

spotlight on VET

BELGIUM

VET in Belgium (BE-DE)

Citizens can access three different vocational education and training (VET) systems in Belgium: Flemish (BE-FL), French-speaking (BE-FR) and German-speaking (BE-DE). In the BE-DE system, the German-speaking Community is in charge of education, training, and employment.

Formal VET is offered at upper secondary, post-secondary and tertiary levels. Upper secondary VET can be accessed from age 14, lasts 4 years and is offered as school-based programmes (nationally referred to as full-time education); from age 15 onwards it is also offered in the form of dual learning, combining company and school-based learning. These options comprise:

- technical school-based programmes (ISCED 2-3) that lead to an upper secondary education diploma and a VET qualification;
- vocational school-based programmes (ISCED 2-3) that are more practice-based and focus on preparing learners for labour market entry. They lead to a VET qualification only, but graduates can follow a 1-year upper secondary programme (nationally referred to as seventh year) providing an upper secondary education diploma and access to tertiary education.

Learners can switch from one pathway to the other or even continue with general education. A further option are the 3-year apprenticeship programmes (ISCED 3) offered by the regional training provider IAWM (*Institut für Aus- und Weiterbildung im Mittelstand und in kleinen und mittleren Unternehmen*) to learners from age 15 onwards, qualifying them as skilled workers. These programmes incorporate 1 day per week of general, occupational, and practical courses at school and 4 days of work-based learning in a company, based on a contract. Apprenticeship programmes are very popular in BE-DE, are highly recognised socially and supported by many stakeholders.

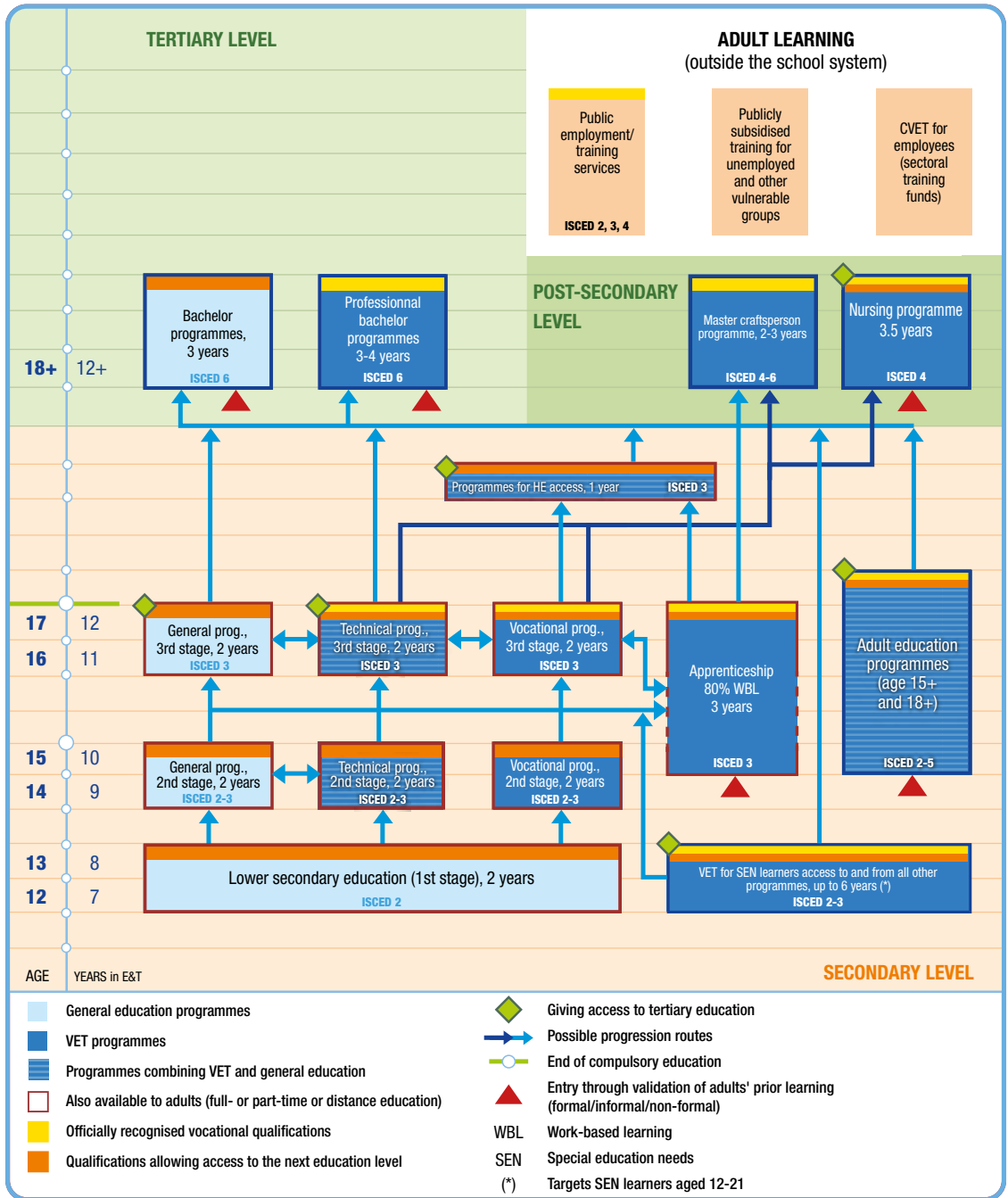
Graduates of upper secondary VET programmes can continue with post-secondary VET programmes. The 3.5-year nursing programme leads to an upper secondary education diploma (ISCED 4), providing access to tertiary education. Upper secondary VET graduates who have acquired a certain level of professional experience can enter the 2- to 3-year Master craftsperson programme (ISCED 4-6), qualifying them to become self-employed professionals and train apprentices themselves.

