



# DIG.INT PARTNERS' REGIONAL REPORTS

## Annexes

**FLANDERS**

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06.05.2025	Femke Sterckx - UCLL	<i>Update</i>
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## VET INTERNATIONALISATION POLICIES AND EXPERIENCES IN FLANDERS

### Introduction to the Local Context

Belgium, located in Western Europe, has Brussels as its capital and covers an area of 30,689 square kilometres. As of 2024, the country has a population of 11.7 million, making it one of the most densely populated nations in Europe with 380 inhabitants per square kilometre. It comprises 581 municipalities and boasts a robust economy.

The country is divided into three regions: Flanders, Wallonia, and the Brussels-Capital Region. Each region has distinct economic strengths, with Flanders exhibiting the highest employment levels, partly due to its industrial and technological base. Brussels, as the headquarters of the European Union and numerous multinational corporations, plays a crucial role in Belgium's international economic presence.

A key example of economic regional specialization is Antwerp's world-renowned diamond industry, which employs thousands and contributes significantly to trade revenues. Meanwhile, Wallonia is recognized for its advancements in biopharmaceuticals and aerospace technologies, with companies such as GSK and Sonaca leading in innovation.

### Education and VET system

**Education and VET system** The Vocational Education and Training (VET) system in Belgium is regionally structured, with Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels each managing their own policies and frameworks. The system provides multiple educational pathways, ensuring flexibility for students with diverse learning needs and career ambitions.

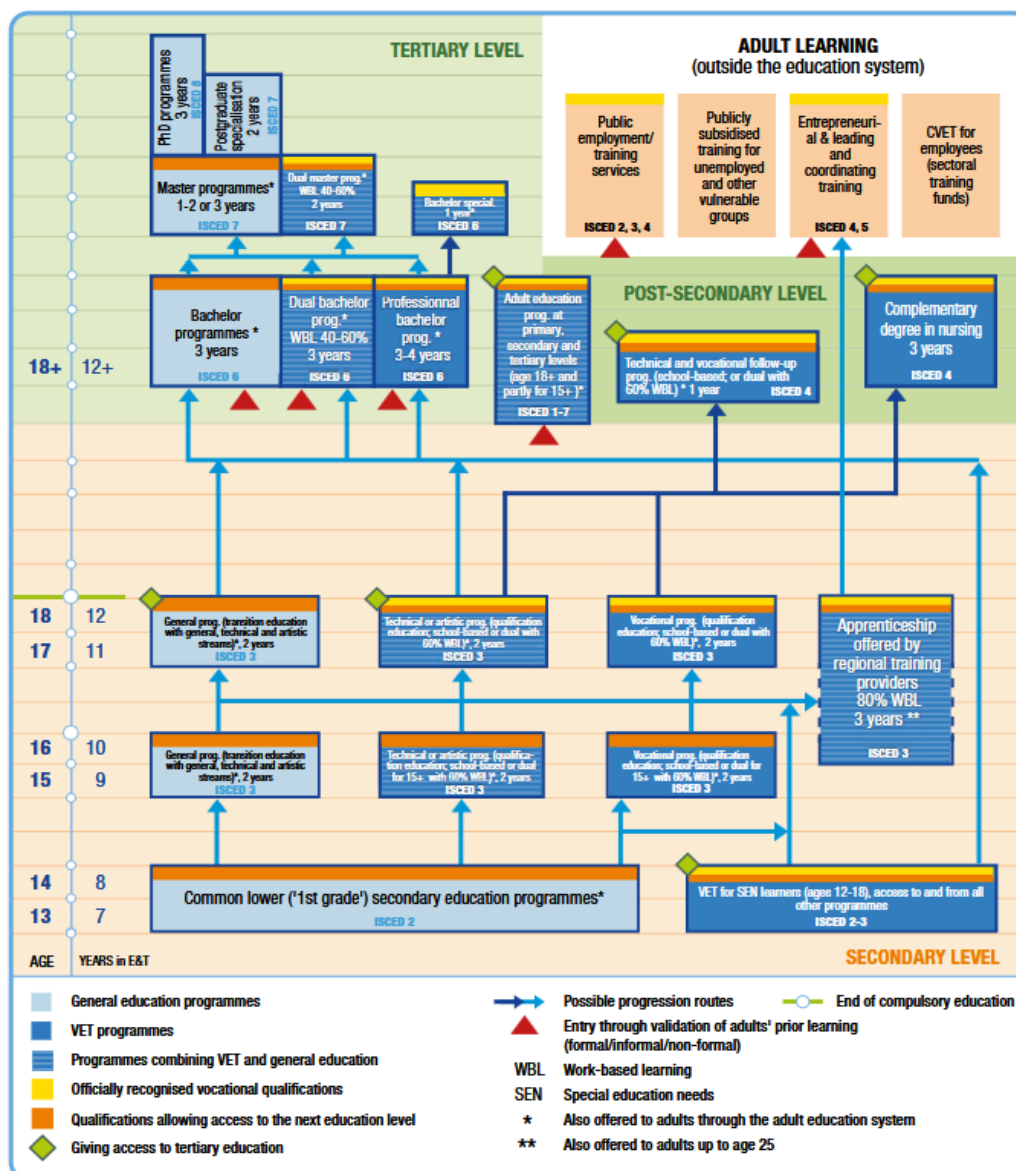
In **secondary education**, students can choose vocational training at around the age of 14. These programs combine general education with technical and practical skills, typically lasting four years and leading to a qualification that allows direct entry into the labor market or further studies. Belgium has a structured vocational education system where students can choose from general secondary education (ASO), technical secondary education (TSO), artistic secondary education (KSO), and vocational secondary education (BSO). TSO and BSO focus on technical and vocational skills, with BSO being more practice-oriented.

