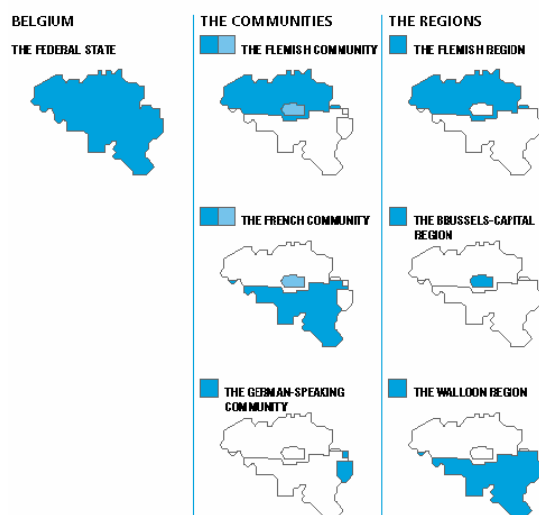


## COUNTRY FOCUS : BELGIUM\*

Wim DE VOS, Royal Library of Belgium  
 Miguel LAMBOTTE, Belgian Association for Documentation (ABD/BVD)  
 Marc STORMS, Flemish Association for Libraries, Archives and Documentation Centres (VVBAD)  
 Pascale VAN DINTER, STIS (Scientific and Technical Information Service/  
 Federal Office for Scientific, Technical and Cultural Affairs) & Cultivate Belgium.

With Belgium holding the Presidency of the EU, from June – December 2001, specialists from the Dutch and French communities explain the rich and diverse background to libraries in Belgium.

### FEDERAL STRUCTURE OF BELGIUM



Belgium is richly diverse through its history, language and culture. Created in 1830 as a highly centralised state, federal structures were gradually created from the mid-1970's onwards. Gradually more decision making power has been passed onto the three communities and the three regions within Belgium.

The federal state has, with the exception of some national cultural institutions such as the Royal Library and the State Archives, no responsibility for culture and education. So each community has their own public library act i.e. Flemish (60% of the population), French (40% of the population) and German-speaking (ca. 60.000 inhabitants). There are some federal ministries, of course, for example for

justice and science policy. The transposition of European Directives into Belgian law is a federal issue although the communities must be consulted, as stipulated in the public lending right and the law on author and related rights (1994). The copyright debate has mainly been conducted at regional level e.g. contracts with collecting societies for reproduction rights signed by Flemish and French-speaking universities differ from each other on some points.

Public competencies in the field of research and development lie with the federal state and federal bodies. Each authority (federal, regional and community) is responsible for the research falling within its general competencies. Consequently, the regions provide general support for industry and technology research, and the communities provide support for basic and university research. The federal authority is responsible for federal scientific and cultural institutions, space research, nuclear research, data exchange networks operating between scientific institutions at national and international level and Belgium's participation in the activities of international research bodies, amongst others.

A good example of this interaction is the issue of book prices. If the current proposal from the federal ministry of eco-

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nomics is adopted, book prices will be regulated from 2003 when the maximum discount on a book price will be 5%.

This country focus on Belgium reflects this federal structure and has been written by specialists from the Dutch and French communities.

## The Royal Library

The Royal Library of Belgium : [www.kbr.be](http://www.kbr.be) falls under the federal Ministry of Scientific Research along with ten other institutions including the General State Archives, the Royal Museums of Fine Arts and the Royal Museums of Art and History.

The major role of the Royal Library is to administer Legal Deposit in Belgium. Since 1966, one copy of every publication by a Belgian author or editor with a foreign publisher must be deposited at the Royal Library. The Royal Library also manages the country's oldest patrimony: manuscripts, antique printed material, nineteenth-century publications, maps, sheet music, woodcuts, engravings, coins and medals. It is also an important scientific library. A recent study showed that readers of the Royal Library are mainly carrying out research in humanities and so it decided at the end of 2000 to spend the larger part of its acquisition budget on the humanities. Nevertheless, it does wish to remain a "reference desk" for anyone who is looking for information in any field and so will continue to build an important collection of broad scientific reference works.

The Royal Library faces many challenges. Because of the specific nature of its collections, it pays a lot of attention to conservation and restoration. It also carries out a preservation policy including microfilming and, to a lesser degree, digitisation projects. The Royal Library will increase its efforts in this field.

Since it took the Royal Library quite a long time to develop an automated catalogue, it has now launched a catching-up

programme for retroconversion. The catalogue of Belgian books published since 1875 can be searched on the Internet; by mid-2002, the database will also include foreign titles published since 1930. This programme will be widened during the coming years.