At tertiary level, learners can access 3- to 4-year professional bachelor programmes (ISCED 6), which are offered in various professional fields such as primary school teacher or accountant. Graduates who want to obtain a master degree, can follow this in a university of another Community, or in one of the neighbouring countries.

VET programmes for learners aged 12 to 21 with specific educational needs (SEN) last up to 6 years and lead to a qualification at ISCED 2 and 3. Individually adapted programmes are in place but those learners who follow the curricular of formal programmes can gain the same certificates as offered by the regular system, including the access right to higher education.

Adult education is partially accessible from age 15 (individual modules/courses, e.g. foreign languages) and fully from age 18. Course participants may obtain a recognised diploma, qualification or (VET) certificate at ISCED 2-5. Adult programmes are offered by the formal education system and by public and private VET providers. The public employment and training service ADG (*Arbeitsamt der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft*) offers vocational training, allowing learners to gain partial or full qualifications, or to be trained in specific subject areas. Such training mainly targets jobseekers and employees and is sometimes provided in cooperation with public or private VET providers.

VET in Belgium's education and training system (BE-DE)



NB: ISCED-P 2011. ISCED-P 2011 and EQF referencing has not yet been done. ISCED-2011 one digit code used in the chart is estimated by the Ministry of Education of the German-speaking Community.

Source: Cedefop and ReferNet Belgium 2024.

VET in Belgium (BE-FL)

Citizens can access three different vocational education and training (VET) systems in Belgium: Flemish (BE-FL), French-speaking (BE-FR) and German-speaking (BE-DE). In the BE-FL system, the Flemish Government is in charge of education, training and employment in Flanders.

VET starts at age 14 as school-based programmes (nationally referred to as full-time education); from age 15 onwards it is also offered in the form of dual learning, combining company and school-based learning in a school or training centre. The 4-year upper secondary VET programmes comprise:

- technical programmes (ISCED 3), which combine technical-theoretical classes and practical lessons. These lead to an upper secondary education diploma and a VET qualification;
- vocational programmes (ISCED 3), which are more practice-based. These lead to a vocational qualification only and aim at direct employment. After successful completion of an additional year (follow-up vocational programme), an upper secondary education diploma is awarded.

After 2 years of upper secondary VET, learners can switch from one pathway to the other or even continue with general education. A further option is a 2- to 3-year apprenticeship programme (ISCED 2-3), offered from age 15 onwards. Learners follow general and technical courses at a SYNTRA training centre (1 or 2 days per week) and work-based learning in a company (3 or 4 days per week), which is based on a training contract. Graduates receive a vocational qualification and an upper secondary education diploma.

These upper secondary vocational programmes are currently under reform and a new dual learning track will be fully implemented and accessible from the school year 2025/26 onwards.

Learners with special educational needs (SEN) aged 12 to 21, can follow VET programmes which lead to a qualification at ISCED 2 or 3. Individually adapted programmes are in place but those who are following the regular curricular of formal programmes can gain the same certificates including access to higher education.

