



# **The typical dilemma between university expansion and rationalization: Belgium (and Finland) since the 1960s**

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*Immediately after the abolition in 1814 of the academies of Brussels and Liège, a struggle broke out in the Southern Netherlands between several cities to secure the establishment of a university within their walls. Particularly the advocates of Leuven and Brussels pushed forward the ideal of one university, although it appeared to be impossible to reach a consensus about where to establish this single university. From the start, the ideal met with all kinds of conflicting local interests. However, the idea of one university actually never left the scene again. Certainly in reaction to the university expansion in the 1960s and the subsequent need of rationalization of the university landscape from the 1970s, the idea of one university (in this period for Flanders) gained in attraction again. By comparing the debate in Belgium with that in Finland, the article will make clear that the outcome of the discussions was not determined by arguments with regard to pedagogy and science, but rather by local, regional, ideological, economic and not the least political priorities, which besides, changed only very little during the whole period.*

## **Introduction**

In this article it is argued that the perceived trend towards commodification in higher education should be analysed in a broader framework because this phenomenon is to a large extent the result of other, deeper rooted streams in society. If one talks about commodification in higher education one should also speak about ‘managerialism’, efficiency, the publish-or-perish culture, accountability and the increasing topicality of the sentence ‘to measure is to know’. All these phenomena are, according to our view, expressions of a general societal preoccupation to economize. The overarching aim of this trend is to put the scarce resources to their best use. This idea implies that one can objectively calculate or reason what is the best way to utilize certain resources. Particularly in the realm of higher education this is extremely difficult to realize because if one wants to economize one should at the outset know what one wants to achieve. And when it comes to the goals of higher education, the opinions differ hugely and sometimes even seem irreconcilable.

Also in the Belgian/Flemish case, the debate on the commodification of higher education is closely connected to the question what is/are the (main) function(s) of higher educa-

tion. Should it concentrate on the education of the elite, the training of the future work force or making an end to social injustice? Since the arguments are manifold and consensus seems to be lacking, it becomes relatively easy to join the debate and to try to get a piece of the cake. And then the whole issue, which started out as an economical one, becomes one of politics. This article will look at how Belgium/Flanders has tried to organize its supply and number of universities and – hopelessly – failed to do so. The short comparison with the indeed remarkably similar case of Finland will show how in general too often these discussions, were and probably still are, dominated by economical or political considerations. On the other hand arguments of regional development appeared to make much more sense in the vast country of Finland than in tiny Belgium. Moreover, the comparison also proves the highly complicated character of the Belgian society with many different kinds of dividing lines: ideological, linguistic and regional.

The article is based mainly on secondary literature concerning the expansion and democratization of university education in Belgium and Finland from the 1960s. However, in contrast to most of the existing studies the focus is not put on one particular institution, but instead the university landscape as a whole is at the centre of attention, enabling us to reveal broad lines of development and some general similarities in the typical dilemma between university expansion and rationalization. In order to analyse the Belgian debate in particular, the opinions and suggestions of the most influential protagonists in the discussion, many of them being university rectors, have been studied by making use of their leading publications in this regard.

Immediately after the abolition in 1814 of the academies of Brussels and Liège, which had been established by the French occupier, a struggle broke out in the Southern Netherlands between several cities to secure the establishment of a university within their walls. Particularly the advocates of Leuven [1] and Brussels pushed forward the ideal of one university. And although many others in principle agreed that one university was enough for the Southern provinces, it appeared to be impossible to reach a consensus about where to establish this single university. From the start, the ideal met with all kinds of conflicting local interests. Within the chaos of the Belgian revolution in 1830, new proposals were launched to transform the existing institutions into one integrated university, yet the intensified ideological conflict caused that the ideal changed into an unattainable idea (for more details on the debate between 1814 and 1835 and references to literature and original sources, see Dhondt 2006 and Dhondt 2011, 49–105).

The disorder at the state universities of Ghent, Liège and Leuven (that had been founded by William I in 1817) and the inactivity of the government gave rise to the idea to establish an own catholic university in Malines. Indeed, the bishops did no longer believe in the possibility to transform the state universities according to their views. So the conflict between different cities gradually evolved into a conflict between different ideological groups. In reaction to the solemnly opening of the catholic university at the 4th of November 1834 in Malines, the liberals in Brussels for their part fell back on their idea from 1831 for the foundation of a free university in Brussels, and only a bit more than two weeks after the catholic university, followed the inauguration of the Université libre de Belgique/Bruelles. In that way there existed five universities in the autumn of 1834 – the state universities of Ghent, Liège and Leuven, the catholic university in Malines and the free university in Brussels – even though complaints about the large number of universities were uttered already for years.

