

# Generalist Youth Information Services in Belgium (French & German Communities) in 1997

The attached pages constitute the chapter concerning **Belgium** (French and German-speaking Communities) which is part of a 17-country study completed in 1997. Each chapter provides a summary of the situation in the country at the end of 1997 concerning generalist youth information and counselling, and the methods and structures involved in its organisation and distribution.

This study was conducted by the **European Youth Information and Counselling Agency** (ERYICA), to which all the author organisations belong as “Member Organisations” or as “Co-operating Organisations”. Accordingly, the study is limited to those countries where in 1996-97 there existed functioning networks of generalist youth information centres and services which were co-operating with ERYICA.

The 17 chapters of this study, in separate English and French versions, can be consulted on the ERYICA Internet site (“[www.eryica.org](http://www.eryica.org)” - see the section “Documents”, then “1997 Study”). Each file, which is in Word 2.0 for Windows / PC (varying between 4 and 20 pages in length), can also be downloaded from the site.

More recent information about each ERYICA national partner, its activities and its network can also be found on the ERYICA Internet site:

- a) **current addresses of national partners**: under “Discover ERYICA”, then “Members”, then “Country”
- b) **links to Internet sites of national partners**: under “Discover SERVICES”, then “Web-sites of ERYICA Partners”
- c) (when the organisation co-ordinates a network) **links to a list of addresses of regional or local centres**: under “Discover ERYICA”, then “Members”, then “Country”.

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# B

## BELGIUM

### French- and German-speaking Communities

#### INTRODUCTION

The first youth information centre was opened in Brussels during the 1960s. This move came at a time when the Government was coming under criticism for the fact that the only solutions it was putting forward for young people in difficulty were of a repressive nature (legal protection for youth). From the outset, the service was designed to operate on the basis of principles that still hold good today: pluralism, independence, information delivery which exclusively meets the demands and needs expressed by young people and the refusal to exert any influence whatsoever on young people.

Very soon the solution chosen met with a certain success and, regional centres were subsequently created along similar lines in the provinces. A few years later (in 1972), a federation (CNIJ / *Centre National Infor Jeunes* - now the **Fédération Infor Jeunes Wallonie-Bruxelles**) was founded, which has functions that are distinct from those of the Brussels Centre.

At this time, the **Infor Jeunes** centres were mainly addressing a public of young people with problems and proposing them what may be termed "alternative solutions".

During the late 1980s, **Droit des Jeunes** (Youth Rights) services were set up in several towns. These stemmed mostly from the Infor Jeunes structures and provided

the trigger for professionalising the youth information sector. The rapid development of computer technology reinforced this trend by enabling information exchange between networked associations, whilst also forcing them to harmonise their methods. From this point, co-operation between the various centres took shape and the notion of a network became meaningful. Co-operating also meant fine-tuning the information tools to be used, particularly computerised data-bases, statistical records, communication tools, publications, and the adoption and implementation of a common political strategy.

The network now has 11 information centres (including 2 youth information centres from the German-speaking Community), 17 **Points Relais** (relay-points) and a dozen communes linked to Infor Jeunes by co-operation agreements.

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The information centres are involved in producing information as much as actually distributing it. They are represented within the national centre, which they control at a political level. The Points Relais are generally set up on the initiative of a commune and are local structures officially recognised by the Infor Jeunes network as providing local youth information services. The Point Relais Infor Jeunes have the use of all the network's information tools and take part in staff training courses.

### AIMS AND PRINCIPLES

The purpose of Infor Jeunes is to ensure that information of interest to young people is made available to all. This objective is explicitly mentioned in its charter and in the European Youth Information Charter adopted by ERYICA, which has been integrated into the Infor Jeunes Charter.

Infor Jeunes lays emphasis on the fact that youth information services must offer information that is of a high quality, accurate and up-to-date; that the relationship with the centre must in no way bring influence to bear on young people, and that the operating structure must, in compliance with its mission, be seen to be independent and pluralist, having the sole objective of fulfilling its mission as an information provider.

### GOVERNMENT POLICY

In Belgium, youth information policy does not as yet really exist as such. This is certainly true at federal level. As far as the French-speaking Community is concerned, the Section for Youth Affairs in the Department for the Administration of Youth and Adult Education, within the Ministry for Culture and Social Affairs, manages youth policy in so far as it recognises and funds two types of youth initiatives: youth clubs and affiliated bodies (which host the information

centres) and youth organisations (which host associations providing services, such as the Fédération Infor Jeunes Wallonie-Bruxelles or the SIEP - Studies and Careers Information Service).

Over the last few years, a drive to develop a youth information policy has emerged, as was witnessed by the fact that the Minister for Youth Affairs signed the European Youth Information Charter. The policy guidelines are difficult to define for two reasons. First, the French-speaking Community lacks the necessary financial resources, which makes it impossible to launch any new policies given that it is solicited on all sides for new funding. Second, youth information is a particularly sensitive subject and a great many associations underline the role they play in youth information and the fact that they should, accordingly, be taken into account. It is to be noted therefore that there are a large number of militant or complementary structures that exist alongside the Infor Jeunes network. In Belgian society, where almost every initiative takes on an ideological dimension, the pluralist and independent type or service advocated by Infor Jeunes appears to deviate from the norm and does not receive political support from the Community government. However, the latter cannot but recognise that the Infor Jeunes network occupies an important place in the field.