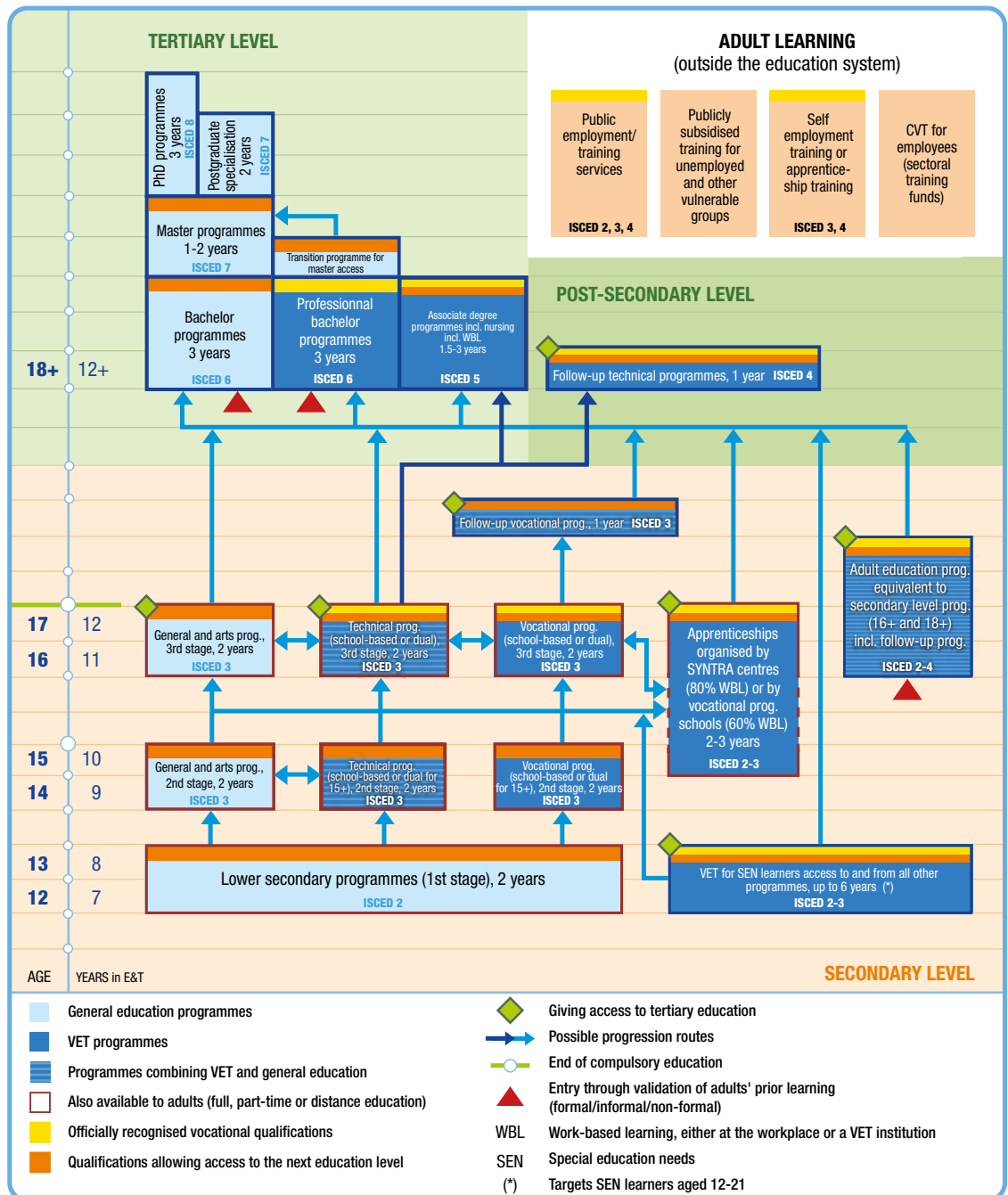
Adults over 18 can choose among a wide range of programmes leading to ISCED 2-4; this is partly also accessible from age 16 onwards. The programmes are offered by the formal adult education system and by public and private VET providers and include entrepreneurial training programmes as well as the possibility to obtain the upper secondary education diploma.

At post-secondary level, 1-year technical follow-up programmes (ISCED 4) are offered to technical programme graduates, providing in-depth knowledge and skills in their professional field, as well as the option to gain the upper secondary education diploma.

