



Flanders
State of the Art

THE ORIENTATION YEAR:
**For non-EEA students,
researchers and PhD
candidates**

DEPARTMENT
OF WORK, ECONOMY,
SCIENCE, INNOVATION
AND SOCIAL ECONOMY

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**“The scholar is not
the person who provides
the right answers,
but the one who asks
the right questions.”**

Claude Levi-Strauss, 1964

Welcome researcher, doctoral candidate, student

Studying or conducting research in Belgium is about more than just the acquisition of knowledge. It requires curiosity, tenacity and a willingness to explore new frontiers. Whether you are a student, PhD candidate or researcher: your ideas and critical perspective make all the difference.

After your studies or a period of research, you are often faced with new choices. Do you want to stay in Belgium? Then the orientation year can be an important step. It forms a bridge to work or entrepreneurship and gives you the space to explore the job market and prepare for your next career move.

This booklet offers practical information and answers to frequently asked questions about the orientation year. Use it as a guide, reference work or for support along the way – a simple compass to provide direction.

Good luck, and above all, enjoy exploring the options.

Practical tips

1/ Get your paperwork in order

- Create a digital folder containing:
 - passport
 - residence permit
 - employment contract / scholarship letter / proof of sufficient means of subsistence
 - insurance documents
 - birth certificate
 - all degrees obtained

Make a note of the expiry dates of your residence permit and contract in your diary.

2/ What is your residence status?

- In Belgium there are different types of residence permit, such as
 - employee
 - (scholarship) or (exchange) student
 - researcher
- Your status determines your rights (social security, sick leave, access to the labour market).

3/ Has something changed? Let us know!

- Are you changing your address in Belgium or is your contract or status changing?

> Report this to your HR / International Office / student administration and to the municipality.

- Even minor changes can have major consequences for your residence entitlement.

4/ Points to consider regarding international employment:

- Check your residence status and deadlines.
- Check the maximum amount of time you are permitted to be absent from Belgium and renew your residence card on time.
- Save important documents in digital format.
- Request information in good time if your residence status changes.

Administrative follow-up helps to avoid problems and delays.

5/ Learn Dutch and/or French if you are staying in Belgium

Are you thinking of staying in Belgium?

Then a knowledge of one of the national languages is recommended in order to find work more quickly and to facilitate integration.

What is the orientation year?

Are you a researcher from a non-EEA country and have you completed your research project in Belgium?
Or are you a (mobility) student who recently graduated in Belgium?

Then you can apply for an orientation year to extend your stay in Belgium by up to 12 months.

During the orientation year:

- you have to search for work;
- you may work;
- you may do an internship;
- you may prepare to become self-employed (provided you apply for a professional card).

When and where can you apply for an orientation year?

1 During your stay in Belgium

- You must submit your application for the orientation year no later than 15 days before the expiry of your current residence card or Annex 33.
- The application must be submitted to the municipality where you are officially registered and reside.

- The application is made via the Belgian embassy in that Member State from a legal place of residence. If Belgium was not the last Member State of your mobility, you must submit the application within **3 months** of obtaining the degree.

You submit the application to the Belgian embassy or the Belgian municipality from a legal residence.

2 After mobility within the EU

Have you completed your studies or research in another EU Member State and were you temporarily residing in Belgium in the context of mobility?

Both short-term and long-term mobility are eligible. The orientation year must follow completion of the research project or studies but does not necessarily have to immediately follow the mobility period in Belgium.

- You must submit the application no later than **15 days before** the expiry of Annex 33.

Which documents do you need?

When making your application for the orientation year, you must submit the following documents:

- proof of payment of the fee (only for researchers);
- a valid passport;
- a copy of your current residence card or Annex 33;
- proof of completion of research activities (issued by the research body) or a degree or proof that studies at a recognised college or university have been completed;
- proof of valid health insurance;
- proof of sufficient means of subsistence during the orientation year: 12 months of funding.

Proof of sufficient means of subsistence

How can you demonstrate this?

1. By means of a future employment contract

- The net income under this employment contract must be at least the required amount for 12 months.
- A shorter employment contract is possible (for example, 6 months), as long as the total income reaches the required amount for 12 months.

2. By means of personal means of subsistence:

- preferably in a blocked bank account¹;
- in a personal bank account (only for researchers)

¹ A blocked account into which the means of subsistence are paid is strongly recommended for smooth processing and is available through higher education institutions or recognised providers such as Ready Study to Go.

3. By means of Annex 32 (only for students)

How much should the means of subsistence amount to?

