankets were important manufactures (Ghent, Kortrijk, Tournai, and Verviers were all textile centres). Nowadays the location of this endangered industry is restricted to South-West Flanders. Other industries include diamond cutting (Antwerp is an important diamond centre) and glass production. Over 75% of Belgium's electricity is produced by nuclear power. Recently, one can see important delocalisation of industrial activities to low salary countries (South-West Asia, Eastern Europe).

Belgium has much fertile and well-watered soil, although agriculture engages only a small percentage of the workforce and of GDP (in Flanders only 3 % of GRP). The chief crops are wheat, oats, rye, barley, sugar beets, potatoes, and flax. Cattle and pig raising as well as dairying (especially in Flanders) are also important. Processed foods include beet sugar, cheese, and other dairy items; beer and other beverages are manufactured.

### **2.3 SERVICES**

Services are of vital importance for the Belgian economy. In fact, the country's tertiary sector supplies around two thirds of jobs and of gross value added. Services also make a substantial contribution to the Belgian exports.

The importance of services in Belgium comes as no surprise, given the characteristic features of the Belgian economy. Its size, its geographical location in the very heart of Europe, its comprehensive infrastructure and the development of its industry account for the fact that trade and transport are key areas in Belgium.

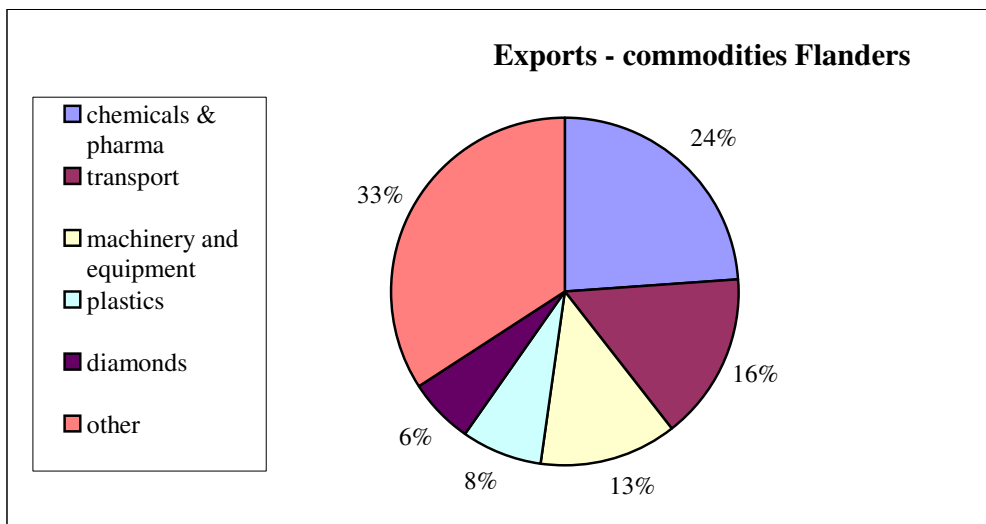
Historically, the development of banking and insurance activity has always been closely linked with commercial activity. Lastly, the high level of education and training in Belgium means that its citizens provide a pool of skilled labour geared to the needs of the most highly sophisticated tertiary activities, which employ large numbers of clerical staff, executives and graduates in general.