At tertiary level, associate degree programmes (ISCED 5) are offered by university colleges, while the nursing programme takes place in schools for full-time secondary education. Programmes are accessible to graduates of all upper secondary VET programmes and last between 1.5 and 2 years, except for the nursing programme, which takes 3 years. Professional bachelor programmes (ISCED 6) last 3 years and graduates can progress to a general 1-to 2-year master degree (ISCED 7) after following a 1-year transition programme. Higher education is accessible to adults as full-time pathway, part-time or as distance learning.

Outside the formal education system, vocational training is offered to jobseekers, employees and entrepreneurs. This leads to partial or full professional qualifications, or relates to specific subject areas, such as entrepreneurship courses. It is offered by the Flemish Agency for Entrepreneurial Training SYNTRA, by private VET providers or by the Flemish public employment service VDAB.

VET in Belgium's education and training system (BE-FL)



NB: ISCED-P 2011. Assignment of programmes to ISCED classification is under revision, so only the first digit in ISCED coding is displayed. EQF levels on qualifications are being discussed.

Source: Cedefop and ReferNet Belgium 2024.

VET in Belgium (BE-FR)

Citizens can access three different vocational education and training (VET) systems in Belgium: Flemish (BE-FL), French-speaking (BE-FR) and German-speaking (BE-DE). In the French-speaking part of Belgium, the Ministry of the French Community is in charge of formal education, including vocational education (nationally referred to as qualification education), in collaboration with school boards. The Walloon Region is in charge of vocational training and employment system; in Brussels, the COCOF and the Brussels Region respectively oversee these fields.

VET starts at the age of 14 in a school-based form (nationally referred to as full-time education). From age 15 it is offered as dual programmes (nationally referred to as part-time programmes), which take place at school or at a training provider and in a company based on a contract. Upper secondary VET includes 4-year programmes comprising:

- technical or artistic qualification programmes (ISCED 3) that lead to upper secondary education diplomas, as well as vocational qualifications such as office employee and automation technician; graduates have direct access to tertiary education;
- vocational qualification programmes (ISCED 3), which are more practice-based and aim at direct employment. These lead to a VET qualification, such as assistant butcher.

After 2 years of upper secondary VET, learners can switch from one pathway to the other or even continue with general education. A further option is an apprenticeship programme (ISCED 3), accessible to learners aged 15 to 25. These programmes follow the alternation scheme of 1 or 2 days in the training centre and 3 or 4 days in a company based on a contract. These training providers are:

- IFAPME, the Walloon Institute for dual training and self-employment in small and medium-sized enterprises for Walloon Region;
- SFPME, the training service for small and medium-sized enterprises in Brussels.

Graduates can enter the labour market or progress to entrepreneurial programmes or to leading and coordinating training, offered outside the formal education system to adults from age 18 onwards.