- The required amount for researchers is based on the minimum wage in Belgium. The amount varies depending on family circumstances, i.e. as a person who is single, cohabiting or with family responsibilities.
- The required amount for students is based on **an amount dictated by the Belgian government.**



- These amounts are indexed annually for students and are non-negotiable. For researchers, the amount is simply indexed.
- You must show evidence of the amount for **12 months**: a shorter orientation year is not possible.

Researchers: the minimum wage amounts are for reference purposes only. During the orientation year, the person may not at any time become dependent on Belgian social assistance.

Students: If you are a PhD student with a **Dehousse scholarship¹**, then you follow the procedure for **an orientation year as a student²**.

If your visa or residence application is refused, the amount deposited in the blocked account will be refunded.



Application procedure for an orientation year

APPLICATION

In the municipality of residence

(15 days before the expiry of the A-card or annex 33)

APPLICATION

At the Belgian consular post

(within 3 months of obtaining the degree)



The municipality or the embassy reviews the application.

- **Complete:** you receive a receipt (Annex 33ter).
- **Incomplete:** you have 15 days to complete the documents required.
- **Late:** you receive a decision of inadmissibility (Annex 29).



Dienst Vreemdelingenzaken (DVZ) (Immigration Office) decides within 90 days.

The municipality issues an Annex 15 if:

- you have submitted a complete application in a timely manner **in Belgium**;
- your residence card is expiring;
- you have not yet received a decision.

You can start working as soon as you have received your Annex 15.

If you are abroad, you must wait for your visa application to be approved.



The municipality of residence issues a residence card (A-card for 12 months; including the decision period and is reduced by the duration of Annex 15) or the Belgian embassy issues a D visa.

01



I have arrived from abroad after a mobility period in a first Member State, but I have not found any accommodation yet. Can I already apply for an orientation year?

If your file has been suspended or is no longer active, you must first submit a change of address so that your file can be reactivated.

If your A-card is going to expire soon and a permanent address has not been included in your file yet, it is best to contact the municipality where you are residing for further information.

02



I am moving or I have moved. To which municipality should I submit my application for the orientation year?

You must submit your application to the municipality where you are officially registered at the time.

03



I have graduated, but I have not yet received my degree. My residence card is going to expire soon. Can I apply for an orientation year?

Yes.

Submit your application as soon as possible, before your residence card expires.

After submission, you will have 15 days to complete your file, even if not all the documents are immediately available. You can also submit proof that you have successfully completed your studies, for example, the examination scores of your courses.

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Can I apply for an orientation year if I already have an Annex 15?

No.

An Annex 15 is a temporary residence document which you receive while waiting for a decision about another residence application. You cannot apply for an orientation year if you only have an Annex 15.

05



My residence card is expiring while my application for the orientation year is pending.

Will I get an Annex 15?

Yes.

After your residence card expires, you are entitled to an Annex 15 while waiting for the decision from the Dienst Vreemdelingenzaken (Immigration Office) if you have completed and submitted your application in a timely manner.

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Can I extend an orientation year?

No, you cannot extend an orientation year.

For further residence, you will need:

- a single permit through an employer,
- a professional card as a self-employed person
- or possibly another reason for residence, such as studies or family reunification.

Without a new right of residence, you must leave Belgium at the end of the orientation year.



How can I provide evidence of sufficient means of subsistence in an application for an orientation year as a student or researcher? Is an employment contract or job offer sufficient?

In the application for an orientation year, you must demonstrate that you have sufficient means of subsistence. This can be done using various financial documents.

An employment contract is valid as proof, provided

that the income covers at least the required amount for the complete duration of the orientation year. A promise of employment or a job offer is not sufficient as this does not demonstrate actual income yet.

Accepted supporting documents include a blocked account with the required amount, an employment contract with salary, (for students) a commitment to provide financial support or other proof of personal funds. The Dienst Vreemdelingenzaken (Immigration Office) assesses whether these are sufficient.



Can friends or family open a blocked account for me in their name?

No, the blocked account must be in the person's own name.

It cannot be in the name of parents, family or friends. The account is in the name of the student/researcher/PhD student or is managed by the university/college on behalf of the student. Legally, the money remains the student's money.

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*Can the blocked account
be an account abroad?*

No, a foreign bank account (in your home country or elsewhere) is not accepted as a blocked account for an orientation year.

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*Can I do an
internship during the
orientation year?*

Yes.

An internship counts as part of “actively seeking work” and is therefore permitted during the orientation year.

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When and how much can I work if I have not received an orientation year yet?