The discussions in parliament in the summer of 1835 did not add many new elements to the debate. The catholics supported tacitly the bill for the preservation of the state universi-

ties in Ghent and Liège and the (implicit) abolishment of the state university in Leuven, with the idea to move the catholic university in that case to Leuven. The liberals argued strongly in favour of one state university. This single university should then be established in Leuven, allegedly because of the central location and the discipline of the students, in reality of course to prevent the move of the catholic university. Somewhat unexpectedly the liberal members of parliament received the support of some prominent catholics who had an eye for the flourishing of science rather than for ideological interests, but this was of no avail. With a narrow majority, 37 members of parliament voted against the preservation of only one state university, 32 in favour.

After 1835 everyone seemed to have resigned himself with the existence of four universities in Belgium and other themes started to dominate the discussions on university education. Still, regularly the consideration could be heard that one university was actually enough for the small country of Belgium. The development from one university in Leuven at the end of the eighteenth century, over three state universities in the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, to two free universities and two state universities in 1835, was largely the result of accidental occurrences. The opponents of a dissemination of the intellectual and financial capital over several institutions had not expected in 1830 that they would lose their struggle for one university once again. And indeed, the decision of 1835 had far-reaching consequences. It prescribed the rules according to which the game had to be played and it was clear for everyone that it were not scientific interests that decided upon these rules, but priorities of the cities and of different ideological groups.

However, the idea of one university actually never left the scene again. Certainly in reaction to the university expansion in the 1960s and the subsequent need of rationalization of the university landscape from the 1970s, the idea of one university (in this period for Flanders) gained in attraction again. Indeed, this time it did no longer function as a more or less realistic ideal to pursue, but rather as an idea with a strong warning function. The policy of rationalization never had the aim to establish one university, but at the other side of the spectrum stood the even more abused reality of one university per one million inhabitants. However, it will become clear that since 1814 the outcome of the discussions was not determined by arguments with regard to pedagogy and science, but rather by local, regional, ideological, economic and not the least political priorities, which besides, changed only very little during the whole period.

## **University expansion in the 1960s**

The question of the number and the place of universities in Belgium only came on the political agenda again at the beginning of the 1960s. It is true that already at the middle of the nineteenth century a few new university institutions were established, but these were not of a kind that they provoked a fundamental debate about the whole issue. The Jesuits, for instance, had extended their philosophical education at the Collège Notre-Dame de la Paix de Namur in 1845 to offer an (ultramontane) counterweight against the too progressive university in Leuven at the time, at least according to their interpretation (Troisfontaines 1987). The foundation of the Institut Saint-Louis in Brussels followed some ten years later, but it had a completely other ideological background. The institute was established in the aftermath of the conflict about the professors François Laurent and Hubert Basseur at the University of Ghent, who had dared to deny the divinity of Christ (Lamberts 1970). In reaction

to this, Pope Pius IX summoned the Belgian bishops in an encyclical to establish in each diocese a school where the ultramontane catholic philosophy would be taught.

In the dioceses of Bruges and Tournai the foundation of such an institution did make no sense because of a lack of students. The bishop of Liège could content himself with the education at the local university, where right-minded graduates from Leuven taught the philosophical courses. The Jesuits interpreted the decision of the pope correctly as an expression of sympathy towards their college in Namur and they tried to establish similar institutions in Ghent and Brussels. In Ghent this happened at the Collège Sainte-Barbe from 1857, but the courses in philosophy continued there only for some ten years. The foundation of similar courses in the archbishopric Malines took some doing, due to the opposition of Archbishop Engelbert Sterckx, who feared for a too fierce competition with his own university in Leuven. Finally he decided to be ahead of the Jesuits by moving the existing commercial college in Malines to Brussels and to extend the programme with philosophical courses. In that way the Institut Saint-Louis à Bruxelles was established in 1858 (Braive 1985). The Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis (FUSL), as the institute was called since 1948, was one of many university institutions to receive a Dutch-speaking counterpart at the end of the 1960s, in this case the Universitaire Faculteiten Sint-Aloysius (UFSAL), in 1991 renamed into Katholieke Universiteit Brussel (KUB).

Already during the debate in the beginning of the 1830s the linguistic aspect had been pushed forward as one of the arguments for the preservation of two state universities, one in the Flemish part of the country in Ghent and one in the Walloon provinces in Liège. In that period this reasoning was not very relevant yet, since nobody really considered offering teaching in Dutch. Only in 1930 when the University of Ghent was changed into a Dutch-speaking institution, the Flemish Movement had reached this crucial objective, viz. higher education in their own language (Mantels & Vandevoorde 2010). Leuven followed Ghent relatively quickly. By 1935 most of the programs there were taught both in Dutch and in French. However, after the settlement of the language border in the early 1960s, the situation in Leuven became extremely tense because of the existence of a French-speaking branch of the university on Flemish soil, which was moreover intending to stay and even to expand in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Violent demonstrations in 1968 preceded reaching an agreement about the splitting up of the Dutch-speaking Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven) and the French-speaking Université catholique de Louvain à Louvain-la-Neuve (UCL) (Tollebeek & Nys et al. 2006). One year later also the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) got its Dutch-speaking counterpart, the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) (Witte & Tyssens 1995).