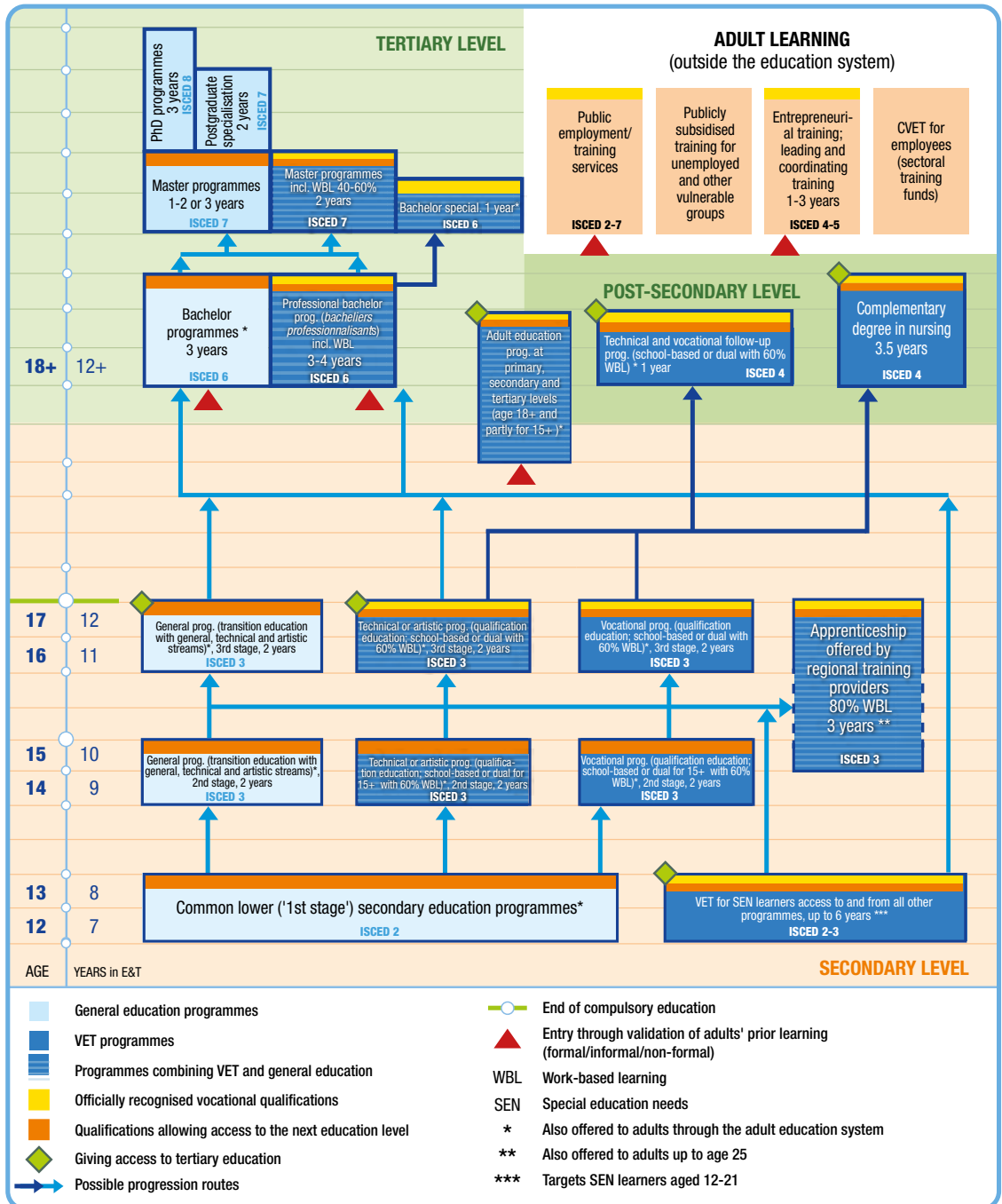
Learners aged 12 to 21 with specific educational needs (SEN) can follow individually adapted programmes but those following the regular curricula of formal programmes can gain the same certificates (ISCED 2-3) including access to higher education.

At post-secondary level, 1-year technical and vocational follow-up programmes (ISCED 4) provide a specialisation in the related professional field as well as access to tertiary education. The 3.5-year nursing programme leads to an upper secondary education diploma (ISCED 4), providing access to tertiary education.

At tertiary level, 3- to 4-year professional bachelor programmes (ISCED 6) are offered and accessible to those holding an upper secondary diploma. Graduates can progress to a 1-year bachelor specialisation programme (ISCED 6) or a 2-year master programme (ISCED 7); they may also directly enter the labour market.

The adult education system offers formal education programmes at ISCED 1-7 and includes the same qualifications as in the 'regular' system. It also offers specific qualifications which are only available in this system. Programmes follow a modular approach and courses offer a flexible time schedule. The system is accessible to all adults, irrespective of initial educational career, and so is the main reskilling, upskilling and second-chance mechanism of the formal education system. Regional public employment and/or public vocational training providers organise vocational training, which leads to partial or full qualifications, or relates to specific subject areas, such as language learning. These public services are FOREM (*Office Wallon de l'emploi et de la formation*) in Wallonia and *Bruxelles Formation*, in Brussels. Validation of adults' prior learning (formal/informal/non-formal) is well developed in BE-FR and offered to jobseekers and workers, as well as to adult and higher education learners.

VET in Belgium's education and training system (BE-FR)



NB: ISCED-P 2011. Assignment of programmes to ISCED classification is under revision, so only the first digit in ISCED coding is displayed. EQF levels on qualifications are being discussed.

Source: Cedefop and ReferNet Belgium 2024.

Distinctive features of VET

The Belgian VET system has a high number of responsible bodies, split between the three Regions (Flanders, Brussels, and Wallonia) and the three Communities (Flemish, French- and German-speaking), which overlap but do not coincide. Therefore, each community has its own education system and citizens can access three different vocational education and training (VET) systems: Flemish (BE-FL), French-speaking (BE-FR) and German-speaking (BE-DE). Brussels is a specific case, as both BE-FR and BE-FL systems coexist. Added to this, the school system is also split into multiple networks (public and subsidised private education), each of which is required to pursue common objectives, including certification, occupational profiles and VET standards, while benefiting from some autonomy in their own organisation. Despite multiple authorities being responsible for education, training and employment, there is a political consensus on specific issues at national level, such as the definition of the compulsory age for education: this starts at age 5 and lasts until age 18.

