



## Languages and aspects of tourism education and training in Flanders (Belgium)

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### **Abstract**

The Flemish MSc Tourism programme does not include language courses. Although the students come from different educational backgrounds, it can be taken for granted that its students are trilingual (Dutch, French and English). Proof is provided by describing the broader context of, and the interplay between the higher education tourism programmes, the secondary school foreign languages outcomes, the foreign languages policy of the regional government, the language curriculum for professional tourist guides and tour managers. We also focus on opportunities and threats regarding this unique state of affairs.

**Key words:** Flanders, Belgium, tourism education, foreign languages education, languages education policy

### **1. Introduction**

The immediate background of this article is a meeting of the Association for Tourism in Higher Education (ATHE, 2007) where the Flemish MSc Tourism, its aim, structure and collaboration with the tourism industry, was introduced. On this occasion, some people in the audience observed that no language courses are included in the educational programme. Questions were asked and an answer given: "we think there is no need for it". Consternation... tourism is by definition an international business, about experiences among different cultures and about meeting people from all over the global village! No languages needed? One could suppose that the lack of language courses is in line with the complaint that "languages are too often seen as something secondary, a support tool used only by translators, interpreters and language teachers"; that it neglects the common knowledge that "some employers seek employees with three languages, with English competence taken for granted, i.e. mother tongue, English and at least one other language" and that "opportunities extend beyond conventional business into [among others] travel and tourism." (Bloch, 1995: 16-18).

We would like to show that this does not apply to the Flemish MSc Tourism or tourism in Flanders generally. To do this we will provide more details on the Flemish language learning approach in higher, professional and academic education, secondary (high) school education and specialized parallel training offered by several educational institutions. Readers will be able to see the broader context of languages in a region that is part of a small but complex country with three national languages (Dutch, French and German, spoken by three different communities with an officially bilingual capital that has to prove itself worthy of the title 'capital of Europe'. The Flemish people in general and the

educational system in particular accept the need for foreign language learning. Indeed, foreign language competence is taken for granted by both indigenous and foreign employers. To exemplify this with regard to tourism education in Flanders, several authors have contributed to this article. Dominique Vanneste, programme director in charge of the Flemish MSc Tourism, outlines the aims and structure of the degree (section 2). Steven Huyghe, member of staff at the Centre for Educational Development of the K.U.Leuven explains the prerequisites for knowledge of languages of university students that start a higher education programme in general and the MSc Tourism in particular (section 3.1). Kaat Vandensavel, Department for Educational Development of the Flemish Community, discusses the foreign language policy of the Flemish government and how this is translated in the '*Talenbeleidsnota*' (Policy Paper on Language Learning). In this context, it should be noted that we refer to the Flemish and not the Belgian Government. This is related to the federal state structure of Belgium whereby regions possess independent decision making powers in personal and cultural matters such as education (section 3.2). However, not all training in (and for) tourism takes place in higher education, for example the training of tourist guides and tour managers. Katrien Vanginderachter, who works for *Toerisme Vlaanderen* (Tourism Board of Flanders), explains the way in which the linguistic needs and wants of this group of professionals are catered for (section 4). In the final section we focus on the question as to whether Flanders has a real Unique Selling Position (USP) as far as languages are concerned and the opportunities and threats for tourism education in Flanders (section 5).

## **2. The Flemish MSc Tourism**

### **2.1. Educational Programme**

Flanders – the Dutch speaking region in the north of Belgium<sup>1</sup>- has a long tradition in tourism education at a higher, professional level with degrees such as BSc Tourism and Recreation Management and BSc in Hotel Management at six different university colleges. Nevertheless, no coherent academic programme was available until 2004. In 2002 the regional government of Flanders decided to meet this need by the creation of an academic MSc tourism that allowed and obliged all stakeholders to work together. Two important objectives of the programme are: collaboration with the tourism industry without denying the research based vocation of the academic on one hand and the reconciliation of the economic approach and the focus on society and space on the other. Therefore the programme contains a cluster of management and marketing courses and a cluster of courses focussing on culture, mobility and destination that are compulsory for all students.