In what follows we will focus only on the development in Flanders – the ministry of National Education was split up at the end of the 1960s and had from then on two ministers. The debate about the rationalization of higher education from the 1970s on was much less intense in the Walloon provinces and has never taken the form of a plea for one Walloon University. The situation there was also a bit less complicated due to the existence of only two dominant players, the liberal ULB on the one side and its catholic opponent the UCL at the other side. The University of Liège had lost much of its popularity and had fallen in esteem. Moreover, many of the small university institutions in Brussels, Mons, Gembloux, Arlon or Namur were very keen on their independency (Tyssens 2000–2001).

The establishment of Dutch-speaking counterparts of existing university institutions was only one aspect of the university expansion of the 1960s. More important was the dominant idea of democratization, which became the main objective in educational policy in the 1950s. Following on a post-war international trend, the conviction prevailed that eve-

ryone should be enabled to enter the university (Kerr 1991). Supported by the social partners and out of the need of more higher educated professionals, pleas for the establishment of new university centres followed each other very quickly. Another argument that recurred frequently read as follows, that “the spread of university education would be useful for the dissemination or consolidation of certain views of life – catholic according to some, liberal according to others – to the farthest corners of the Flemish region,” wrote Albert Westerlinck, professor at the University of Leuven and one of the most important critics against the university expansion (Westerlinck 1961, 457).

The last argument was without a doubt the main motivation for the establishment of a department for undergraduate studies in Kortrijk by the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in 1965 (KULAK). Even though the episcopate defended the foundation with the witticism that they wanted to bring the education closer to the people, still it was clear to everyone that another (if not the most important) aim of the new institution was to attract catholic students from the region, to the disadvantage of the state university in Ghent. The University of Ghent however, did manage to get the KULAK to be established in Kortrijk and not in nearby Bruges (Casselmann 1984 and Vanden Borre 2015). A few years earlier the Jesuits had extended their commercial college in Antwerp already with the faculties of Arts (including law studies) and Political and Social Sciences, resulting in the Universitaire Faculteiten Sint-Ignatius Antwerpen (UFSIA). In 1965, the UFSIA succeeded to get its programs recognized and subsidized by the state.

Reactions on these catholic initiatives could not stay away. Stimulated by the socialist burgomaster of Antwerp, Lode Craeybeckx, the State Commercial College (Rijkshandels-hogeschool), the Colonial College and the Higher Institute for Translators and Interpreters merged, (also) in 1965, into the Rijksuniversitair Centrum Antwerpen (RUCA) (Van Beeck et al. 1996 and Craeybeckx 1962). In general, these regional institutions were highly promoted by politicians of different parties, firstly because the discourse of democratization was omnipresent, but also because of the existence of regional electoral districts, what made that politicians were continuously tempted to give preference to their regional electorate instead of to the public interest (Huyse 1975).

A second reaction followed a few years later when a group of free-thinkers, together with some progressive catholics came up with the idea of a new type of university, viz. the pluralistic institution. Within these universities the two dominant directions of thought (free-thinkers and Catholics) were given the guarantee to be represented. Tolerance was the point of departure, but by no means neutrality (Witte 2000, 56)[\[2\]](#). In practice, in 1971 the Limburgs Universitair Centrum (LUC) was founded in Diepenbeek with a decisive catholic ascendancy and a blocking minority of non-Catholics. In Antwerp a pluralistic superstructure was established in the same year, the Universitaire Instelling Antwerpen (UIA), which offered education in the second and third cycle for most of the study tracks that existed at the UFSIA and the RUCA.

The origins of most of the new institutions that had been established in the 1960s were thus clearly ideological, regional and linguistic interests. Nevertheless, chiefly the feeling of a need of democratization had inspired the university expansion at the beginning of the decade. All kind of protest was thus bound to follow. Especially because the objections against the university expansion of the National Council of Science Policy had been brushed aside completely as well. The government had asked this council, which was established in 1959, for advice about the issue, but its report had been entirely neglected.

Firstly, according to the Council, a real university spirit could attain its full development only within a complete university where all branches of human knowledge were confronted with each other. Secondly, universities of a certain size could attract highly qualified professors much more easily and they could provide for better equipment. Moreover, the small number of students from certain regions of the country (what had been one of the immediate causes for the university expansion) could be attributed in the first place to the social structure of the population in this area. In this respect it did make no sense to establish university institutions in these provinces without taking important socio-economic measures at the same time. In addition to this the Council criticised the regional and provincial spirit that was at the basis of many initiatives precisely for the foundation of a pre-eminently universalistic and international institution as was the university. And finally, one of the main counter-arguments was probably the financial cost. A decentralisation of higher education would bring along a large increase of the financial burden, possibly at the expense of the quality of education (De Clerck 1985, 11–13).