Though VET is decentralised in Belgium, it is perhaps the most so in the French Community. The Flemish Region and Community are represented by the same parliament and government – and hence the same administration – whereas these bodies are split between the Regions and the Community in BE-FR, leading to a stronger need for collaboration on the ground. This collaboration can be observed in several agreements, for example the French-speaking Service for Trades and Qualifications (SFMQ, *Service francophone des métiers et qualifications*), which is the result of a cooperation agreement ⁽¹⁾ between the French Community, the Walloon Region and the French Community Commission (COCOF, Brussels). The SFMQ brings together actors from employment and vocational education, vocational training and skills validation; its outputs include training profiles that describe the learning outcomes needed to carry out these key activities, as well as to participate in the mapping of qualifications within the national qualifications

framework. The system in the German-speaking Community is different, with some regional competences linked to employment.

The plurality of political actors can lead to divergent political priorities and strategies in the country. Policies are formalised in several government strategies and plans drawn up in each Region, dealing with aspects such as language learning, new technologies, sustainable employment, training for young people or matching workforce skills to labour market needs. Though examples of strong cooperation exist within the individual Communities, collaboration between them mostly takes place through informal talks. On selected topics (e.g. the COVID-19 crisis has led to further collaboration in education) or when consensus is needed (such as positions to take at EU level), communication is carried out in a more coordinated way. There are, however, also some common points of reference for the country. The [2023 National reform programme](#) sets a common goal to improve the performance and inclusiveness of the country's education and training systems, and better tackle skills mismatches.

Social partners have strategic importance in the Belgian VET system. Strategy, policies and all measures involving employment and VET are negotiated with social partners, leading to formal sectoral agreements. Social partners are also directly involved in organising programmes of alternating work and education, and continuous vocational training through framework agreements.

Learners leaving the education system without a certificate/diploma of secondary education have the option to enter adult education. This is a parallel, modularised, formal education system that allows adults to obtain academic and professional qualifications at primary and secondary levels in all Communities, including – apart from BE-FL – at tertiary level. The system is central to lifelong learning because it recognises skills acquired from formal, non-formal or informal learning in pursuing a learning path leading to qualifications corresponding to those provided through full-time education.

(1) Cooperation agreement between the French Community, the Walloon Region and the French Community Commission (Brussels) about the French-speaking Service for Occupations and Qualifications, 29/10/15.

Main challenges and policy responses

Despite the different socioeconomic and education contexts within Belgium, the VET systems face many similar challenges.

The coexistence of three official languages remains a key challenge in all Regions, also having an impact on interregional mobility. Knowledge of the language of instruction is an important matter within VET, especially for better integration of newcomers. In response to this need, jobseekers in Brussels are offered language job vouchers to improve their language skills and employment chances. In Wallonia, Le Forem offers financial aid for learning Dutch, English and German and interested candidates can also apply to spend a year or a semester abroad during the school year immediately following their upper secondary school diploma. Jobseekers can learn a language (nl, en, de) in intensive modules or immersion, or even at distance.

Lifelong learning is a major challenge, as participation in adult education and continuing education and training remains comparatively low in Belgium. Various measures were taken at regional and community levels, such as the action plan [Setting the sail for learning Flanders](#) (2021), which aims to increase adult participation in (non-)formal learning by 2030. With the [Go4Brussels Strategy 2030](#), the Brussels government and social partners are cooperating to improve the quality and labour market relevance of lifelong learning opportunities. From 2023 an [individual learning account](#) is also available in Flanders to stimulate lifelong learning. The [Belgian recovery and resilience plan](#) focuses on adult learning, with particular attention to skills required for the digital and green transition, while also stressing the integration of disadvantaged groups.