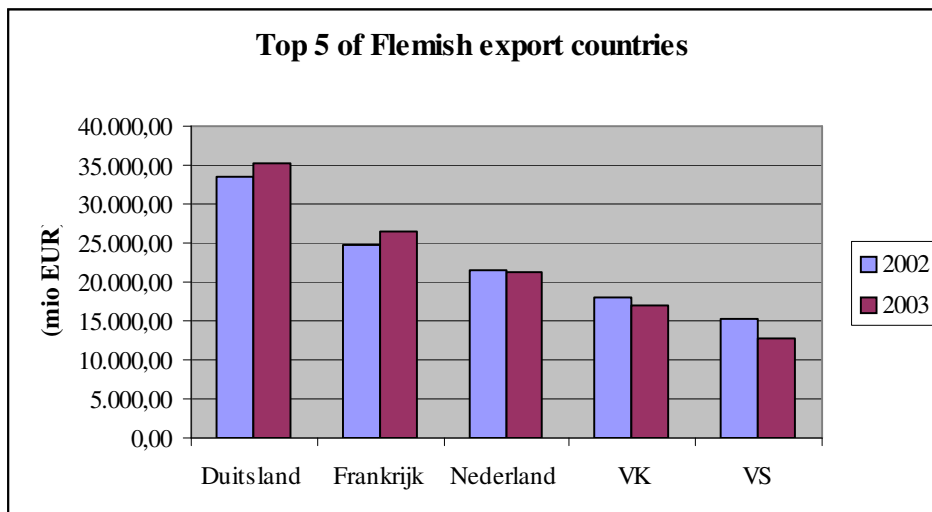
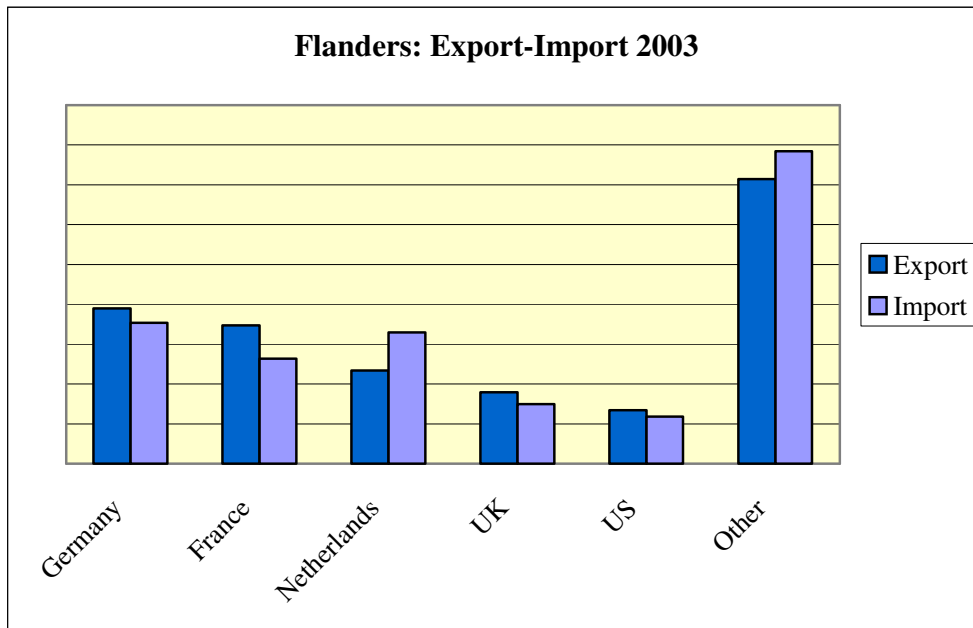
To speak of international services in Belgium is to refer more specifically to two cities, two major centres of activity. First and foremost of course there is Brussels, the country's capital but also the headquarters of the European Union (European Commission, European Parliament, Council of Ministers) and of number of other important international organisations such as NATO.

Then there is Antwerp, Belgium's second city, but perhaps even more importantly the world's third biggest port and hence a commercial centre in the finest tradition.

## 2.4 IMPORT-EXPORT

Belgium has a very open economy: in 1999, 76.5 % of Belgium's GDP (and 85% of Flanders GRP or Gross Regional Product) is derived from export of goods and services and almost 73 % from import. For comparison, the European average comes to 32.2 % (export) and 31 % (import). The total value of export in 1999 mounted to 186,7 billion euros. Although the share of services in the trade relations increases quickly, 70 % of Belgian imports and exports still exist of goods. This trade is very Europe-oriented. Roughly half of the export of goods is exported to neighbouring countries (Germany, France, the Netherlands ...). The same pattern can be observed for the import. This reflects the important role of Belgium as a transit and distribution centre for other European Union member countries. For this reason in particular, the country has attracted a large number of foreign businesses, which makes a significant contribution to the country's economic prosperity, as, moreover, do the 1,200 international organizations which have set up their headquarters in Belgium.