### **Prevailing feeling of disappointment**

Many people involved in particular shared this last concern, including the rector of the KU Leuven, Pieter De Somer. The foundation of the KULAK was not less than a financial disaster in his eyes. And also his colleague at the University of Ghent, Jan-Jacques Bouckaert, emphasized especially this argument in his objections against the university expansion in a letter to the prime minister in 1964:

*If Ghent would like to survive, this University has to dispose of a sufficient number of students to enable the recruitment of its staff needed for teaching and scientific research. Moreover, it is self-evident that the country can only spend limited resources on financing higher education. When these means are spread out equally over the existing and the still to establish University Centres, our University would dispose of an absolutely insufficient number of resources for its existence and its development. For these two reasons, it is doomed to disappear due to a slow suffocation and a death by strangulation (De Clerck 1985, 20).*

Despite the support of his colleague from Liège, Bouckaerts words – which were also inspired by the fear for the extension of the sphere of influence of the KU Leuven – were taken into account just as little.

Certainly the new law of 1971 on the financing of universities made a big hole in the budget of the Belgian government, of which the state universities suffered in the first place. All university institutions were dealt with on equal terms and the basic revenues were based exclusively on the number of students in relation to their subject of study. Each year a lump sum was fixed per student and the number of students to be paid for was decided upon. Actually the law was prepared for a climate of economic expansion and fitted into the dominant discourse of democratization, but immediately it came into conflict with the crisis of the public finances in the middle of the 1970s (De Clerck 1975).

Whereas the main argument against the university expansion was thus not changed since the beginning of the nineteenth century, a number of other arguments was added as well, one of them being the fear for a prevailing sphere of provincialism. Among other professors, Westerlinck considered the establishment of the new universities an attack on the real

function of a university. As such, he opposed the foundation of separate undergraduate education centres because they ran counter the central idea of a university as being an institution where all sciences are represented, a position that he shared with many of his colleagues from the beginning of the nineteenth century (Westerlinck 1961).

According to Westerlinck these new institutions were not established in the first place for the benefit of science, yet to meet the need of more higher educated people by offering them a vocational education, and thus not in a university spirit. Part of experiencing this university spirit consisted of liberating oneself of the own *Heimat* and coming into contact with students from a different background, with other opinions and other views of life. A typical manifestation of this prevailing spirit of provincialism, Westerlinck founded in the fact that Flemish students returned home each weekend “as pigeons who want to return to their own cage as soon as possible once the courses are finished on Friday afternoon”. And indeed “one can argue in favour of provincial countries in huge countries such as Russia or America, but does it make sense on a small piece of land as ours?”, he wondered (Westerlinck 1961, 462—464).

In reply to the argumentation that in smaller institutions a better supervision of the students was possible, the opponents stated that if it was true that undergraduate students at the larger institutions needed more coaching, this was certainly something to work at. “Sparing the students of getting acquainted with the ‘real’ university as long as possible, seemed not to be the optimal means to prepare them on what is coming after leaving the university,” according to the historian Jan Roegiers in a reflection on Westerlinck’s objections. He considered the increasing use of dialects symptomatically for the narrow-minded university climate at the new provincial colleges (Elchardus et al. 1998, 24—25).

Many people involved were also disappointed because the university expansion had not realized all of the expectations. Despite the large increase in the number of students, great doubts remained about the social effects of the democratization of higher education. “This seems, it is alleged, to have missed its ultimate target, since at present children of the less educated make two to four times less use of it than do children of the more highly educated,” Marc Depaepe introduces his article in which he pleads for a more critical approach of statistics with regard to the university expansion (Depaepe 2010, 28). In addition to this, several professors feared for a lowering of the level of education. Just as two centuries before, it was argued that due to the existence of such a big number of universities, inevitably some medium professors had to be appointed (De Clerck 1975). And finally complaints arose about a fragmentation of forces by the lack of cooperation. Within a radius of 25 km, students could, for instance, study Germanic languages at six separately functioning institutions, at the KU Leuven, the UCL, the VUB, the ULB, the KUB and the FUSL.

Since the arguments for a large part were unchanged compared to the situation at the beginning of the nineteenth century, many critics also came to the same conclusion and proposed the idea of one university, this time for Flanders and no longer for Belgium. At that moment, in a context of far-reaching ideological tensions, the proposal was not realistic at all, but still, attempts to reach a certain degree of rationalization were absolutely indispensable, if only because of the oil crises of the 1970s which made the maintaining of the financing law of 1971 almost impossible. The great challenge was to find a mechanism, which treated all Flemish universities on equal terms without endangering the livability of the most vulnerable unit, the VUB. On behalf of his colleagues, Laurent Vandendriessche, rector of the UIA, and his direct colleague Karel Van Goethem, elaborated a detailed pro-

ject with regard to the division of tasks and the coordination in university education in Flanders, but their proposal was soon dropped without having any practical results (Van Goethem 1978 and Van Goethem 1995-1996, 50). Just like many of their followers – among who both ministers of National Education – they bumped against the self-interest of the universities what prevented any far-reaching measure of rationalization (Elchardus et al. 1998, 18).

