Higher education organized or subsidized by the French Community consists of an association of higher education institutions into academic centers and coordinated by an Academy of Research and Higher Education (ARES).

ARES is a public interest organization funded by the French Community and created by the decree of 7 November 2013 [1], defining the landscape of higher education and the academic organization of studies ("Landscape Decree").

The missions of ARES are:

- guarantee the mission of public service of general interest in higher education;
- support institutions and ensure their overall coordination in their missions of teaching, research and service to the community;
- to encourage collaboration among themselves, while respecting their autonomy;
- ARES federates 142 higher education institutions [2] in Wallonia and Brussels:

  - 6 universities
  - 20 "hautes écoles"
  - 19 higher education schools of arts
  - 100 higher education institutions for social advancement education
  - 200 000 students, 22 000 staff members, 5 academic centers constituted on a geographical basis and competent for questions of mobility, information and training.

### Objectives in Higher education

Under the terms of the decree of 7 November 2013 ("Landscape decree"), higher education organised or grant-aided by the French Community has the following general objectives:

- to support students in assuming their role as responsible citizens, able to contribute to the development of a democratic, pluralist and united society;
- to promote students’ autonomy and development, in particular by fostering their scientific and artistic curiosity, their critical sense and their awareness of individual and collective duties and responsibilities;
- to convey, through both the content of instruction and the other activities organised by the institution, the humanist values, creative and innovative traditions, and artistic, scientific, philosophical and political cultural heritage which constitute the historical foundations of this form of education, while upholding individual diversity;
- to ensure the provision of education – both general and specialised, both fundamental/conceptual and practical – at the highest level in order to enable students to play an active role in professional, social, economic and cultural life, and to open up equal opportunities for social emancipation;
Higher education includes university education, higher non-university education organised in hautes écoles and higher education in the arts organised in arts colleges. Two or more universities may associate to form an academy. An academy may establish partnership relations with other higher education institutions.

**The legal framework**

On 31 March 2004, an important decree known as the ‘Bologna Decree’ redefined the whole of higher education in the French Community, with the aim of facilitating its inclusion within the European Higher Education Area. The decree entered into force in September 2004. A number of technical terms were redefined or simplified (e.g. types of degrees), and education was reorganised in three cycles, leading to bachelor and master's degrees and doctorates (only universities offer third-cycle studies). Partnerships between universities and other institutes were regulated.

The years are counted in terms of "credits" or ECTS: one year corresponds to 60 ECTS and one ECTS corresponds to 24 hours of learning activities. The first cycle consists of 180 ECTS (except for some university courses, such as medicine, ...) which may be acquired in three years of study. It leads to the bachelor degree. The second cycle generally consists of 60 or 120 ECTS which may be acquired in at least one or two years of study respectively, and leads to the master's degree. Third-cycle programmes consist of doctoral courses (leading to a research training certificate) (up to 60 ECTS) and work on the preparation of a doctoral thesis (at least 180 credits).

A major new reform of the landscape of higher education was put in place by the decree of 7 November 2013, defining the landscape of higher education and the academic organization of the studies (see above). This "landscape" decree applies to any student, whatever the institution of higher education where he is registered. The concept of "year of study" disappears in favor of that of "annual program" of the student. Similarly, the notion of "course" is replaced by that of "teaching unit". In general, the student's annual program consists of at least 60 ECTS, divided into teaching units, which are themselves composed of learning activities. The success threshold necessary for acquiring the ECTS for a teaching unit is set at 10/20. At the end of the first year, a student must have passed at least 45 ECTS to move to the next annual block. If the student has successfully completed at least 30 ECTS, the student repeats his / her first annual block (having acquired ECTS for marks greater than or equal to 10/20) and has the possibility to anticipate ECTS from the rest of the program for a maximum of 60 ECTS in its annual program. During the following academic years, the student enters into a logic of accumulation of ECTS. The unsuccessful ECTS are presented again in the next annual program.

At the end of the course of study, when the minimum number of credits is acquired by the student, the jury gives him the corresponding academic degree: bachelor (first cycle degree) or master (second cycle degree).

Postgraduate studies include doctoral training and work related to the preparation of a doctoral thesis (forfeit of 180 ECTS acquired after an initial master's degree).
The academic year

The academic year is a period of 12 months starting on 14 September and ending on next 13 September. For the purposes of organisation of study programmes, the academic year is divided into three terms.

Educational activities leading to a first- or second-cycle academic degree are spread over the first two terms of the academic year, apart from certain assessments or employment integration activities. The first two terms comprise at least 12 weeks. An assessment period is organised at the end of each of these terms. The third term comprises assessment periods as well as employment integration activities or research projects. The academic authorities may, for duly justified reasons of force majeure, extend the assessment period of a student to the following term, but not beyond a period of two months and a half after the end of the term.

Students benefit from three holiday periods: two weeks in winter (Christmas), two weeks in spring and at least one month in summer (starting from 1 July or 5 July or the end of courses as defined by the authorities, until the start of the following academic year), in addition to the statutory public holidays. Educational activities and assessments, except for employment integration activities, are not organised on Sundays, statutory public holidays or 27 September. The academic authorities or the controlling authorities of higher education may decide on other days when activities may not take place at a specific institution.

Each institution defines its own timetables.

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