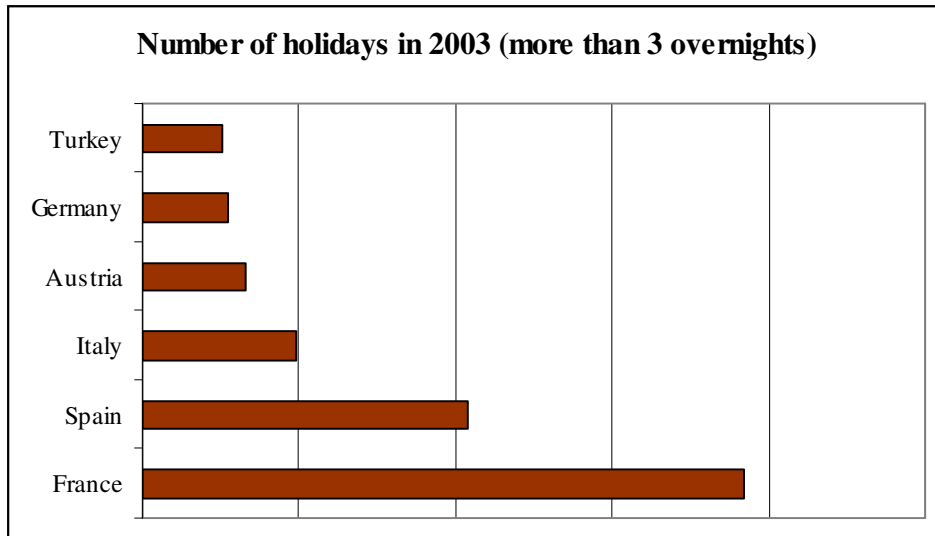




## 2.5 TOURISM IN BELGIUM

### 2.5.1 THE OUTGOING TOURISM

In 2003, almost 6,000 families participated in the annual inquiry of the NIS (National Institute for Statistics) on the holiday habits of the Belgian people. This inquiry reveals that the top 3 of most popular holiday destinations remains unchanged: it concerns France, Spain and Italy. Nevertheless new important destinations such as Egypt (108.000 journeys) and Tunisia (113,000 trips) appear on the foreground.



### 2.5.2 THE INCOMING TOURISME

Due to the high economic prosperity and increasing leisure time, the tourist sector is becoming of increasing importance for the Belgian economy. The main tourist centres are the Belgian coast, the historical/cultural cities (Brussels, Antwerp, Ghent, Bruges ...) and the “nature tourism” with e.g. the Ardennes and the province Limburg.

In 2003 the NIS registered 29.01 million overnights. The total amount of overnights remained the same for our important markets (Belgium, the Netherlands, United Kingdom, Germany and France). Yet, changes between themselves can be noticed and the number of overnights of Dutchmen (+ 4.5 %) and Frenchmen (+ 5 %) increased whereas those of the British and Germans decreased (- 5 %).

#### **Top-10 of overnights in 2003**

<b>Country of origin</b>	<b>Total overnights in 2003 (in million)</b>
Belgium	13,089
the Netherlands	5,246
United Kingdom	2,509
Germany	2,119
France	1,786
USA	0,606
Italy	0,489
Spain	0,417
Japan	0,221
G-D of Luxemburg	0,185

### **2.6 INFRASTRUCTURE**

**Roads:** the main European highways cross Belgium. Until now, highways are toll free.

**Railways:** the densest network on the continent and an important development of high-speed trains (HST).

- The Eurostar from Brussels to London via Lille and the Channel Tunnel.
- Thalys between Brussels, Paris, Amsterdam, to Aix-la-Chapelle and Cologne.
- French TGVs provide direct connections to various cities in the south of France.

**Seaports:** Antwerp, Zeebrugge, Ghent, Brussels, Ostend and Liège, the biggest port concentration in Europe.

**Air links:** Brussels National Airport (Zaventem) and several regional airports like Liège Airport, Brussels South Charleroi Airport, Ostend and Antwerp, even Eindhoven (NL) and Maastricht-Aken (NL), Düsseldorf (DE) and Cologne-Bonn (DE).

Industrial centres are linked with each other and with the main ports of Antwerp and Ghent by the Meuse and Scheldt rivers and their tributaries, by a network of canals (notably the Albert Canal), and by a dense rail network.

### **3. NEW LINGUISTIC DEMANDS IN THE PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SECTORS RESULTING FROM EUROPEAN INTEGRATION AND GLOBALISATION: LANGUAGES AND SKILLS/ COMPETENCES**

#### **3.1 IMPORTANCE OF KNOWLEDGE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES**

##### 3.1.1 FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN BUSINESS LIFE

In Belgium, as well in Flanders as in Wallonia, contacts with respectively non-Dutch/non-French speaking partners (foreign or non-foreign) are of vital importance for the business world. We can say this on the basis of several theses, in which a specific study of the situation was made in Limburg, Flemish Brabant (will be handled first) and Liège (Wallonia).

Almost all companies have contacts in foreign languages: 70,8 % of the companies in Limburg, at least once a week, in Flemish Brabant even 98 %; in Limburg 54,6 % at least once a day, in Flemish Brabant, this result was even higher: 73,5 %. As a positive -logical- result, three quarters of the companies realize a part of their turnover in non-Dutch speaking regions/countries: 20,8 % of the Limburg companies and 34,3 % of the Flemish Brabant companies make up the greater part of their turnover there.