Your student residence card is still valid:

- A maximum of 20 hours per week during the academic year.
- Unlimited during the official school holidays.

Once the student residence card has expired and Annex 15 has been received:

- Unlimited employment.
- Researchers can start once the previous single permit has expired and they have received Annex 15.

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Can I do a flexi-job during the orientation year?

Yes, as you have unlimited access to the job market. However, you must be employed for at least 4/5 of a full-time job with one or more other employers.

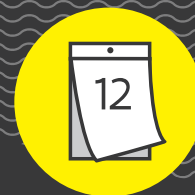
13



Can I work as a self-employed person during the orientation year?

No, you need a professional card to start working as a self-employed person.

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Can I work with an Annex 49?

Not automatically.

An **Annex 49** is **not a work permit**. Whether you can work with it, depends on your residence and work status. Until your work permit is approved by the competent region, you are not allowed to work with an Annex 49.

For more information about your residence, please contact the Dienst Vreemdelingen zaken (Immigration Office).

To do so, scan the QR code.



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Can I apply for an orientation year more than once?

Yes, in certain cases.

You can reapply for an orientation year after obtaining a new degree (while holding a residence status based on studies) or after finalising a single permit as a researcher. This is only possible with a new electronic residence card type A (temporary).

Please note: if you obtain a new degree during your orientation year, an extension or second orientation year is not permitted.

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Can you apply for an orientation year for 6 months, for example?

No, the application is always for 12 months.

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How do I extend my residence after the orientation year if I have obtained a professional card?

You must submit a new application to your municipality before your residence card expires.

Find out about the procedure and the required documents in a timely manner.

I am going to start studying again during my orientation year. Do I need to apply for a new residence card?

Yes.

You must submit an application to your municipality before your residence card expires to change your status to student.

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What if I have not found an employer by the end of my orientation year?

If you are unable to submit a new residence application before your residence card expires, you must leave Belgium.

Can I apply for an Annex 49 if my orientation year has ended?

NO, once your residence based on the orientation year has expired, an Annex 49 is not possible.

For more information about residence, please contact the Dienst Vreemdelingenzaken (Immigration Office).

To do so, scan the QR code.





When can I apply for an L-card?

The L-card gives you long-term residence status, which means that as a third-country national, you have the right to live and work in an EU country for an indefinite period.

You can apply for this card if you:

- have resided legally and continuously in Belgium for 5 years;
- have sufficient means of subsistence;
- have valid health insurance;
- submit an extract from the criminal record.

Student years count for half a year; the orientation year counts in full.

You cannot apply for an L-card as a student or during your orientation year.

Practical tip

Contact your municipality to find out if you meet the conditions.



More information



Can I travel with an A-card during the orientation year?

Yes, you can travel with an A-card during the orientation year:

- within the Schengen zone*, you can travel visa-free for up to 90 days per 180 days;
- outside Schengen, a valid passport and possibly a visa are required.

It is not advisable to travel while your application for an orientation year is pending, and you have only received Annex 15. Annex 15 is not a valid document for re-entering Belgium.

You must have a valid passport and valid residence card to return to Belgium.

* Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Hungary, Germany, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Luxembourg, Italy, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Austria, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Netherlands, Slovenia, Slovakia, Spain, Czech Republic, Sweden, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland



How do I become self-employed in Belgium?

1. **In Flanders**, you apply for a professional card from the **Dienst Economische Migratie** (Economic Migration Service)¹ of the Flemish government (via the WSE counter). If you are resident **in Brussels** and your registered office is to be located there, you **apply to the Brussels-Capital Region**². If you are resident **in Wallonia** and are setting up your self-employed activity there, you **apply in Wallonia**³.
2. After obtaining your professional card, go to a recognised enterprise counter (e.g. Acerta, Liantis, Eunomia, etc.) to apply for your business number.
3. The average turnaround time for receiving a professional card in Flanders is between 50 to 60 days.

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How much start-up capital do I need as a self-employed person?

This depends on the type of self-employed activity that you want to start:

- For a self-employed activity with economic added value, the required start-up capital in 2026 is at least € 22,838.
- For a self-employed activity with innovative, sporting, cultural or artistic value, no start-up capital is required.

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Can I work as both an employee and a self-employed person?

Yes, but you will need a single permit as an employee and a professional card as a self-employed person.

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What are my rights as an employee in Belgium?

You are entitled to fair working conditions, a safe working environment, correct remuneration and protection from discrimination.

The maximum working hours are 8 hours per day and 38 hours per week, with the right to breaks, rest periods and holidays.