The above implies that there is no academic Bachelor degree in tourism. The 'direct' intake consists of two different groups of students: non-academic, so called 'professional' students with a professional degree in Tourism and Recreation Management or Hotel Management on the one hand and BSc/MSc students from a restricted number of disciplines such as economics, sociology, geography, planning, law and physical education on the other. Students from other disciplines can join the programme when an admissions committee accepts them, on the basis of an individual dossier. Archaeologists,

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<sup>1</sup> Since the Belgian (Dutch, French and German speaking) communities have gained full authority on educational issues within the federal structure of the Belgian state, there is no such thing as a Belgian educational policy or a Belgian educational system. Nevertheless the systems of the three communities are very similar because of their unified past history and the need for comparability in the present Belgian context.

historians, sinologists, etc., have been accepted but translators, for example, have not. The idea behind this is that candidates for the MSc programme in tourism must have some previous knowledge of economy and/or society and space to enter the programme. Knowledge of languages is necessary but it is not considered sufficient. It is taken for granted that all students are trilingual, speaking Dutch (usually as mother tongue), French and English when they start the programme (cf. 2.2). However, instruction on the programme is in Dutch and English only since a number of Dutch students (from the Netherlands) do not have a thorough command of French.

## ***2.2. The use of languages***

The programme consists of three semesters<sup>2</sup> and is mostly taught in Dutch but foreign languages are always indirectly involved. First, there exists a strict recommendation for all MSc programmes to use course materials (books, articles, reports) in their original language. Second, to ensure the oral use of foreign languages, a whole course called 'Tourism Environment' consists of a series of guest lectures from foreign experts speaking English, where students are required to use their language skills in questions and subsequent discussions.

Third, the last semester of the programme consists of exchanges with foreign universities within and outside Europe. These exchange agreements cover only programmes in tourism in the respective partner institution's native language (French, Dutch, English, German or Spanish). Only students who are sufficiently fluent in these languages are allowed to take part in these exchanges. Further, their MSc thesis must involve fieldwork in those countries. During this same semester, the presence of foreign students and foreign external partners means that all work in project groups as well as all presentations and reports are completed using the English language. MSc theses based on fieldwork abroad can be written in Dutch, French or English. When written in Dutch but with the involvement of a foreign educational institution or partner from the tourism industry, an executive summary is also required in French, English, German or Spanish as appropriate.

Fourth, a number of courses of the Flemish educational programme can be substituted by an equivalent course of the 'Master en sciences et gestion du tourisme' at the French speaking Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) and vice versa. This exchange is very easy and does not imply additional fees or administration since all can be arranged within the framework of the Erasmus Belgica agreement which extends the Erasmus/Socrates principles to both sides of the linguistic border within Belgium.

There are simple and complex reasons as to why the programme is not taught in English in the first place. The simple reason is the right of each student to study in his or her mother tongue; the complicated reason has to do with the Belgian political context with three official languages, namely, Dutch (Flemish<sup>3</sup>), French and German. Used by a Dutch speaking community in the north, a French speaking community in the south and a small

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<sup>2</sup> The first semester consists of a bridging programme that is different for the professional bachelors and for the academic bachelors and MSc. At the start of the second semester, the two groups are brought together for the actual MSc programme, which takes a further two semesters.

<sup>3</sup> 'Flemish' does not exist as a separate language; it consists of several dialects that all belong to the Dutch language, as spoken in the Netherlands. The splitting up of Flanders and the Netherlands, once part of a political and linguistic entity, goes back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century after which the Flemish dialects on the one hand and the Dutch language as spoken in the Netherlands evolved somewhat differently. Nevertheless differences were never such that they were considered separate languages. At present a common language commission decides on the rules for the standard Dutch language that is used in Flanders as well as in the Netherlands.