After secondary education, students can pursue **post-secondary vocational programs such as HBO5 (Higher Vocational Education)**. These programs, classified at EQF Level 5, offer practice-oriented education aimed at bridging the gap between secondary education and professional bachelor's degrees. HBO5 is highly valued for its strong focus on workplace learning and industry relevance. Graduates receive an associate degree (graduaat) awarded by university colleges, which enhances employability and provides access to higher education. The vocational track emphasizes hands-on experience and prepares students for specific professions. Vocational training is also integrated into higher education institutions, offering short-cycle programs that align with industry needs. The German-speaking Community operates its own education system, closely mirroring the structures of the other regions, with a strong emphasis on bilingual education and cross-border vocational training opportunities. (More information on HBO5 programs is available at [hbo5vlaanderen.be](https://hbo5vlaanderen.be)).

At UCLL, we offer a postgraduate bachelor's programme in Advanced Business Management. This one-year, practice-oriented programme gives students the opportunity to learn from guest lecturers who are active in the business world. In the second semester, students work for four months in a company on a real-life management challenge. They are supported by both a company coach and a mentor who monitors the project in a consulting role. The Advanced Business Management postgraduate programme is an example of a course that combines a solid theoretical foundation with hands-on experience in the workplace (EQF Level 6+).

Additionally, Belgium offers adult education and continuing **VET to support lifelong learning**. For adults seeking to upskill or reskill, Belgium provides flexible learning opportunities through adult education centres. These programs often feature modular structures, allowing learners to progress at their own pace. Classes may be scheduled during evenings or weekends to accommodate working individuals. Dual learning initiatives, particularly in Flanders through Syntra Vlaanderen, integrate classroom education with hands-on work experience in industries like IT, healthcare, and automotive technology.

In summary, the Belgian VET system includes dual learning, which combines classroom instruction with on-the-job training, allowing students to gain practical experience while studying. Lifelong learning is a crucial component, encouraging continuous skill development through adult education centers and professional development courses. Certification is standardized and recognized nationally, ensuring that VET qualifications facilitate mobility within Belgium's regions.



Source: Vocational Education and Training in Belgium: Short Description (Cedefop, 2022)

## Economic sectors: Industry 4.0 & VET

The integration of Industry 4.0, the fourth industrial revolution, characterized by the integration of advanced technologies such as automation, robotics, artificial intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), and big data into manufacturing and industrial processes, has strengthened collaboration between Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions and the industry.

In Belgium, the Social-Economic Council of Flanders (SERV)- an advisory body that brings together employers' organizations and trade unions to discuss economic and social policies, ensuring a balanced approach to labor market development—plays a crucial role in shaping policies related to

Industry 4.0. SERV's Industry 4.0 report<sup>1</sup> highlights the impact of digital transformation on businesses and workers in Flanders. It stresses the need for **collaboration between VET institutions and industry**, ensuring that education systems align with the evolving technological landscape.

