



BELGIUM (FRENCH-SPEAKING COMMUNITY)

INFOPACK - RECOGNITION OF LEARNING PERIODS ABROAD IN GENERAL SECONDARY EDUCATION

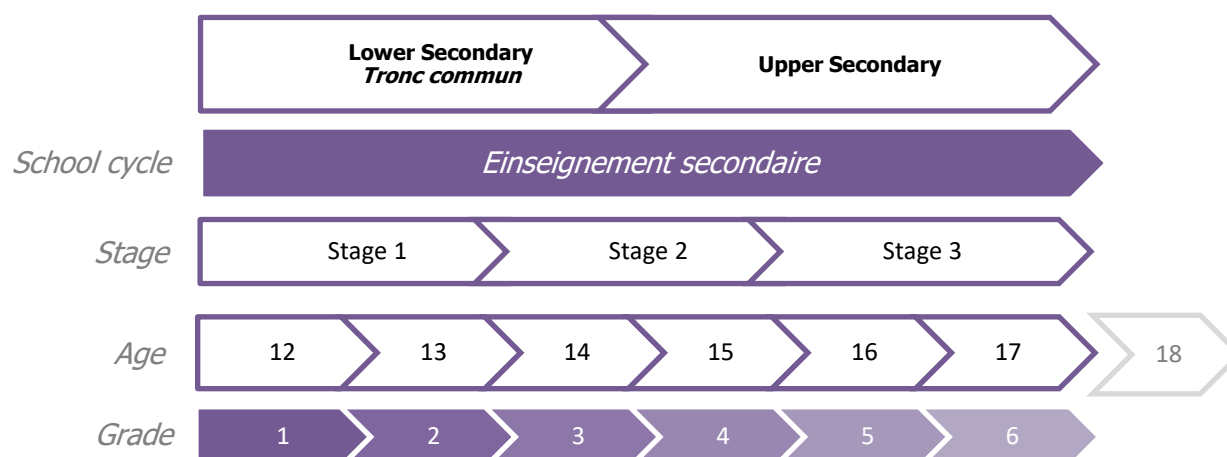
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The information below gives an overview of procedures¹ for the recognition of learning periods abroad in general secondary school. It can be consulted by pupils, as well as their families and teachers, who are or plan to be involved in long-term individual 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 EDUCATION SYSTEM



Education is compulsory until 18 years of age. Secondary school is divided into three stages of two years each. The third and last stage can have an additional year of specialisation or preparation for higher education.

Following the reform adopted in 2019², there will be a pedagogical continuum from pre-primary education to the end of compulsory schooling (third year of secondary education). The first three years of secondary education are the so-called *tronc commun*, at the end of which pupils obtain a certificate that marks the end of lower secondary education. In addition, at the end of each stage, pupils receive a certificate (*attest*)³ and at the moment, the certificate of the first stage (CE1D) is still issued to pupils at the end of second grade.

From the third year onwards (second and third stages), pupils can choose from among three forms of education (general, technical, artistic) which offer a transition stream, namely general education preparing pupils for university. Within the form of education chosen, pupils choose a study orientation which is made up of the classes chosen by the pupils, next to the common courses (*la formation commune*)⁴.

Graduation and Certification

Decisions about pupils' progression to the next grade or cycle and the issue of diplomas and certificates are the responsibility of the class council⁵.

An upper secondary education certificate (*Certificat d'Enseignement Secondaire Supérieur – CESS*) is awarded to pupils who have successfully completed the last two years of study in general secondary education in the same form, stream and orientation of studies. A common assessment is

² The reform will be gradually implemented and will be fully in place by 2028.

³ Pupils can receive an A, B, or C attest. With an A attest they are free to take any option of studies, with a B attest their options are restricted, with a C attest they need to repeat the year or move to the qualification stream.

⁴ See §§ 3 and 4, art.5, Arrêté royal du 29/06/1984 relatif à l'organisation de l'enseignement secondaire

⁵ The class council is chaired by the school principal and consists of the members of the management and teaching staff responsible for educating a defined group of pupils.

taken at the end of the 3rd stage⁶ for French and History. This is optional for schools and is aimed at providing the mark which feeds into the upper secondary school diploma.

The school-leaving certificate (CESS) provides direct access to higher education, however, a few faculties require pupils to take 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 (FRENCH-SPEAKING COMMUNITY)

Age and grade

Pupils usually enrol in an individual pupil mobility programme during the 5th year, when they are 16/17 years old.