The Infor Jeunes centres are non-profit-making organisations which have a pluralist structure, including local authority representatives, and are recognised as organisations affiliated to the Belgian French-speaking Community.

This status gives them the possibility of obtaining limited grants for staffing and operating costs. In practice, most staff positions are financed by the Regional authorities as part of programmes to reduce unemployment (precarious work contracts, special hiring terms: 1 or 2 years' on full

unemployment benefits, or low-level qualifications). The limited fixed-sum operating grant is always complemented by local authority contributions (use of premises, grants and/or special agreements).

### **NATIONAL AND REGIONAL CO-ORDINATION**

The Infor Jeunes Centres are organised into a network structure through the Fédération Infor Jeunes Wallonie-Bruxelles, which is also a non-profit-making association recognised by the French-speaking Community as an official youth organisation. Its General Assembly comprises each Infor Jeunes centre represented by a maximum of four representatives.

Co-ordination between the centres is mainly carried out through co-operation on joint programmes (documentary resources, databases, publications, etc.) and ongoing consultation to harmonise local decision-making.

### **RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND YOUTH INFORMATION SERVICES**

The relations between the Government of the French-speaking Community and the Infor Jeunes network are limited to the continued participation of the Fédération Infor Jeunes Wallonie-Bruxelles in the European Youth Information and Counselling Agency (ERYICA), and occasional consultations on European Union youth information policy.

### **TYPICAL SERVICES OFFERED BY CENTRES**

Infor Jeunes collects, verifies, processes and diffuses information so as to make it available to all young people, using all appropriate means. The information is put together solely in response to the requests

and needs expressed by the young people themselves. The Infor Jeunes centres deal with a whole variety of subjects ranging from education and training, work and employment, social security and assistance, citizenship and law, the family, personal life and health, consumer issues, housing and living conditions, leisure and holidays. The information is given without discrimination and free of any ideological, political or other interest. It is easily accessible and available free of charge. A personalised service is ensured, with a total respect for the user's anonymity.

The centres have facilities for the photocopying of documents, and certain publications are for sale. They also offer a student accommodation service (list of offers).

#### **Profile of Infor Jeunes Network**

##### ***Co-ordinating Body:***

Fédération Infor Jeunes Wallonie-Bruxelles

##### ***Network:***

11 regional and local centres and 17 relay-points.

##### ***Legal Status:***

The Federation and most centres are non-profit-making associations.

##### ***Number of information workers working in the network:***

25 paid staff.

##### ***Responsible Governmental Body:***

Youth Service, Ministry for Culture and Social Affairs.

## ASSESSING THE INFORMATION NEEDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

What determines the priorities of the Infor Jeunes network are the needs expressed by young people themselves. Annual statistics about users and their requests are recorded and shared within the network.

## CO-OPERATION WITH OTHER SERVICES

Co-operation takes place mainly between the centres themselves. They have also developed collaboration with the youth hostels, whose guides they distribute, and with local authorities and associations which also diffuse youth information (mainly the Point Relais Infor Jeunes).

## HOW PLURALISM AND QUALITY ARE GUARANTEED

The Fédération Infor Jeunes Wallonie-Bruxelles owns the Infor Jeunes label and guarantees that the Infor Jeunes Charter is respected. The associations in the network must have a pluralist structure, and no individual group may hold a majority position therein.

## SPECIALISED YOUTH INFORMATION SERVICES

The **Association Arc-en-Ciel** (Rainbow Association - rue du Bien-Faire 41, B-1170 Brussels) is a youth organisation which, in collaboration with Infor Jeunes, is developing a national phone-in information service on leisure and holiday activities.

The **Centre de Documentation et d'Information sur les Etudes et les Professions** (CEDIEP -Centre for Documentation and Information on Education and Careers- rue de la Vignette 179, B-11600 Auberchem) is an association that is an offshoot of the independent psychology, medical and social centres, which produce specialist reviews on education.

The **Service d'Information sur les Etudes et les Professions** (SIEP -Studies and Careers Information Service- rue Forgeur 25, B-4000 Liège) is a pluralist youth organisation specialising in education. It organises fairs, co-ordinates school and vocational guidance centres and publishes vocational guides and booklets.

The **Centre Jeunesse et Développement** (CJD -Youth and Development Centre- rue de la Vignette 179, B-1160 Auderehem) is a pluralist youth organisation specialising in legal information.

The **Association Jeunesse et Droit** (Youth and Law Association- rue Charles Steenbruggen 14, B-1210 Liège) is a pluralist youth organisation specialising in youth law, and publishes notably the review "Journal du droit de jeunes". It works in collaboration with the **Droit des Jeunes** services.

Besides these specialised services, a large number of associations, mainly linked to trade union organisations and political parties, are involved in developing information services for young people. This aspect of their activities falls within a more global approach of offering activities to their members, or educating them and increasing their awareness.