**Dual learning programs**, which combine classroom education with practical experience in companies, have become a key strategy to ensure students develop industry-relevant skills. Companies in sectors such as manufacturing, IT, and logistics actively partner with VET institutions to align curricula with evolving technological demands. Additionally, work-based learning in smart factories allows students to gain hands-on experience with cutting-edge technologies like AI, IoT, and 3D printing. For example, Siemens and Janssen actively participate in dual learning programs in Belgium, offering students hands-on training within their industries. Siemens invests in dual education by training thousands of students annually, equipping them with industry-relevant skills. Janssen has launched a pilot project for dual learning in the pharmaceutical sector. The dual learning trajectory combines classroom learning with hands-on experience in the workplace, offering students the opportunity to complete in-depth internships over the course of an academic year. Guided by a mentor within the company, students develop skills that are closely aligned with real-world practice and the needs of the business sector.

In Flanders, **Regional Training Centres (RTCs)**, play a role in initiating these dual learning programs. These Regional Training Centres provide industry-specific training that is often developed in collaboration with the industry, helping to improve employability by offering training programs that are closely aligned with the needs of the labor market. The role of RTCs is particularly important in ensuring that students gain practical, relevant skills that directly address industry demands.

In Flanders, RTCs are active in various domains, including industry, technology, healthcare, and ICT. Collaboration with local businesses and sectoral organizations is a key feature of these centres, as it ensures the training offered is up-to-date and directly relevant to the needs of the labor market. These partnerships help tailor the training curricula to match the evolving technological and industrial landscape, ensuring that graduates are well-prepared to enter the workforce.

The **Flemish Agency for Innovation and Entrepreneurship (VLAIO)** also plays a crucial role in supporting collaboration between education and industry in Flanders. VLAIO promotes STEM competencies (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) through initiatives such as the **STEMhub**, which helps companies develop STEM-focused projects by connecting businesses, schools, research institutions, and youth organizations. Additionally, VLAIO encourages companies to cooperate with secondary schools through **guest lectures, company visits**, and infrastructure sharing to give students practical insights into technological careers.

VLAIO also focuses on lifelong learning by supporting companies in training and upskilling employees, collaborating with sector funds and training centers to keep workers' skills aligned with labor market demands

Another notable initiative is **edtech/station**, a hub for digital transformation and educational technology that **develops innovative learning environments** using simulation, AR/VR, and high-performance synchronous communication.

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<sup>1</sup> SERV (2019), *Industrie 4.0 onder de loep in vijf sectoren*.

HBO5 and VET programs align closely with Belgian economic priorities, with institutions forming partnerships with companies, sector funds, and research organizations to tailor their curricula. ([vlaio.be](http://vlaio.be))

## VET Internationalisation policy

Internationalization plays a crucial role in Belgium's Vocational Education and Training (VET) system<sup>2</sup>. The Flemish Community actively promotes international mobility for students and staff, integrating global competencies into curricula. Programs such as Erasmus+ facilitate cross-border internships and student exchanges, ensuring that learners gain international experience.

In addition, the French and German-speaking Communities emphasize language learning and cross-border cooperation. The German-speaking Community particularly fosters collaboration with neighbouring countries, recognizing the importance of multilingual skills in a competitive labor market. Schools and training institutions engage in partnerships with European businesses, increasing students' exposure to international work environments.

Belgium also invests in transnational projects, aligning vocational training programs with European standards to enhance employability beyond national borders. Dual learning initiatives in multinational companies further strengthen internationalization efforts by exposing students to global industry practices (see examples Siemens en Janssen above).

In Flanders, few **intermediary organizations** play a crucial role in bridging the gap between schools and international companies and institutions. One such organization is Connectief vzw, which focuses on integrating new technologies, digitalization, innovation, and globalization into education. Their mission includes strengthening STEM education, connecting schools with the job market, fostering innovation, inspiring teachers and students, and broadening horizons through internationalization. A concrete example of their work is ErasDu, a program that facilitates international internships for students in vocational training, giving them valuable experience abroad and enhancing their employability. Another key player in this field is Edushakers, which is dedicated to educational innovation and professional development for teachers in Flanders. They organize events and provide platforms for knowledge exchange, aiming to modernize education and connect it with global trends and best practices. By supporting schools in their international ambitions, organizations like Connectief and Edushakers ensure that students are better prepared for an increasingly globalized job market.