Therefore one had to wait on the initiative from the authorities, which happened in 1991, just two years after the state reform that delegated the competence of education entirely to the Flemish and Walloon communities. By decree, the Flemish minister of education decided that, when the university claimed to receive government support, an academic program had to attract an average of 40 students in the first cycle and 20 students in the second cycle during two consecutive years following its establishment. For existing programs the standard of 20 students in the first and 10 students in the second cycle was used for a possible continuation of the financing by the government. However, this so-called 40/20-rule did not reach its goals either since the universities paid with their own reserves for the programs that were threatened to disappear or they just cross-subsidized them. In this way all efforts for a rationalization were in vain (Van Goethem 1995–1996).

### **Impact of the Bologna process**

Other proposals passed the revue as well in the 1990s, but the apologetic reactions to all of them from rectors of several Flemish universities indicate that everyone was indeed aware of the economic and mostly international need of rationalization, but this could not be realized at the expense of the own institution. However, according to Van Goethem and Willy Wielemans, professor in Leuven, “the wide perspective of some of the proposals [...] deserves a better chance than be rejected or welcomed on the basis of obtained or to obtain positions on the market of university education.” Indeed, both authors wondered whether such a fundamental discussion shortly after the decrees of 1991 was really necessary, but since these decrees clearly had missed their goal, the answer forced itself upon. Democratization was far from realized, the regional spread of the institutions was no longer needed and, mainly, the disastrous situation of the public revenues made some measures of rationalization absolutely compulsory. “At the universities too, economism is penetrated”, they started their comments on the suggestion of Roger Dillemans (honorary rector of the KU Leuven) to establish one university area (Van Goethem & Wielemans 1996-1997, 373).

Van Goethem and Wielemans themselves were not really supporters of the idea of one Flanders University, but at the beginning of the years 2000 the proposal was launched increasingly often. Indeed, in this period it did no longer function as a more or less realistic ideal to pursue, but rather as an idea with a strong warning function. One of the main proponents became Rector Paul van Cauwenberge of the University of Ghent (UGent), who received support from socialist circles in this regard, among others from Deputy Prime Minister Johan Vande Lanotte. For a large part the arguments were unchanged in comparison to almost two centuries before: a great number of universities would lead to a fragmentation of the forces; to have one big Flemish university competing with foreign institutions would bring about much better results than provoking a paralysing internal competition between different local institutions; only at a big university students could be submerged in a real university spirit; ideological and regional interests should no longer decide upon scientific issues; cooperation with external bodies and the industry would be much more



evident for a large institution and, of course, a great number of universities was much too expensive (Van Cauwenberge 2006—2007).

The opponents too recycled some of their predecessors' arguments, the main of them being the need of competition. Even though, for instance, Roegiers opposed the provincial and regional institutions and the spectre of one university per one million inhabitants, still he was neither attracted by the alternative: "one 'Flanders University', where the varied entity which we have now would merge into one big, rationally structured and streamlined giant institution, divided upon a few specialised campuses. [...] The elimination of healthy competition and colourful variety in shape and form would constitute rather an impoverishment of the university landscape, than an enrichment," according to his opinion (Elchardus et al. 1998, 25). Moreover it would be much more difficult to realize the essential interdisciplinary contacts within such a mega-institution.

In the debate, both positions were defended by referring to the situation in the United States. The American top universities with on average hardly 17.000 students served as an example for Paul De Grauwe, economist at the KU Leuven. Especially the financially completely independent private universities could push up the number of students very easily, but the fact that they do not do so, is an indirect proof that such kind of large-scale advantages do not exist. Simultaneously he repeated the classical argument that "excellent institutions [...] need the underdogs to put their excellence continuously to the test" (De Grauwe 2006). Van Cauwenberge for his part looked "to the examples of SUNY, State University of New York consisting of 80 locations, and UC, University of California with branches in Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego... In each case, one official university per state with tens of millions of inhabitants, but with far-reaching autonomy. And all these individual branches do a great job and play their own role in the scientific and social world." (Van Cauwenberge 2006—2007)

There was another reason too why in particular the UGent was so much in favour of the idea of one Flanders University. One of the key elements of the implementation of the Bologna declaration in the Flemish legislation was the establishment of associations between universities and university colleges (*hogescholen*), with the aim to get the education of two cycles in the Flemish university colleges on an academic level. Although the initial intention of the government had been to organise the associations on a regional basis, the KU Leuven was ahead of the Flemish regulations determined by decree and connected itself to almost all catholic institutions spread out over the whole country, including in Ghent and Antwerp, and one pluralist university college, situated in Leuven. With his plea for increasing cooperation between the Flemish universities, ideally in the form of one Flanders University, the rector of Ghent wanted to counterbalance this re-intensification of the ideological conflicts as a result of the establishment of these associations.