German speaking community in the east of the country respectively, all were dominated by the French language in politics and higher administration, higher education, prestigious society events etc., which gradually caused protest and resistance. Finally, a linguistic zoning principle<sup>4</sup> was accepted in 1968 which requires, amongst other things, that subsidized education has to be in the language of the region. There are exceptions in higher education though, under pressure of internationalisation and foreign exchange. Thus the final semester of the Flemish MSc Tourism is taught in English, oriented towards exchanges of students and staff but a whole programme in English only is not yet feasible from a legal point of view.

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### ***2.3 The language skills of students on MSc Tourism course***

How can one be sure that students who join the Flemish MSc Tourism (MT) have enough language skills to accomplish all the requirements outlined above? Firstly, all MT students have a degree in higher education. This implies that all these students are familiar with international literature. This is especially true for students with an academic background and to a lesser extent for professional BSc graduates. With regard to the MT degree, although it is limited to specified disciplines, the academic graduates are very diverse as far as their previous knowledge and language skills are concerned. Depending on the faculty the student's previous discipline belongs to, language courses may or may not have been part of their previous academic programme. At one end of the languages scale, graduates from a Faculty of Business and Economics or from a Faculty of Arts (e.g. MA Linguistics and Literature) had plenty of language training on their programme while graduates of a Faculty of Science (e.g. geographers) or from a Faculty of Social Science (e.g. sociologists) may have had little or no language training beyond their secondary school education<sup>5</sup>. Even so, these candidates for the MT are considered to be trilingual. In doing so, we consider the whole educational system in Belgium (Flanders). In the next section we will further examine the learning outcomes for languages at secondary school level.

## ***3. Languages profiles and foreign language policy***

### ***3.1 Diversity in language experience***

Among the factors influencing curriculum design of the MSc Tourism are considerations regarding characteristics of incoming students. As mentioned before, the MSc Tourism at K.U. Leuven is a degree programme that can be followed by a whole range of students, provided they have a relevant degree in higher education. By this time Flemish students, as was stated earlier, have already been exposed to other languages during several years at secondary and even primary school level.

<sup>4</sup> Total Belgian population: 10.666.866 (2008); Region of Flanders: 6.161.600 inhabitants; Region of Wallonia: 3.456.775 inhabitants; Brussels Region: 1.048.491 inhabitants. The Flemish region/community is Dutch speaking. The Brussels Region is an enclave within the Flemish Region but near the linguistic border and therefore also near the Walloon Region and is (officially) bilingual (French – Dutch). The Walloon Region is dominated by the French speaking community (3.382.606) but a small part of it (9 municipalities, 74.169 inhabitants) consists of a German speaking community. ([http://www.statbel.fgov.be/figures/d21\\_nl.asp#3](http://www.statbel.fgov.be/figures/d21_nl.asp#3))

<sup>5</sup> Academic bachelor degrees preparing for the Master of Tourism:

- Sometimes obligatory language courses: English: 0-6 ECTS, French: 0-6 ECTS
- Sometimes optional language courses (English, French, German, Spanish)
- Initial language skills (advice): at least passive knowledge of French and English, meaning being able to follow a radio of television broadcasting or able to read a newspaper, novel or article.

Most courses use texts in foreign languages (mostly English, sometimes French) and sometimes a presentation has to be given in a foreign language.

In *primary school*, next to the mother tongue Dutch, French is introduced in at least the last two years. The learning outcomes state that children have to develop skills that enable them to use French as a way to communicate at a limited level, which means understanding simple information and being able to communicate with French speaking people. In *secondary school* French, English as well as German are taught.

About 20% of the incoming MT students have acquired an *academic* bachelor degree and about 80% have completed a *professional* bachelor degree. Between these two groups there is a clear difference in language learning (cf. Section 2). Essentially the *professional* bachelors (PB) that are admitted were prepared in an active way during their preceding programme in higher education. The language skills of the majority of the *academic* bachelors (AB) were supported only in a passive way or via optional choices but they represent only a minority of the MT intake. All in all it can be argued that the risk taken by relying on a foreign language basis established during the previous educational career of MT students is acceptable. At the same time, it shows its dependence on the educational policy in general and therefore its vulnerability. The following section will clarify some elements about this regional foreign language policy.