## Focus Group

### Participants

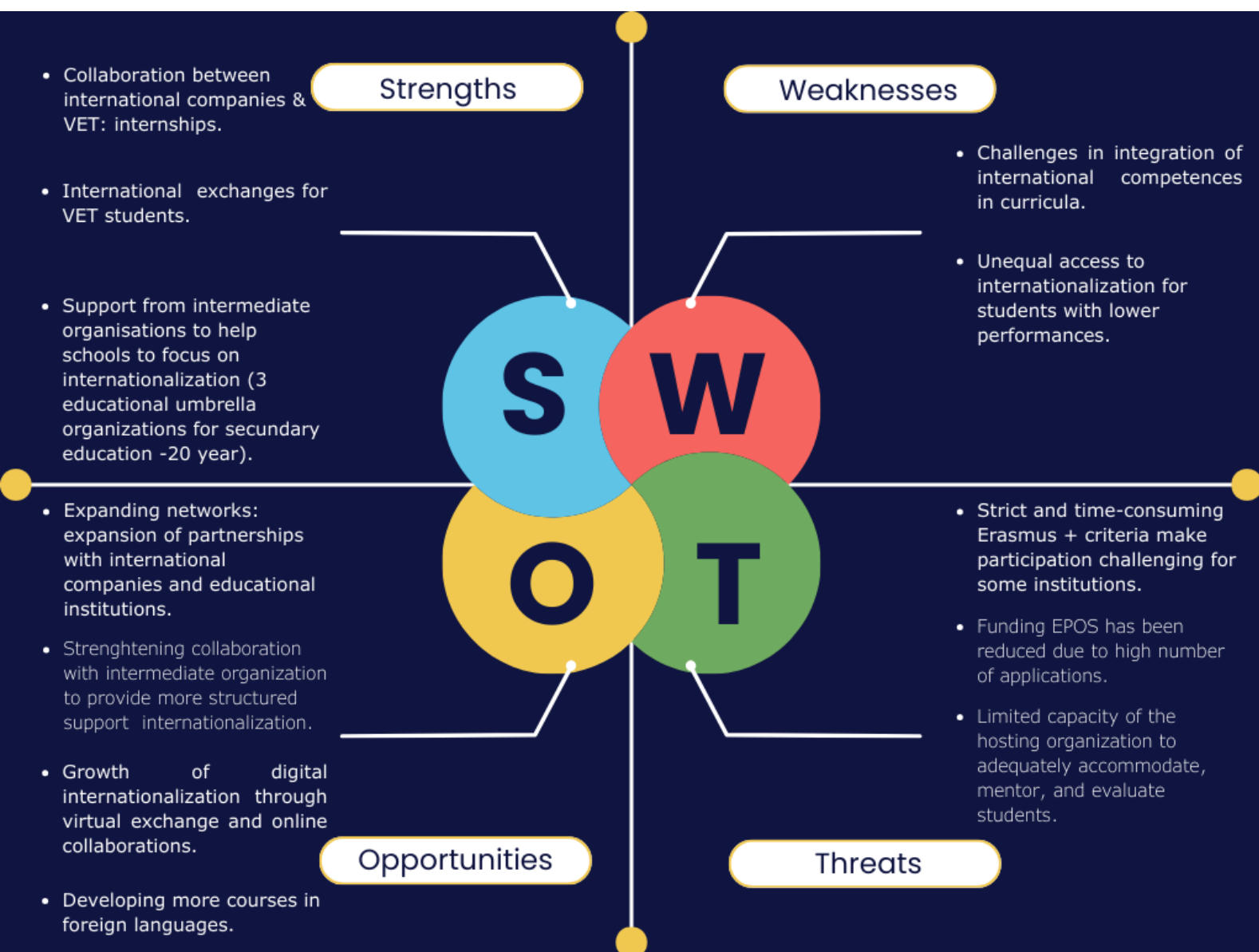
- **Femke Sterckx**, International Relations Advisor UCLL Management
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- **Dirk Staf**, Advisor Erasmus projects UCLL, coordinator International Project in VET Education and coordinator of Edushakers.
- **Tim Van Aken**, Pedagogical Advisor Internationalisation, Catholic Education Flanders.

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<sup>2</sup> Vocational Education and Training in Belgium: Short Description ([Cedefop, 2022](#)).



- **Peggy Goovarts**, Educational Quality Coordinator UCLL Banaba Advanced Business Management.
- **Steven Verjans**, Researcher research project 'Internationalization to ensure quality in education' UCLL Research & Expertise.





## Conclusions

- **Integrate internationalisation into curricula**

VET institutions should embed global competencies into regular coursework. This can be done through international case studies, virtual exchanges, co-teaching with international partners and cross-border projects. Blended and virtual mobility can be scaled up.

- **Diversify funding sources**

To mitigate the risk of a strong dependence on EU funding, VET institutions can seek to diversify funding by building long-term partnerships with international companies and collaborating with them to support international placements.

- **Develop inclusive selection procedures and provide preparatory support.**

By offering language training, intercultural workshops and logistical support, students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are better prepared for international exchange programs.