The automated catalogue should become the basis of an extensive system of electronic services where the Royal Library delivers on-line full-text documents to its users, within the limits of the legislation on copyright. A number of projects in this field are about to be started, enabling the Royal Library to remain the most important reference point for Belgian information in the electronic era.

## Flanders

### Public libraries

In 1998, a book entitled *Building libraries in Flanders : 20 years of public library buildings 1978-1997* was published. In the preface Luc Martens, Minister of Culture wrote "If one assessed the library sector in Flanders as a whole, one can only conclude that it has achieved a praiseworthy standard."

The public library Decree from 1978 was a milestone for the public library sector in Flanders. Almost all of the 308 Flemish municipalities have established a well-equipped library with professional staff and a basic stock of books, journals and magazines. Audio-visual material is also available in about a hundred or so libraries. The higher authorities, such as the provincial governments and the Flemish Community, make a considerable contribution in financing these libraries. The Flemish Community subsidised the construction and stocking of public libraries up until the middle of 1994 and still pays 43 million Euro towards the salary costs of more than 2,500 staff. The provincial governments subsidise part of the operating costs, almost 8.5 million Euro. The contribution from local governments amounts to approximately 60.4% of the total cost of 78.5 million Euro. Although

the lending of books is free of charge, a number of municipalities have introduced a membership fee for borrowers from the age of 14 years (7.5 Euro maximum). Borrowers usually pay a fee for CDs and have to pay for photocopying and overdue items (nearly 7 million Euros in 1997).

From 1997, all public libraries have been connected to the Internet by a virtual private network :

<http://www.bib.vlaanderen.be>.

BIBNET provides a Webguide service (access to a number of Dutch language websites), addresses and opening hours of the libraries and access to the Flemish Union Catalogue (VLACC) of the public libraries. Of course, BIBNET also provides direct access to the global Internet. In most municipalities, use of the Internet is free of charge. Libraries benefit from an agreement with Belgacom, the national telecoms provider, who provide an ISDN connection for a flat fee of 250 Euro a year. Talks have begun to convert to ADSL.

The Flemish population seems to be extremely happy with its public libraries and awarded them a mark of eight out of ten, according to a survey carried out by the consumer organisation *Test-Aankoop* in November 1998.

A new public library decree is being drafted and is scheduled for 2002. With the advent of the information society and the increase in leisure time, lifelong learning, cultural education and meaningful recreation remain important. Individual libraries can no longer comply with the requirement to meet " all " the information needs of their users. This means that co-operation and networking between public libraries and other libraries and documentation centres is becoming increasingly important. The new law will oblige municipalities to establish joint ventures with their neighbours for back-office library services. This will be done in co-operation with the recently created National Centre for Public Libraries :

VCOB <http://www.vcob.be>.

Co-operation between public libraries and other local cultural actors will also be emphasised. The Ministry has announced

that it will publish a single act for public libraries, cultural centres and local heritage.

### Research and school libraries

Research and school libraries in Flanders are many and varied, ranging from large central libraries in the universities to libraries in the new polytechnics and high schools and one-person operations in small institutions and organisations. There are no specific laws or subsidies for these types of libraries.

They all face a speedy transition to electronic information. They will remain hybrid libraries for many more years to come, with conventional literature and information on paper (books, journals, magazines) and electronic information (mostly bibliographies and reference works, but increasingly also electronic journals, magazines and books). Making available electronic research information and general electronic information to the user at his or her desk is one of the great challenges of the coming years.

In order to achieve this goal, the Flemish Community has funded the central acquisition and access to scientific databases (with a ceiling of 2 million Euro) and the development of an electronic document delivery service. The Flemish Council of Research Libraries manages the *Elektron* project, which supports university and high school libraries and some research institutions funded by the Flemish Community.

Flanders' research libraries have gained recognition in the international world of libraries. The Catholic University of Leuven produced the DOBIS-LIBIS automation system (now succeeded by AMICUS), the University of Brussels was the first in the world to run a library system (VUBIS) on a minicomputer. The university library of Gent has carried out pioneering work on the establishment of an interface between databases and catalogue information (SilverPlatter and SFX). The University of Antwerpen and the Limburg uni-

versity centre have joined forces in Anet, the major player in Hyperlib, a project that falls within the Third Framework Programme of the European Commission.