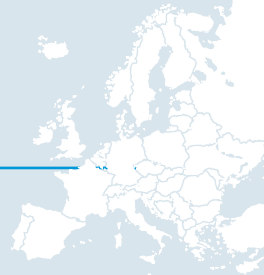
The need for digital transformation in terms of training provision and labour markets was underlined by the COVID-19 crisis. Due to lack of equipment, and of adequate competences in distance learning among teachers and learners, the provision of distance learning faced difficulties. The Communities introduced several measures to tackle these challenges. In BE-FR, providers developed new courses to [help teachers to adapt to online teaching](#). Support was also provided through the provision of the learning platforms Ma Classe and Happi, as well as through a series of webinars, pedagogical tutorials and the 'e-classe' educational platform dedicated to teachers. In Flanders, support for teachers was provided via [KlasCement](#), a portal providing teaching materials and learning resources. Pedagogical guidance services also supported education institutions to help them implement new techniques and to ensure the quality of education provision. The Government of Flanders developed [Digisprong](#), an overall plan to tackle all aspects of digitisation in education, including digital infrastructure and specific teacher training. In 2022, the Flemish Government adopted a decree regulating structural distance learning in secondary education. These changes are expected to have a long-term impact on teaching methods. From a wider perspective, initiatives such as [GO4Brussels 2030](#) and [Digital Wallonia](#) are aiming to build towards the future of work.

[Labour market shortages and skills mismatches have reached a high level in 2022](#). There are increasing shortages of labour in both low- and high-skilled occupations, with the biggest in healthcare, ICT, professional, technical, and scientific jobs, catering and also in occupations that require specific green skills. Different legislative frameworks due to policy choices can cause complications for pupils, students, or employers who are seeking interregional educational mobility. The lack of relevant skills for the green transition is creating bottlenecks in the transition needed for the economy. Several measures have already been taken in response, such as the [Shortages punch \(Coup de poing pénuries\)](#) offered in Wallonia, which responds quickly to serious shortages encountered by companies; the introduction of a [financial incentive paid to learners following training in shortage trades](#) (BE-FR); the adoption of the [STEM agenda 2030](#) (2021), which aims to attract more learners to education and training in science, technology, engineering, mathematics; and the [proposal for a high-level strategy in support of the Flemish green skills transition](#), which was published in 2023.

Youth unemployment remains a major concern for Belgian authorities, a challenge which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. Dual education is often promoted as a measure to reduce inactivity among young people. While dual learning has a long tradition and is popular in BE-DE, there is still a negative perception of dual learning in the other Regions among learners and their parents, leading to a low number of upper secondary VET learners.

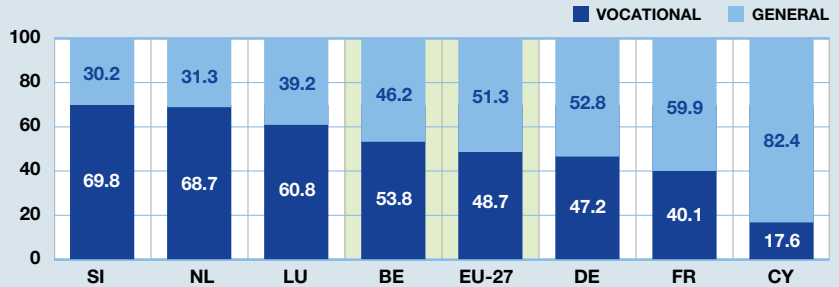
The Regions and Communities have already taken measures to make dual learning an attractive and successful choice for all learners.

- In BE-FL, a [new dual learning system](#) is in the process of being introduced, starting in the school year 2019/20 and to be completed around 2025/26. It replaces the current system of learning and working, which faced many challenges and was often rather a 'negative' choice for pupils who are tired of school. Different tools and campaigns have been developed to promote this new method of work-based learning, and the aim is to extend this system into higher and adult education. Next to this, several incentives have been developed in Flanders aiming to increase the participation of learners and enterprises in VET.
- The [Walloon recovery plan \(2021\)](#) includes a major strand focusing on reforming the dual learning system and on transforming it to an excellent and attractive learning pathway. The [Pact for excellence in education](#), introduced by the French community, aims to increase the attractiveness of vocational education by making it a path of excellence. Vocational education reform is comprehensive and aims among others to improve the management of schools, the fight against failure, and the educational approach to guidance. Learners should be better supported, have a better mastery of basic knowledge and skills, and be accompanied by better trained teachers.