In Limburg more than 7 out of 10 companies have business relations with French-speaking partners; in Flemish Brabant this even adds up to 86,2 %. For German-speaking partners this is respectively more than 38 % and 31,3 %, for English-speaking 30 % in Limburg and 33,3 % in Flemish Brabant.

About 15 % of the companies did admit that they have lost orders due to a lack of knowledge of foreign language (mostly French or German), almost 20 % say that - because of the same reason- contacts have been severed (also here mainly due to poor knowledge of French or German). On the other hand, 60,4 % of the companies in Limburg confirm that knowledge of foreign languages is seen as a trump card in negotiations.

In Flemish Brabant, the study also inquired into the point of view of small and medium-sized companies on the importance of foreign languages in the (near) future. Almost all companies (90,2 %) are of the opinion that the importance of French will increase, 78,4 % predict the same for English and 60,78 % for German (and 37,25 % thought that this will be the case for other languages). Thus, we can say that the conviction that knowledge of foreign languages is of vital importance, still gains ground in the business world.

The majority (53,9%) of the enquired small and medium-sized enterprises in Liège has at least once per week contact in other languages. Even 26% says to have more than once a day such a contact. On average, we can say that 31,7 of the turnover is being made in non-French speaking regions. The ranking concerning the turnover in non-French speaking regions is: Dutch (71,2%) > German (42,3%) > English (30,8%). This order we



also see concerning subcontracting of translations (Dutch: 16,3%; German: 10,6%; English: 4,8%). Besides the needs of knowledge of the national languages (French, Dutch, German) and English, different research studies revealed a small but increasing need of knowledge of Italian and Spanish (1-3 %).

### 3.1.2 FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN TOURIST SECTOR

In the tourist sector we also can say that there is an urgent need for knowledge of foreign languages: a survey of the tourist sector in Limburg estimates that 95 % of all hotel clients aren't Dutch-speaking. French is the most frequently used language, followed by German and English. There are also visitors -to a lesser degree- from Italy, Spanish-speaking countries, Poland and Japan.

From the information given on organised visits in tourist centres of Limburg, we can see that 21,6% of all visitors are non-Dutch speakers. From these results we also conclude that French is the most used language (69,7%) of all foreign languages, followed by German (28,1%) and English (11,2%).

For outbound tourism too, knowledge of foreign languages is of vital importance. Guides, coach drivers and employees of travel agencies, coach companies, ... need a minimum knowledge of -mainly- French, German and English. But it is also recommended for drivers to learn certain expressions in the language of other countries of destination. In all cases, foreign languages are almost always used orally, rarely written.

An enquiry of the STC, observatory organisation of the labour market in Limburg, also had as result that there is an urgent need for knowledge of foreign languages. Based on these findings, languages courses have been set up in several towns for personnel of tourist information offices. The languages, which were taught, are French and German.

### 3.1.3 FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN FINDING A JOB/GETTING A PROMOTION

When applying for a job, it is quite frequent that knowledge of foreign languages is required: up to 58,6 % of job ads ask for this. Quite often an explicit language test is foreseen in the tests: one out of four in Limburg, and in 36,3 % of the vacancies in Flemish Brabant. This is mostly the case for French, to a lesser degree for English and German.

Three quarters of the interviewees experience their knowledge of foreign languages explicitly as a trump card to get ahead in their career. More than 35 % in Limburg and even 78 % in Flemish Brabant considered it as one of the factors influencing their promotion prospects.

According to the majority (51,9%) of the enquired companies in Liège, much importance is attached to knowledge of foreign languages during an interview. In spite of the importance given to this knowledge, only 32,7% of the enquired were really tested on it.

And in case that a test was taken, it was mostly for Dutch (irrespective of the type of test) and in second and third place, English and German (whereas in actual practice, the order is French > German > English). When orders were refused, it was in 16,3% of the cases for Dutch and rarely for German (1%) or English (1%).

### 3.1.4 FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN LEISURE

Knowing that the majority of the Belgian population chooses non-Dutch speaking countries, such as France, Spain and Italy as their favourite holiday destination, one can say that also for leisure time, it is for Belgians very important to master a/several foreign language/s. (see 2.5.1)

A lot of Belgian towns have twinning partners abroad (Germany, France, Romania, Poland, Italy, etc.). Through these partnerships, the inhabitants of the towns have contacts with German, French, English, etc. speaking persons from a sister city. School and youth exchanges, cultural, social and business visits and conferences are some of the activities organised within these relations. This encourages of course to learn the language of the partner town and to understand its culture.