The *Expedis* framework⁷ – which foresees recognition of learning periods abroad of between one month and a full school year – is open to pupils in the 3rd, 4th, 5th or 6th year. However, during 6th year, pupils can enrol with *Expedis* only for a period of maximum three months between 1st September and 30th March.

In addition, it is popular for pupils to go abroad for a *seconde rhéto*, namely repeating the last year of school during a gap year.

Registration in the sending school

Under the *Expedis* framework, you must be registered in your home school and have the school's permission in order to go on an exchange⁸.

If you enrol in an exchange programme outside of the *Expedis* framework, you will not be registered with your home school during the mobility.

Funding for the sending school

For exchanges in the framework of *Expedis*, the sending school continues to receive funding for the pupil.

⁶ Ministry of Education, Federation Wallonia-Brussels, External examination CESS
<http://www.enseignement.be/index.php?page=26248&navi=3056>

⁷ *Expedis* is the framework set by the Ministry of Education of the Federation Wallonie-Bruxelles for providing individual pupil mobility opportunities within the secondary school framework and allow for recognition of the learning period abroad (Mobilités scolaires séjours scolaires individuels – Expedis, <http://www.enseignement.be/index.php?page=26399>).

⁸ Circular 5039, Organisation des séjours scolaires individuels dans le cadre du programme EXPEDIS, Organisation individual school exchange programmes within the framework of Expedis https://www.gallilex.cfwb.be/document/pdf/40099_000.pdf

Funding for the exchange pupil

Pupils living in the Walloon Region (most of French-speaking Belgium excluding Brussels), who are 18 years old and have a *CESS* can apply for funding⁹ for their learning period abroad '*seconde rhéto*' (repeating the last year of school during a gap year).

RECOGNITION OF LEARNING PERIODS ABROAD

The following information addresses learning periods abroad lasting either up to 3 months, or between more than 3 months and a full school year. In both cases, learning periods abroad within individual long-term pupil mobility programmes are recognised by the class council through the *Expedis* framework¹⁰. The same procedures are applied, irrespective of which country the learning period is spent in (EU or non-EU).

The requirements for recognition within this programme include: an agreement between you, your sending school, and the coordinating organisation before departure, a transcript of marks, and other supporting documents from the host school. *Please note that in the case of a mobility within a school-to-school partnership (e.g. Erasmus+) the procedure set for the Expedis framework applies, therefore the possible learning agreement between sending and host school need to be developed accordingly.*

At least 4 months before your departure, you must ask permission to study abroad by submitting an official document to your home school. Sending schools may refuse permission for a learning period abroad if they believe it will be hard for you to successfully follow the curriculum upon your return.

If your request is approved, a learning agreement will be signed between you, your parents, the coordinating organisation (if applicable), and the sending school. This agreement is mandatory for stays of over 3 months, but it is recommended for shorter periods as well. It includes information on the courses you will study while abroad and other learning goals, assessment methods adopted by your home school after the mobility, and on the support offered by your home school upon return for your reintegration. Within the learning agreement, you can include the possibility for partial recognition of credits through exams organised by the school on return, for subjects that could not be followed while on exchange. In this case you commit to following the tasks you receive from the sending school while abroad and to take the exam on your return.

During your stay abroad, you will stay with a host family and/or boarding school and attend full-time courses in the host country in the equivalent grade. The host school proposes a lesson programme which should be as close as possible to that followed in your sending school and draws up a minimum timetable of 28 class periods¹¹. This is especially important in the third stage because the same lesson programme (orientation) needs to be kept for the two last years, as it is a

⁹ <https://www.leforem.be/particuliers/immersion-langues-ecole-secondaire-superieur.html>

¹⁰ Mobilités scolaires - séjours scolaires individuels -Expedis - expérience éducative d'immersion scolaire
<http://www.enseignement.be/index.php?page=26399>.

¹¹ In school terms an 'hour' is not necessarily 60 minutes, but rather 50, therefore the term 'period' is used.

requirement to obtain the certificate at the end of upper secondary school (*CESS*). Therefore, it is more challenging to obtain recognition of a learning period abroad in the last stage.

Regular contact is established between the sending school (a contact person is designated) and the host school. Prior to recognising your mobility your home school will verify that the conditions of agreed in the agreement have been met.

Periods of up to 3 months

For study periods up to 3 months, you can choose to organise your stay by yourself or with an *Expedis*-accredited exchange organisation. In both cases your absence from school can only be justified if you follow the procedure set by the *Expedis* framework. Your stay abroad can take place either from September to December or from January to March.