The minimum wage guarantees fair pay, and you are also entitled to sick pay and clear dismissal rules, which protect you against exploitation and unfair dismissal.



What salary should I earn as a highly skilled worker?

The salary you receive depends on the company and the sector in which you work. The joint committee for the sector determines the applicable minimum wages.

There is a salary threshold for highly skilled foreign workers: a minimum gross annual salary is required for a work permit at least 100% of the Belgian average gross annual salary. For those who are less than 30 years of age or are working as nurses or teachers at a recognised educational institution, this amounts to 80%.

For the correct and most recent salary thresholds, scan the QR code.



What is an Annex 15 and what does this mean for my residence and work?

An Annex 15 is a temporary residence document. You can obtain this if, for example, you have submitted a complete renewal application, pending the decision.

For your residence: Annex 15 proves that you are legally resident in Belgium while your application is being reviewed or pending the production of your residence card.

Contact details

- **For general questions about residence, visas, mobility, housing and orientation year:** contact an **International House¹** in your region.
- **For questions about research, contracts and status, finances, welfare, integrity and career development:** contact the university, college or research institution.
- **For questions about permission to work or professional cards:** contact the Dienst Economische Migratie (Economic Migration Service) using the contact forms for **work permit applications²** or **professional cards³**.

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Glossary

- **Annex 13:** is an official form from the Belgian Dienst Vreemdelingenzaken (Immigration Office) which serves as an Order to Leave the Territory. When someone receives this document, the Belgian government has decided that that person is not allowed to stay in Belgium any longer. It is a formal request that you must leave the country within a certain period (usually 30 days, but this may be shorter).
- **Annex 15:** this is a temporary residence document. You can obtain this if, for example, you have submitted a complete renewal application in a timely manner, pending the decision.
- **Annex 29:** this is a decision of inadmissibility in the context of access to the territory, residence, establishment and the removal of foreign nationals.
- **Annex 32:** When a **student** from outside the EEA or Switzerland (a third-country national) wishes to study in Belgium, or when applying for an orientation year, they must prove that they have sufficient means of subsistence. If the student does not have enough money themselves, a guarantor (a sponsor) can sign this document. *The guarantor hereby declares he or she is responsible for:*
 - Living and study expenses.
 - The costs of medical care.
 - The costs of any repatriation (return to the country of origin).

This commitment applies for one year or for the duration of a cycle (bachelor or master) but must often be renewed annually for the extension of the residence permit.

- **Annex 33:** A student with a valid student residence permit in another EU Member State (for a Cross-border student whose main residence is in a neighbouring country and returns daily/weekly to the neighbouring country) who is temporarily studying in Belgium can obtain an Annex 33 for that period of residence, valid for 360 days maximum. The Belgian educational institution must report the mobility to the Dienst Vreemdelingenzaken (DVZ) (Immigration Office) no later than 30 days before the start. The DVZ makes a decision, or if no decision is taken within 30 days, it is considered approved. If approved, the student will receive written confirmation through the educational institution. With this document, the student can apply for an Annex 33 in the municipality of residence after arriving in Belgium.

- **Annex 33ter:** For a residence application as a student, or for an application for an orientation year as a graduated student or researcher after completion of the research, you will receive an acknowledgement of receipt (Annex 33ter), if all required supporting documents are submitted at the time of application.

This document only confirms that your application is complete and has been taken into consideration. It is not a residence permit.

Annex 33ter is issued to:

1. a third-country national who applies for residence as a student via the competent diplomatic post or through the municipality;
2. a graduated third-country national who wishes to obtain an orientation year;
3. a third-country national who wishes to obtain an orientation year after completing their research.

- **Annex 49:** This is a temporary residence document in Belgium which you receive from your municipality of residence pending the definitive electronic residence card issued by the Dienst Vreemdelingenzaken (Immigration Office), for example, after a positive decision regarding residence and work.

Annex 49 proves that:

1. You are currently awaiting a decision on your residence permit.
2. You are currently residing legally in Belgium, even if your previous card has expired.
3. If you are allowed to continue working or not.

- **Single permit:** A Single Permit is a single document which entitles a national from outside the EEA and Switzerland to reside and work in an EU country for more than 90 days.

Previously, you had to go through two separate procedures (a work permit and a residence permit), but in recent years this has been combined into a single application.

- **Joint Committee** (Paritair comité): In Belgium, a Joint Committee (PC) is a consultative body in which employers and trade unions from a particular sector come together to reach agreements.

Each sector has its own PC with a number (e.g. PC 200 for white-collar workers, PC 124 for construction).

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