*Kaavio 1: The location of the HUB, KU Leuven, KULAK, tUL, UA, UGent and VUB.*

The student associations were in general very disappointed about the whole Bologna reform because of the strong dominance of the economic aspect. And according to them, also the debate about the rationalization was determined only by economic motives, without really taking into account possible scientific arguments. The diversity in the university landscape did not lead to fragmentation and useless competition, the Flemish Union of Students asserted, but on the contrary to an interesting confrontation of ideas which stimulated the creativity of mental processes and in that way advanced the quality of education and research (De Rocker).

The impression of the students was for a large part correct. Economic, ideological and regional considerations in the first place led in the years 2000 finally to some realizations in the rationalization debate, which dragged along already for some years now. In 2001, the LUC managed to enforce its position by starting a partnership with the Universiteit Maastricht in the form of the transnationale Universiteit Limburg (tUL). The VUB closed some of its programs (e.g. dentistry). The KUB too ensured its existence by the establishment of the Hogeschool-Universiteit Brussel (HUB) in 2007, merging itself with a few other catholic university colleges in Brussels, while closing half of its academic programs, and entering the association of the KU Leuven. Nevertheless, the situation remained precarious, and so in 2013, the HUB was forced to merge with the Katholieke Hogeschool Sint-Lieven, resulting in the university college vzw Odisee. In Antwerp the ever-increasing cooperation between UFSIA, RUCA and UIA resulted in one united Universiteit Antwerpen (UA) in 2003. The permission to establish new programs functioned in this kind of merging often as a sort of political lubricant. Also with regard to the cooperation in the field of research a few successes were achieved, viz. the foundation of the Interuniversitair Micro-Elektronica Centrum (IMEC), already in 1984, and the Vlaams Instituut voor Biotechnologie in 1996.

### **Similarities and differences with the Finnish case**

In other European countries too, it seemed as if the external pressure of the Bologna declaration in the early 2000s helped somewhat to open up the discussions and to reach solutions in a question that was stuck already for some time. Particularly the situation in Finland is

remarkably similar. Yet there were other reasons for the reforms too than only the ‘extra speed’ given by the Bologna process.

Finland’s first university was founded in Turku in 1640 and was transferred to Helsinki in 1828 (Klinge 2010). The first period of expansion of the Finnish system of higher education took place in the early 1900s. One of the motivations in that period was the linguistic struggle between Swedish and Finnish as the language of instruction. Although the Flemish Movement in Belgium needed a bit more time to reach their aim (as mentioned, the University of Ghent was changed into a Dutch-speaking institution only in 1930), what was at stake in both countries during the first decades of the twentieth century was exactly the same. In Finland, the language question was resolved firstly, through the establishment of two new universities in Turku, a Swedish-speaking one (in 1918) and a Finnish-speaking one (in 1920); and secondly, with regard to the University of Helsinki, through the law of 1937, extending Finnish-speaking education to the whole university, yet securing Swedish-speaking instruction as well. Apart from regularly returning discussions about the quota of Swedish-speaking students to be admitted at the University of Helsinki, according to the large majority of the population, the issue was settled once and for all. However, the universities in Turku were not the only new institutions to be founded in this period. Between 1908 and 1934, as many as seven new universities or semi-universities were established, and the number of students grew from 1.200 in 1900 to 8.300 in 1935 (Nevala 2014).

Like in other parts of Europe, the actual process of massification of higher education started only from the 1960s. A far-reaching policy of regionalization led to the establishment of universities in among other places Oulu, Joensuu and Kuopio. So, between 1959 and 1979 altogether again seven new universities were founded in Finland (see e.g. Nevala 2014, Eskola 2006 and Nevala & Rinne 2012). In result of this process of regionalization and democratization, in the early 2010s the number of university students had increased to more than eleven times as much as it had been in the late 1940s, 170.000 against 15.000 (University statistics 1961—2011).

Particularly the struggle that accompanied the expansion of university education in Eastern Finland resembled the situation in Belgium. Indeed, linguistic and ideological conflicts were absent in the Finnish context, but in both countries politicians and municipal decision-makers took a role alongside the academic elite. It has to be kept in mind that in the early 1960s there was not a university policy led by the state in Finland. In addition, the committees appointed by the government to investigate the so-called ‘university question of Eastern Finland’ were not unanimous in their proposals and neither were the leading politicians. All this resulted in a heavy struggle on the local level between the towns of Kuopio, Joensuu and Lappeenranta, all aiming to obtain the university. In the centre of the struggle were no issues of university policy, science or religion, but the expectations and promises that were included in the ‘university question of Eastern Finland’. To put it shortly, the university was supposed to bring all possible good: cultural development, better employment rate and a higher standard of living (Eskola 2006 and Nevala 2009).