## **3.2 LANGUAGE POLICY OF THE FLEMISH EDUCATION DEPARTMENT**

The excellent knowledge of foreign languages of the Flemings, is being indicated as one of the major reasons of the success of the Flemish export. It is alleged often that Flemish university graduates can speak and read Dutch, English, French and German or an other foreign language ...

### 3.2.1 PRIMARY SCHOOLS (6-12)

Since many years French has become in Flanders a compulsory subject in the last two years of primary school; in the Flemish schools in Brussels, it is even obligatory from the third year on. The schools even can offer initiation lessons French from the pre-school kindergarten (but are not obliged to do so).

It is also possible for schools to organize initiation lessons for other languages, such as German, English, Turkish and Arab, depending on the regional differences.

### 3.2.2 SECONDARY EDUCATION (12-18)

On this moment, all pupils of the general education have at least two foreign languages as a part of the teaching package: French and English; for some options this offer is extended to a third foreign language (German, Spanish or Italian). In the technical, arts and vocational schools this situation is often quite different. In the technical and arts options, in most cases, two foreign languages are being taught (French and English); in the last two years, one of these is being dropped, depending on the option. In the vocational education options all pupils have one foreign language -French- but only

during the first two years; in the following four years, hardly any foreign language is included in the teaching package.

### 3.2.3 UNIVERSITY (18-...)

A foreign language can be used in bachelors and masters when that language is the subject of the study, when non-Dutch speaking guest professors give a lecture or when students follow a training in a foreign language at a foreign university or high school, this in agreement with the own institution. With this regulation, Chinese can be taught in the Sinology department, international professors can give lectures in Flanders and students can participate in exchange programs.

It happens rarely that a foreign language is taught in a non-language study and if this is the case, it will only be small part of the total learning package. During the studies of industrial engineer or graduate, for example, only 1,25 to 6,5 % of the classes are languages courses and it concerns almost always English, restricted to technical jargon.

### 3.2.4 LIFELONG LEARNING

A study of the University of Antwerp shows us that 250,000 Fleming's, older than 18 learn a new language or try to improve one they already know. Not less than 41 percent, that are 100,000 Fleming's, do this through home study and even 64 % follow a language course, mainly after work, in the evening. The most popular languages are Spanish (46 %), French and Italian (both 26 %) (See 3.1.3). But also German (24 %) and English (19 %) are frequently learnt languages. A quarter of the interviewed would even like to study a less widely-used language: Russian (3,5 %), Portuguese (3,5 %), Arab (2,6 %) or Swedish (2,4 %).

### 3.2.5 RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

#### *3.2.5.1 General measures and intentions*

The Walloon government launched his Marshall-plan on 30<sup>th</sup> August 2005 with as one of the actions "Lancer un plan langues". This ambitious project of economic revival sees as one of the levers for the realisation of this plan the learning of foreign languages. See [http://gov.wallonie.be/code/fr/action\\_prio.pdf](http://gov.wallonie.be/code/fr/action_prio.pdf)

In September 2006, the Flemish Minister of Education and Employment has presented his language policy "De lat hoog voor talen in iedere school". He stresses the importance of foreign languages for Flanders and allows experiences with CLIL and foreign language initiation even in kindergarten.  
([www.ond.vlaanderen.be/beleid/nota/talenbeleid.htm](http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/beleid/nota/talenbeleid.htm))

The board of the Euregion Meuse-Rhine (Provinces of Limburg in Belgium and in the Netherlands, Province of Liège in Belgium, region of Aachen in Germany), after a euregional language congress (30.11.2005), adopted a resolution "Versterking van de

meertaligheid in de euregio Maas-Rijn” (Strengthening the multilinguism in the Euregion Meuse-Rhine) in an attempt to intensify job mobility in the Euregion. An action plan will be elaborated in 2007.

### **3.2.5.2 A CASE: FOREIGN LANGUAGES AT HASSELT UNIVERSITY**

The situation at Hasselt University can be considered as an example of the situation in Flemish universities.

First of all, languages, if offered, are mostly taught outside the faculties in language centres. Their staff does not have the same academic recognition as the normal university staff: they only teach and do not have facilities to do research. Also the weight of foreign languages in the students’ evaluation is mostly less important than it is for other disciplines.