Before doing so, we would like to briefly reverse the question: not ‘what about languages in tourism education?’ but ‘what about tourism in foreign language education?’ A comparison of professional self-concepts and teaching practices among Belgian, Danish and British teachers (Sercu, 2002), all confronted with explicit advocating of intercultural learning, revealed the following: Flemish teachers appear to have not yet left the traditional foreign cultural approach behind for the real intercultural approach to language-and-culture teaching. This means that culture teaching implies mainly a passing on of cultural information and taking little account of pupils’ abilities, needs and interests in the area of intercultural competence. Nevertheless, in doing so, Flemish teachers do not differ much from their colleagues in Denmark and the UK while, unlike Danish and British teachers, “Flemish teachers attach higher importance to tourism and travel, and to Culture with a capital C” (Sercu, 2002: 161).

### **3.2. Flemish languages education policy.**

The Flemish languages policy, as described in the “Policy Paper on Language Learning” is based on the vision that language as a communication tool improves both mutual understanding as well as social cohesion<sup>6</sup>. In an international context and within the open Flemish economy and society foreign language competence is an important issue. The policy paper talks about an “and-and-story”: a good mastery of Dutch as a standard language creates the condition for rich multilingualism and the implementation of more foreign languages in technical, artistic and vocational education.

One of the aims of the Barcelona Agreement signed off by the Council of Europe in 2002 states that every pupil should be able, at the end of compulsory education, to speak his or her mother tongue and at least two foreign languages. In order to reach these language goals the Flemish government leaves considerable autonomy to schools by providing a specific framework, such as the possibility to use *Content and Language Integrated Learning* (commonly referenced as ‘CLIL’), exchange opportunities for pupils as well as teachers, continuing lines of educational goals based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL) and basic competences for teachers.

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<sup>6</sup> Therefore Flanders expects its newcomers to learn Dutch, which is considered to be an important element of the Flemish identity

With this framework as a basis every school creates its own language policy, which the inspectorate takes up as a special point of interest.

In the Flemish foreign language policy much attention is paid to the early acquisition of foreign languages. From kindergarden onwards children are sensitised to languages<sup>7</sup>. The government also encourages schools to test language use, especially at the beginning of primary education (6 year-olds) so that schools know how to start and continue their language policy. To encourage schools to develop their local language policy and to motivate all Flemish teachers to effectively also become language teachers, the government has created an informative and communicative platform<sup>8</sup>. This website provides the latest news about language education, interesting language activities and useful software. Other creative input such as articles and examples of good practice can be found on this website. Teachers can post their own contribution on this site, such as teaching materials, lesson plans for specific language issues, presentations and worksheets. This tool stimulates interaction, innovation and cooperation on multiple levels of the Flemish foreign language policy and education.

Forming the cultural boundary between Germanic and Latin Europe, Belgium is home for several linguistic groups of which the Dutch speaking community in the north (57,8% of the population) and the French speaking community in the south (31,7% of the population) are the most numerous. The Brussels Region, officially bilingual (French – Dutch) but multilingual in practice, represents 9.8% of the population, while the German-speaking community, although limited (0.7%), has gained autonomy for personal and cultural matters<sup>9</sup>. This linguistic diversity is reflected in the federal legislation, which obliges every community to teach the other national languages at schools. As a result of this language law and due to the fact that French is spoken by almost 40% of Belgians (in Wallonia and Brussels) this language is preferred to English as the second language at Flemish schools. Nevertheless, the dominance of English for international communication and the affinity of Dutch speakers with the English language, stimulate quick progress in English as a third language in secondary school education.

Of course, dossiers full of statements about the importance of foreign language skills are not enough to make pupils and students learn languages. Studies in psychology about motivated language learning behaviour provide evidence that inter-group contact (e.g. among tourists and pupils or students) is an important factor influencing language attitudes. It has been argued that 'contact' as such is not enough: superficial contact experiences that are personally unimportant will not bring about a positive attitude while the perception of importance of contact might have a far reaching influence (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2005). Therefore the intercultural approach to language teaching combined with the professional use of concepts from travel and tourism in language courses, (see previous section), might stimulate positive language attitudes among pupils in secondary schools and might explain the satisfactory language skills among students in tourism as much as a long plea for languages.