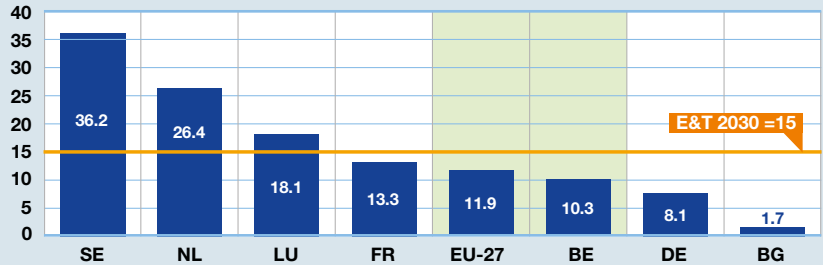
Education and training in figures

Upper secondary students (ISCED 2011 level 3) enrolled in vocational and general programmes
% of all students in upper secondary education, 2021



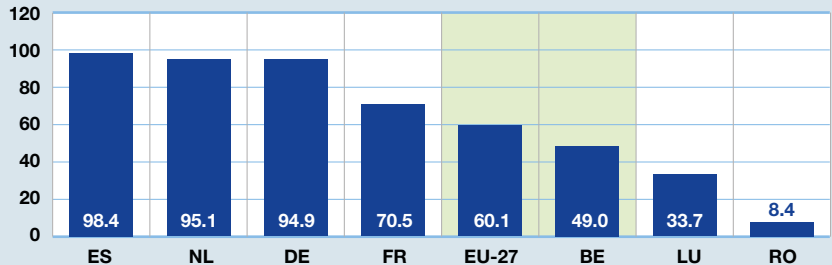
Source: Cedefop calculations based on Eurostat, UOE (UNESCO, OECD, Eurostat) data collection on education systems, date of extraction 27.6.2023.

Lifelong learning
% of population aged 25 to 64 participating in education and training over the 4 weeks prior to the survey, 2022



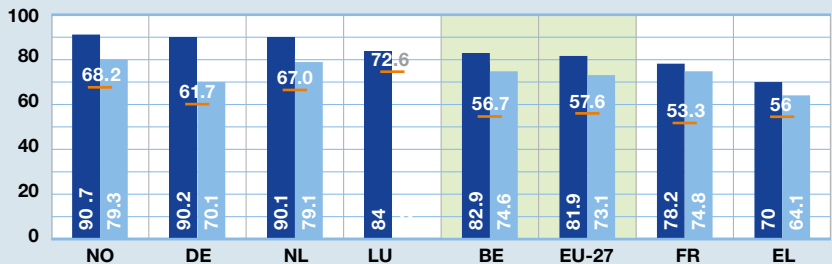
Source: Eurostat, EU labour force survey, date of extraction 14.9.2023.

Exposure of VET graduates to work-based learning
% of recent graduates from VET benefitting from exposure to work-based learning during their VET programme, 2022



Source: Eurostat, EU labour force survey, date of extraction 26.9.2023.

Employment rates of young graduates
% of 20- to 34-year-olds no longer in education and training, 2022



■ Upper vocational secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education (levels 3 and 4)
■ Upper general secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education (levels 3 and 4)
— Less than primary, primary and lower secondary education (levels 0-2)

Source: Eurostat, EU labour force survey, date of extraction 14.9.2023.



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Further information

- Cedefop (2024 forthcoming). *Vocational education and training in Belgium: short description.*
- Cedefop. *Timeline of VET policies in Europe.*
- European Commission (2023). *Education and training monitor 2023: Belgium.*
- Eurydice (2023). *National education systems: Belgium.*

ReferNet Belgium	
Belgian Government	
Education portals	Vlaanderen (BE-FL)
	Wallonia-Brussels Federation (BE-FR)
	German-speaking community (BE-DE)
Federations	Federation of Belgian Enterprises (VBO FEB)
	National Labour Council
Statistics on labour and training market	Le Forem: Employment and training market figures and analyses
	Walloon Institute for Evaluation, Forecasting and Statistics
Brussels capital-region (BE-FR/FL)	Public employment service (Actiris)
	Vocational training service for French-speaking learners (Bruxelles Formation)
	Vocational training service for Flemish-speaking learners (VDAB)
Flanders (BE-FL)	Public service for apprenticeship and entrepreneurship training for French-speaking (COCOF) or Flemish-speaking (SYNTRA) learners
	Public employment and vocational service (VDAB)
Wallonia (BE-FR)	Public service for apprenticeship and entrepreneurship training (SYNTRA)
	Public employment and vocational services (Le Forem)
German-speaking community (BE-DE)	Public service for apprenticeship and entrepreneurship training (IFAPME)
	Public employment and vocational service (ADG)
German-speaking community (BE-DE)	Public service for apprenticeship and entrepreneurship training (IAWM)
	Public employment and vocational service (ADG)

This Spotlight is based on input from Bruxelles Formation (ReferNet partner in 2023).



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