Co-operation between Flemish research establishments takes place partly through Belgian and partly through Flemish channels. This has resulted in the Belgian union catalogue of monographs (CCB), ANTILOPE :

<http://www.ua.ac.be/MAN/ANTILOPE/>, the Belgian periodicals catalogue : (<http://www.libis.kuleuven.ac.be/libis/ccb>), IMPALA, the Belgian electronic document order system and VIRLIB :

<http://www.ua.ac.be/VIRLIB/index.html>, an electronic document delivery service. A recent trend is the creation of networks amongst libraries and documentation centres working in the same subject field e.g. the environment (Felnet), transport (Sado-ver), North-South relations (Cocos-net) to name but a few.

## Wallonia

Co-operation between libraries has been steadily increasing over the last few years. For the public libraries of the French Community, the Centre for Public Reading (CLPCF) - see :

<http://www.cfwb.be/biblio/reseau/gbp3.html> is a public organisation focusing on issues of co-ordination, promotion, publishing, bibliographies, cataloguing, professional training, etc. For the last five years, the CLPCF has organised Days of New Technologies. In 2001, the event will focus on " Libraries in the knowledge society " and will take place on 25-26 September 2001 (for more information, send an email to [clpcf@cfwb.be](mailto:clpcf@cfwb.be)).

In the Brussels-Capital Region, a central agency for the co-ordination of the public reading has been set up.

Special co-ordinating bodies for university libraries have been established in each Community. In the French community, a standing committee for libraries within the French inter-university council, the CIUF, has been established. One of its

initiatives is the creation of a co-operative, SASUF, to represent scientific authors with Reprobél, the only Belgian body that represents author's rights.

The Conference of the librarians of the universities, including the librarian of the Royal Library, serves as a national co-ordination forum. The " Workgroup Libraries " of Belnet (the Belgian research network) represents libraries and documentation centres (including the Royal Library and the university libraries) that provide electronic information services through the network. These all support many co-operative projects e.g. union catalogues, ILL systems, etc. and other partnerships.

Several libraries are involved in the implementation of co-operative telematics projects within the framework of publicly-funded programmes at both federal and Community levels e.g. the ULB (Brussels) in the VIRLIB project (see above) and UCL (Louvain-la-Neuve) in the EOLE project :

<http://leon.muse.ucl.ac.be/Eole>.

The ULG (Liège) has LENTIC : <http://www.egss.ulg.ac.be/lentic/e8ac.htm> a multidisciplinary research laboratory. This focuses on economic, organisational and strategic aspects of innovation processes, with special emphasis on information and communication technologies. It is often called upon to meet external requests in these fields. Its team consists of fourteen researchers from different disciplines such as economics, sociology, psychology, or management.

The role of professional library associations in stimulating co-operation between all library sectors should also be emphasised.

There is a special supplementary education for documentalists and librarians at four universities and twelve schools at polytechnic level organise degrees that

lead to diplomas in librarianship. Depending on the institution, courses can take place either during the day or as an evening class.

### Professional librarian associations



There are many professional organisations for librarians at federal as well as at Community level.

The national association, the Belgian Association for Documentation (ABD/BVD - <http://www.synec-doc.be/abd-bvd>) unites specialists mainly active in corporate libraries and documentation centres. The annual meeting, Inforum, attracts more than 200 participants where matters of common interest and concern are discussed. The ABD/BVD is fully involved in the European project DECIDOC, which will build a certification procedure for documentalists across Europe.



In Flanders, the Flemish Association for Libraries, Archives and Documentation Centres (VVBAD - <http://vbad.be>) is the meeting place for library and archive professionals. The Flemish Research Libraries Council (VOWB -

[http://www.libis.kuleuven.ac.be/vowb/index\\_engels.html](http://www.libis.kuleuven.ac.be/vowb/index_engels.html)) co-ordinates scientific library work in Flanders through studies and projects; these provide information and insight for co-ordination between different individual libraries.



In Wallonia, the APBD (<http://apbd.citeweb.net>) focuses specifically on the domain of French-speaking public libraries.

This association organises a Cannone Award, to reward the special contribution of public libraries to young readers.

The FIBBC (Fédération interdiocésaine des Bibliothécaires et Bibliothèques Catholiques), is also present throughout Wallonia.



### **CONCLUSION**

Belgian information specialists are very diverse through history, language, culture and sources of inspiration. Their experience and marketplace are boosted by the presence of the European institutions in Brussels. They always try to respect their motto : " Strength lies in unity ".

### **WEB REFERENCES**

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Cultivate Belgium  
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Virlib  
<http://www.ua.ac.be/VIRLIB/index.html>

Vlaams Centrum voor Openbare Bibliotheken (VCOB)  
<http://www.vcob.be>