However, the issue entered the national level as well. The Centre Party, the leading party at the time in the Finnish government, connected the university policy closely to the aims of regional policy and broader social policy. Therefore the Centre Party was prepared to divide the university of Eastern Finland into three parts, regardless of the strong opposition of the other government party, the National Coalition Party, and the academic elite of the ‘old’ universities. Even though also in Belgium this idea was sometimes uttered (to split

up the university and establish different faculties in different cities in order to satisfy a larger number of candidates), it was never realized. The devotion to the ideal of one unified university where all the sciences were represented prevailed. But in the final decision in 1966, the Finnish Parliament agreed with the suggestion of the Centre Party and three new universities were founded, in Joensuu, Lappeenranta and Kuopio, each of them focussing on specific disciplines.

In the same year, the existing institutes of higher education in Jyväskylä and Tampere were also converted into universities and in addition, the Tampere University of Technology and the private Vaasa School of Economics were founded. Moreover, a new act was passed concerning the future development of universities, stating that the boom of university education came to an end (Eskola 2006, Nevala 2009). In result, the network of university education in Finland at the beginning of the 1970s looked almost the same as today. Only the University of Lapland was founded later, in 1979.

Broadly speaking, Finnish university policy in that period was closely related to the so-called Nordic welfare state and the goals set for it. One of the main elements was to advance social and regional equality, and one important instrument for this was the foundation of new universities. The taken measures improved the educational opportunities considerably, especially in regions previously regarded as peripheral. University education was brought to new locations, what led to the first large generation of an academically educated class, both in a regional and social sense. In brief, educational equality advanced, and education functioned as a significant means of social mobility because at the same time there was a growing demand for skilled university-educated workers in the welfare state (Nevala 2014 and Nevala & Rinne 2012). In contrast to the situation in Belgium there were almost no concerns about the provincial spirit of these regional universities, nor about the limited number of students. But of course, regional development appeared to make also much more sense taking into account that the distances between cities like Joensuu, Lappeenranta and Kuopio were 140 to 270 km, against the six separate institutions within a radius of 25 km in the centre of Belgium.

The next major reform of the university network started in the 1990s and was carried through in the beginning of the new millenium. Three main reasons lay at the background of the reform. Firstly, and ditto as in Belgium, there was the economic situation and more particularly the recession of the early 1990s. The crisis in Finland was longer and more difficult than in many other western countries due to the concurrent collapse of the Soviet Union, being one of Finland's major trading partners. Secondly, also in Finland from the 1990s, slowly a 'neo-liberalist' turn took place. University authorities had to acquiesce in a complete turnabout based on new social circumstances. Equality was no longer the core ambition of the educational policy. In fact, a number of decisions was taken quite in contrast to educational equality, under the constraints of economic policy, economic growth, and Finland's international competitiveness. The new definitions of university policy in the 1990s stressed assessment, the application of resources, internationalization, excellence and accountability. Thirdly, in 1995 Finland became a member of the European Union and was a bit later strongly committed to cooperation also in education, especially in university policy, for instance, within the framework of the Bologna process (Nevala & Rinne 2012 and Kauko & Diogo 2011).

A number of small reforms was introduced from the beginning of the 1990s, all aiming to move towards bigger and scientifically stronger units. Even though the rationalization did not come true as widely as planned, it all culminated in the 'great university reform' of 2009-2010. According to the new law, the universities were transformed into 'legal per-

sons', independent from the state. Their financial autonomy increased as well as the importance of external, private funding. The status of university staff changed from state civil servants into employees of the own university. At the same time, the number of universities was reduced from 17 to 14 due to the merging of previously separated institutions: the Aalto University was founded, consisting of the Helsinki University of Technology, the Helsinki School of Economics and the University of Art and Design Helsinki; the universities in Joensuu and Kuopio formed together the University of Eastern Finland; and the Turku School of Economics merged with the University of Turku (see e.g. Nevala & Rinne 2012 and Kauko & Diogo 2011).

So just like in Belgium, some of the younger institutions merged with each other to ensure their existence, again in the first place out of an economic necessity. In both countries the impact of globalization and international definitions of university police have become more important, yet the leeway of national education policy more restricted. On the other hand, the contexts in Finland and in Belgium have been different. In Finland, both the ideological and linguistic dividing lines have played a much smaller role in this regard than the regional or welfare policy, which both have been very important catalysts in decision making. That is why, for instance, at the centre of the university discussion in Finland in the 1990s and 2000s there was the idea to make bigger and stronger university units. Nevertheless, only a few claims have been heard about really closing down universities and concentrating education on a more limited number of places. Mostly these latter proposals have come from the representatives of business life. By most of the politicians the regional university network is accepted as a reality that is not wise to challenge.

