

# **How is Belgium (Flanders part) moving Geography into the future?**

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The main challenge for geography in Belgium is to develop our standing as a real science subject. Needless to say that we have a lot of competition from other science courses, but mostly from the general public who still see geography as an encyclopedic course.

## **Geography in primary education**

About 8 years ago there was a reform of the program in primary education. The different courses geography, history and biology were combined into a new course called 'World orientation'.

This includes a thematic study of different subjects.

As a result teachers in the first year of secondary schools noticed a decline in the knowledge and capability of some basic geographic skills, like: working with atlases, working with scale ...

## **Geography in secondary education**

At the moment geography is usually a one lesson/week course. The only exceptions are:

- first year: 2 lessons/week
- science option (general education) in the last year: 2 lessons/week

## **Geography at higher education**

We have seen a decline of the number of students studying geography. Until 2006 every year about 360 students started the professional bachelor geography study. Due to a reform in 2006 the students no longer need to choose 3 subjects (in that system geography could be chosen as well as history), but just 2 courses. As a result the number declined to 260 students (- 30 %).

At the master level (to become a teacher in the higher secondary or higher education) the number of students following the special didactical courses has dropped even more. Every year a maximum of 10 students attain that didactical degree (it used to be about 60-70 in the '80 and '90).

The main reason is the ease with which graduates can get a job outside education (e.g. GIS).

### **This evolution: threat or not?**

On the one hand it is a real threat to the quality of geographical education in secondary education. More and more non-geographers teach geography and their lack of knowledge make it into an uninspiring course. Many studies show the link between a good course and the interest of the pupils.

As a result students are no longer interested in geography, what results again in fewer students following it into higher education.

On the other hand in today's economic situation geography students are among the few to have very good opportunities to get a job after their studies.

### **Moving geography back in the picture: How?**

A lot of initiatives have taken place in Belgium the last 5 years. As a result we have managed to change little by little the general public's opinion of the subject.

An overview of the strategy:

- 1) The University of Louvain (KUL) has **combined all courses that deal with the earth** into a new building: the geo-science building.

This building combines all the subjects of geography, geology, soil (part of bio-engineering), spatial organisation and urbanisation (part of civil engineer – architect). This has given extra opportunities to show the wide spectrum of all geo-related subjects.

- 2) **Universities and higher education take part in the science week.**

Every 2 years secondary schools have a science week in which pupils visit laboratories of higher education institutions– this is part of a government science promotion. Every university with a geography/geology department takes part with success.

- 3) **Combining the forces of geography in secondary and higher education.**

Many under the influence of the VLA (the Flemish geography teachers association), together with Fégépro (the Walloon geography teachers association) we have achieved better cooperation and visibility of geography and the geo-sciences. This has been achieved by:

- a. There is twice a year a meeting of the National Comité of geography, this committee is composed of all professors geography in Belgium. Since 2007 VLA and Fégépro have been invited to take part in these meetings. This way specific issues of interest to secondary geography education can be discussed.
- b. Last year the Comité organised again the 'Belgian geography days'. As a result of the cooperation with VLA and Fégépro a specific series of workshops were organised about geography education. On the second day excursions with interesting (educational) subjects were organised.
- c. As a result of these days the VLA is organising in cooperation with the universities a symposium about 'scientific research in geography'.

#### 4) **Combining forces with other scientific organisations and universities.**

The VLA is a partner with different organisations. This way geography is promoted as there is always a lot of media attendance at these activities:

- a. VLA cooperated with the VLIZ to organize a 2-day symposium about the North Sea. Scientists, professors, economists, environmentalists and teachers were present and attended a number of presentations and received ready-to-use materials for the classroom.
- b. VLA cooperated with Flagis at the GIS-o-Topo-Lis days about GIS in the private sectors, public sector and education sector.
- c. VLA cooperates with companies that deal with geography: the NGI (topographical maps), Eurotronics, Intergraph and ESRI (GIS). This cooperation leads to benefits for teachers to make introduction of these tools easier in secondary and higher education.
- d. Together with the University of Ghent we take part in science projects.

#### 5) **Make geography (or geo-science) the common name**

There is a proposal in Belgium (and some professors already do it) to mention in their title always the prefix 'geo' or 'geography' or 'geology'. In this way whenever a professor is interviewed in the media the link with the geo-sciences is made, giving the public a more informed idea of what geo-science is all about. For example a professor specialised in seismology (part of the geology department) is presented in the news he is referred to as a 'geologist – seismologist'.

#### 6) **Cooperation with other countries is essential**

The main importance of organisations like HERODOT or EUROGEO is that it combines forces to help geography, not only on the field of promotion and visualisation but also as part of science and education. In fact the more cooperation the more good tools and material are distributed, giving geography a boost.

## **Results: In the long term yes!**

We notice already in Belgium a change in the general opinion on geography. More and more people are starting to realize the real content of geography and its importance in today's society. There is still a long way to go but as someone said: *'Change: yes we can!'*

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