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<sup>7</sup> Initiation of French preceding the formal language education of French which is obligatory since 2004 in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> form in primary education

<sup>8</sup> [www.delathoogvoortalen.be](http://www.delathoogvoortalen.be)

<sup>9</sup> Refer to footnote 4

#### ***4. Language education for tourist guides and tour managers***

Previous passages clearly demonstrate that the Flemish languages education policy aims at developing language skills to a fairly high level. Consequently, even adults with just a general secondary education diploma already have a firm language base. This is an asset, especially for the tourist sector in Flanders. One of the unique selling points of Flanders is the fact that tourist personnel are able to welcome tourists in English, French, German, and to a lesser degree in Spanish. However, some tourist professions demand more specialised language skills. This is the case for tourist guides and tour managers. In the following passage, we will point out the difference between those two categories and give a brief overview of their training programme before discussing the language issues.

##### ***4.1 The basic curriculum for tourist guides and tour managers***

In essence, tourist guides accompany a group of individuals during a short time whilst giving more specialised information whereas tour managers lead a group of tourists during their holiday, being responsible for the practical organisation and interpreting the visited area on different levels. The difference between the two professions is also evident in the two-year modular training programme developed in 2005. There is a common syllabus for Year 1. It focuses on developing a general knowledge in history, arts, culture, geography and geology. Basic guiding and communication skills are also introduced. During Year 2, students can choose to specialise in tourist guiding or tour managing. The curriculum for the former focuses on storytelling and intercultural communication whilst aspiring tour managers are taught about group dynamics and first aid as well as intercultural communication. Both curricula have a regional specialisation. For guides, this is a region or art city in Flanders. Tour managers specialise in Flanders as a whole with focus on the art cities, Europe or far-off destinations. Professional competence is assessed during practical training. Candidates also have to attend several model tours by a guide or a model trip by a tour manager and practise on a permanent basis. Finally, they have to develop their own tour.

The training programme for guides and tour managers is categorised as higher professional education in Flanders, which focuses on the development of specific vocational skills. Although it is below a Bachelor degree, i.e. the minimum entry qualification is a certificate of secondary education, around 90% of guides and tour managers have already obtained a Bachelor or Master degree, from a range of subject areas.

##### ***4.2. The language component added***

This brings us to the central concern of this article: the language education for guides and tour managers. In 2008, a tailor-made language curriculum was designed for this target group for several reasons. Firstly, the definition of guides and tour managers outlined by the tourist sector and the Socio-economic Council of Flanders (SERV, 2002) clearly emphasizes their ability to express themselves in the language of the visitor or customer. It is seen as a crucial element of hospitality to communicate with foreign groups in their own language. Furthermore, tour managers interpret a destination better if they understand the language of the visited area and if they can translate the explanation of local guides.

Secondly, tourist offices and guide organisations in Flanders are constantly in search of multilingual guides. There is a shortage on the market, especially for the German and Spanish languages. Thirdly, Flanders' tourist marketing strategy abroad focuses mainly on the promotion of its art cities – Brussels, Ghent, Bruges, Antwerp, Leuven and Mechelen.

Thus, figures from 2007 show that foreign tourists generate 57% of the overnight stays. And last but not least, the current generation of guides pointed out the need for specific language courses. Guiding demands specific linguistic skills and special vocabulary not yet covered by traditional language courses for adults offered across Flanders.

Consequently, the Tourism Board of Flanders and the Department of Education took the initiative to develop a tailor-made language curriculum for guides and tour managers. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) was used as a standard for determining the level of language skills needed in the context of guiding. The standard for the language course for guides was set at B2 or Vantage level, which is roughly equivalent of SCQF level 8<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, it is a specialised course which means that the specific vocabulary used by guides determines the focus of the curriculum.