### **The idea(l) of one university in Belgium/Flanders**



In Belgium however, it was clear that despite the realizations of the years 2000, the rationalization did not go far enough according to many people involved. For instance, the ministerial committee for the optimization and rationalization of the landscape of higher education under the direction of Luc Soete (professor of international economic relations at the Universiteit Maastricht) proposed in 2008 to abolish undergraduate programs with less than 115 students from 2015—2016. However, these proposals are not put into law texts yet. According to the critics the focus in the report was too much on a purely economic rationalization rather than a real optimization of the university landscape. Whether this optimization should take the form of one Flanders University was very disputable, but everyone agreed that there was actually no space for such small institutions as the KULAK, the KUB or the LUC (since 2005 Universiteit Hasselt) and that they owed their existence only to the fact that the demand for rationalization often broke down “on the interests which had grown as a hard shell around the long-standing institutions” (Elchardus et al. 1998, 17—22).

To what extent the (limited) policy of rationalization that has been taking place in the years 2000 has been successful, is a question that falls beyond the scope of this article. It is true that the catholic university in Brussels (UFSAL – KUB – HUB) ensured its existence through its merger with Katholieke Hogeschool Sint-Lieven, yet even within the Belgian context alone the standing of the new university college Odisee is quite insignificant. The University of Antwerp and the University of Eastern Finland on the other hand are clearly very successful examples of university mergers. However, in order to be able to assess the

real impact of rationalization measures on the quality of education and research, a lot of further research is required. One cannot judge the performance of these institutions solely on their place in the (by definition) superficial world university rankings.

Yet the ambition of this article was not to assess the results of the process of rationalization, but to explain the complex way to get there. Very remarkable with regard to the Belgian case is to what extent the local, regional, ideological, economical and not the least political priorities were identical in the discussions between 1815 and 1835 and these between 1970 and 2010. During the discussions many scientific arguments were brought up, but these were never decisive for the final result. Besides, the whole issue has always been closely connected with the question which kind of university education was to prefer, mass universities or elite institutions, even though it is not an issue of either... or. Each university needs a sufficiently large critical mass of students to be able to select the best out of them. What then the ideal size of a modern university is, is hard and most likely impossible to tell. In any case the idea(l) of one Flanders University remains temporarily not more than a strong idea with a long historical background.

## References

- [1]  Leuven is not translated into English to avoid confusion with the city of the French-speaking Université catholique de Louvain à Louvain-la-Neuve. Until 1968, the University of Leuven refers to the unitary institution in Leuven, from 1968, to the Dutch-speaking Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.
- [2]  The tendency of pluralism was taken on in this period in the whole sector of education (see De Neve et al. 1997).

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### **Abbreviations of universities in Flanders/Belgium, including their date of foundation and period of activity.**

- FUSL: Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis; 1858—today; since 2012 known as the Université Saint-Louis Bruxelles, USLB.
- HUB: Hogeschool-Universiteit Brussel; 2007—2013; merger of Economische Hogeschool Sint-Aloysius, Vlaamse Economische Hogeschool, Hoger Onderwijs van Imelda and KUB; from 2013 part of Odisee.
- KUB: Katholieke Universiteit Brussel; 1991—2007; successor of UFSAL, between 2007 and 2013 part of HUB.
- KU Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven; 1834—today.
- KULAK: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven Afdeling Kortrijk; 1965—today.
- LUC: Limburgs Universitair Centrum; 1971—today; since 2005 known as Universiteit Hasselt Odisee; 2013-today; merger of HUB and Katholieke Hogeschool Sint-Lieven.
- RUCA: Rijksuniversitair Centrum Antwerpen; 1965—2003; from 2003 part of UA tUL: transnationale Universiteit Limburg; 2001-today; cooperation between LUC/Universiteit Hasselt and Universiteit Maastricht.
- UFSAL: Universitaire Faculteiten Sint-Aloysius; 1969—1991; predecessor of KUB.
- UFSIA: Universitaire Faculteiten Sint-Ignatius Antwerpen; 1965—2003; from 2003 part of UA.
- UA: Universiteit Antwerpen; 2003—today; merger of RUCA, UFSIA and UIA.
- UCL: Université catholique de Louvain à Louvain-la-Neuve; 1968—today.
- UGent: Universiteit Gent; 1817—today.
- UIA: Universitaire Instelling Antwerpen; 1971—2003; from 2003 part of UA.
- ULB: Université libre de Bruxelles; 1834—today.
- VUB: Vrije Universiteit Brussel; 1969—today.

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