Languages are absent in the curricula of “sciences”, hardly present in the programs of humanities, except linguistics and literature. Faculties with traditionally a relatively important place for foreign languages are law and business.

Under the pressure of the current internationalisation and globalisation currents however, we see an increasing interest for foreign languages teaching. But this positive evolution on the one hand is counterbalanced by an exponentially increased importance attached to research activities of the academic staff leading to less space for foreign languages in the curricula and to less time for foreign languages teaching by the staff.

So we see various efforts to convert the personnel intensive foreign languages courses into semi-autonomous learning pathways. But therefore adequate learning material is necessary but rarely at the disposal of foreign language classes.

Because of all this, the foreign language teaching at the Business Faculty of the Hasselt University has been completely rethought and consequently renewed since 2005 - 2006. In the first place, students have mostly (depending on their specialism) three compulsory foreign languages: English, French and a third foreign language (Spanish, German, Italian or Turkish). The latest as part of a program to give migrant children more chances to succeed their university studies.

But where in the past, students had foreign languages during their complete study career, they now only have foreign languages in the bachelor years as follows:

BA1	2x3 ECTS	(languages A + B)
BA2	2x3 ECTS	(languages A + C)
BA3	2x3 ECTS	(languages B + C)

Introducing blended learning in a semi-autonomous organisation, students have three types of activities:

- self study with ICT-means for language basic elements (vocabulary, grammar)
- question-answer sessions in groups of 80 - 100 students after specific self study tasks

- workshops in groups of 20 - 30 persons for activities with immediate feedback (role plays, simulation).

### **3.4 RECOMMENDATIONS**

In order to improve the employment chances of pupils for the technical, arts education but particularly for the options of the vocational schools, and their chances in universities it is essential to make permanent or even to extend the offer of modern foreign languages.

## Sources

- LE VIF/L'EXPRESS 24/9/2004 p 24
- Heeren J., Milis K., Staten-Generaal van de Limburgse Economie en Werkgelegenheid, Heverlee-Leuven, Uitgeverij LannooCampus, 473 p.
- Morreale V., Vreemde-taalbehoeften in Luikse bedrijven, Diepenbeek, L.U.C., 2004, 136 p.
- Putzeys D., Taalvormingsbehoeften in Limburgse bedrijven, Diepenbeek, L.U.C., 2003, 137 p.
- Uit "Landeninformatie Frankrijk" van Export Vlaanderen 15.10.2002 and the website of BDBH okt. 2002.
- Clijsters W., Jedwab C. eds, Taal en Werk, Symposiumboek van de studiedag van 21 oktober 2001, Diepenbeek, L.U.C., Brussel, VDAB, 2002, 152 p.
- Gielis T., Vreemde-talenbehoeften in Limburgse K.M.O.'s, Diepenbeek, L.U.C., 2000, 173 p.
- Bikkembergs V., Vreemde talen in de toeristische sector, Diepenbeek, L.U.C., 1999, 68 p.
- Klasse voor Leerkrachten 88, oktober 1998, p. 38-39
- Verstraten J., Vreemde-talenbehoeften van recent afgestudeerde EHL-studenten, Diepenbeek, L.U.C., 1994, 95 p.
- Clijsters W., Verjans M., e.a., Linguaplan Limburg fase 1: Rapport van de regionale audit Limburg, Diepenbeek, L.U.C., 1993, 96 p.
- Alaerts K., Vreemde-talenbehoeften in Vlaams-Brabantse KMO's, Diepenbeek, L.U.C., 1992, 138 p.
  
- [http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/nieuws/2004pers/0211\\_meer\\_taal.htm](http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/nieuws/2004pers/0211_meer_taal.htm)
- <http://www.export.vlaanderen.be/servlet/genweb.servlet.MainServlet?toDo=open&id=8>
- [http://statbel.fgov.be/figures/d40\\_nl.asp#1](http://statbel.fgov.be/figures/d40_nl.asp#1)
- <http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/world/A0856897.html>
- [http://www.madeinbelgium.be/7\\_about\\_be\\_central.htm](http://www.madeinbelgium.be/7_about_be_central.htm)
- <http://www.belgium.be>
- [http://www.statbel.fgov.be/press/pr081\\_nl.asp](http://www.statbel.fgov.be/press/pr081_nl.asp)
- [http://gov.wallonie.be/code/fr/action\\_prio.pdf](http://gov.wallonie.be/code/fr/action_prio.pdf)
- <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/beleid/nota/talenbeleid.htm>