At the end of the course, which takes 120 hours, students master the four language skills of speaking, listening, writing and reading at operational proficiency level. This means that they can speak fluently and effectively on a broad range of topics related to tourism. They are able to express themselves spontaneously, have a large active vocabulary, have mastered the grammar and can understand the language through different media. In short, they are independent users of the language. The language curriculum was completed in 2007 and since 2008 these language courses have been organised mainly in the art cities of Flanders. Language teachers as well as tourist guides and tour managers are very positive about the initiative and the material developed. To date, the Tourism Board of Flanders has developed syllabi for five languages: French, German, English, Spanish and Italian. For every language, a language group was founded consisting of language teachers, most of them also guides or tour managers. They produced a syllabus of thirteen chapters on different topics relating to Flanders. For every Flemish topic, there is a link to the same topic in another country. For instance, the Italian course will cover the Flemish art cities with reference to Italian art cities. Consequently, not only language learning as such is important but for guides and tour managers it is also a way to bridge the gap between two cultures and to see through the eyes of the other culture. The story of a guide or tour manager only becomes relevant if the listener can identify with that story. Intercultural communication skills are essential in this context and therefore the language curriculum is designed as a real intercultural learning tool (cf. section 3.1).

## ***5. Concluding remarks***

Because the students this Flemish MSc Tourism is aimed at all have experienced at least three languages it was not considered necessary to incorporate language courses within the syllabus, although language skills are required to access course materials and to give presentations. However language skills will remain an aspect of the MT programme that needs permanent attention.

For now, the language skills of Flemish graduates can be seen as an asset for the MSc Tourism Programme and a Unique Selling Point for the region. Nevertheless, this asset is vulnerable in an unexpected way. One could expect the internationalisation and globalisation of business, tourism and leisure, travel and mobility to benefit foreign language learning and in one sense they do since they open up access to new markets with new customers and visitors. On the other hand, the dominance of the English

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<sup>10</sup> The learning targets for general secondary school students in Flanders are set at 'threshold level' (B1 in the Common European Framework), roughly equivalent of SCQF level 7 (Scottish Advanced Higher). For further details of the Scottish Credit Qualification Framework see [www.scqf.org.uk](http://www.scqf.org.uk)



language as the international medium of communication threatens the knowledge of other languages and especially the position of French in Flanders. A recent survey (Infotravel, 2008) among travel agencies in Belgium revealed a concern about the level of French among Dutch speaking graduates from Flanders as well as about the level of Dutch among French speaking graduates from Wallonia. The MT is not exempt from this trend since the inflow of Dutch students (from the Netherlands) limits or even excludes the use of French in literature, guest lectures, presentations and/or discussions. Similarly, although no film at a Belgian cinema, documentary or series on Belgian television is dubbed, the predominance of the English language weakens the diversity of the everyday language landscape and the confrontation with foreign languages other than English.

As for the Language Curriculum for tourist guides and tour managers, it was an obvious choice to set the standard at a higher level in view of the language learning outcomes for general secondary schools (cf. section 4). Moreover, tourists nowadays are very demanding and critical. Quality in mastering foreign languages is a condition *sine qua non* if Flanders wants to promote itself as a region where one is welcomed in different languages. Further evaluation will have to assess if the Flemish tourism policy has succeeded in its goal to professionalize the language and intercultural skills of guides and tour managers.

Therefore the languages education policy makers need to keep a close eye on the evolution of foreign language skills on the one hand while providing more language training on the job on the other. A recent survey shows that the most important additional professional skills required by companies in the hotel, catering and tourism sector in three European regions (Slovenia, Czech Republic and Burgundy-France) are knowledge of foreign languages and digital technology skills. At the same time, it was mentioned that this situation was not specific to the sector or the countries or regions under consideration for such a trend is found everywhere (Giffard et al., 2001). Therefore, no self-satisfied attitude about language skills is permissible but, at present, they can be considered an asset for the MT educational programme and the tourism industry in the Flemish region.

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