If your learning period abroad is not recognised on your return, the class council of your sending school can decide to anyway accept you back in the school to continue the academic year and to take the exams at the end of the school year.

Periods of between more than 3 months and a full school year

For study periods over 3 months, you need to enrol in an exchange programme run by an *Expedis*-accredited coordination organisation, if you wish to try and have your period abroad recognised.

If the learning period abroad is not recognised on return, you must repeat the academic year, exceptions are not usually granted. However, the learning agreement can include a clause which allows pupils who have returned to Belgium before the final year exams to take them together with their classmates¹².

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

If you go abroad for a full year outside the *Expedis* framework, you need to apply for *equivalence*¹³, if you wish to be admitted to the next grade.

INFORMATION FOR PUPILS HOSTED IN BELGIUM (FRENCH-SPEAKING COMMUNITY)

Registration in the host school

As a hosted pupil, you can choose whether to attend classes as a regularly enrolled pupil or as a visiting pupil (i.e. *élève libre*).

In the first case, you need to go through an administrative process called '*equivalence*'¹⁴ which determines the grade you should follow in the host school. If you get the equivalence of a 5th grade¹⁵

¹² EFIL Elisa Briga, Recognition of study periods abroad in Europe – an overview and policy recommendations (EFIL, 2018).

¹³ Ministry of Education, Federation Wallonie-Bruxelles, Equivalence of diplomas <http://www.equivalences.cfwb.be/index.php?id=524>

¹⁴ Ministry of Education, Federation Wallonie-Bruxelles, Equivalence of diplomas <http://www.equivalences.cfwb.be/index.php?id=524>

¹⁵ A-attest, namely a certificate that allows them to choose any study they wish.

you can attend the 6th grade as a regular pupil. As part of this process, you must provide the host school with a transcript of your marks over the past 3 years, and of the decision of your home school's council. The host school submits the request for *equivalence* to the Ministry of Education, which examines the documents and decides how to recognise the previous studies in the home country. The *equivalence* is not based on your age.

You can also choose to enrol in the host school as a visiting pupil (i.e. *élève libre*). The Admission council (*Conseil d'admission*) decides on your placement in classes, and you can also follow classes in the 6th grade. Under this status, the host school will not formally certify any of your learning even though you still must attend all activities. Since the *equivalence* process is perceived as complex by both pupils and host schools, the majority of host schools prefer that pupils enrol as visiting pupils. Only pupils with strict requirements of formal certification linked to their home country's recognition system go through the steps to be enrolled as regular pupils.

Funding for the host school

Host schools receive funding for hosted exchange pupils who are regularly enrolled, but not for *élèves libres* (visiting pupils).

Certification for hosted pupils

If you are regularly enrolled, you will receive the same type of certification as your fellow classmates. If you enrol as a visiting pupil (*élève libre*), you will receive a certificate of attendance.

Possibility of graduating in the host country during the exchange

In order to get the *CESS*, you need to enrol with an *equivalence* to a 5th grade and you must meet three conditions: 1) follow the same study orientation as the one followed in your home country in 5th grade and for which you received *equivalence* for, 2) attend classes regularly, and 3) receive an A-attest at the end of the school year. However, this is a rare practice.

TESTIMONIAL

Judith from Belgium: a full school year in Austria

"An open-minding experience where I learnt a lot"

My motivation to do an exchange year was mainly to learn a new language. My method was to write down every new word once I heard one. Generally, I think it is best not to have too high expectations, to be open-minded and always ask if you don't understand something. On the basis of your cultural background, you might misinterpret things.

During my stay abroad, I had a loss in my family and at first, I did not want to share my grief. I talked about it with the contact person from my exchange organisation and this helped me a lot as

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I shared this difficult moment with my host family and our relationship grew stronger from that moment on.

Difficulties with having the year recognised

I have discussed a learning agreement with my school before departure: I knew there was a risk I would not be able to continue school with my peers when I would come back, however I did my best to stick to the agreement while abroad: my friends sent me homework, I was in touch with one teacher and I studied all summer once back to take the exams to be admitted to the next grade. Unfortunately, I failed the physics exam and had to repeat the year. I felt I lacked the needed support. During my stay in Austria, I invested much time in learning the curriculum of my sending school in Belgium, plus I was learning a new language and culture. All in all, I don't recommend this because I spent less time with my host family as I would have liked.

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