

Storm in Liège: the French made unwelcome at the school

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With the change of political majority in the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles (FWB), which oversees secondary education in French-Speaking Belgium, a programme decree was adopted last November. The decree introduces a number of reforms that will have a direct impact on the Liège Gunsmithing School and its flagship sections.

- A 3% reduction in the number of course periods that can be organised next year:

this reduction will have a direct impact on student supervision and will limit the projects that the school can put in place.

- A ban on enrolment in the 7th year of specialisation for students who have reached the age of majority and hold a diploma equivalent to the BAC G: this measure affects three of the school's flagship courses:

- The wood specialisation, which provides training in the manufacture, repair and maintenance of butts;
- The metal specialisation, which focuses on the acquisition of advanced technical skills for the repair and maintenance of weapons;
- Engraving, which enables students to learn unique techniques, particularly in inlay.

By restricting access to these courses, a whole body of expertise risks disappearing.

A ban on enrolment in 4th year for students who have reached the age of majority and have not previously attended a school in Belgium: a decision that directly threatens training in gunsmithing and is specifically targeted at French students.

This course requires three full years to reach a sufficient level for both the job market and the school's high standards. The 4th year is essential: it's the one that enables students to master the tools and technical gestures essential to their future profession (filing, fitting, machine tools). Without this foundation, the following years - devoted to internal mechanisms and the manufacture of parts and complete systems - become inaccessible.

This restriction on enrolment for foreign students, confirmed by the Minister's office, will lead to a sharp drop in enrolments, jeopardising the very survival of the sections and the school.

The situation is similar for the engraving course, the only one in the world dedicated to engraving on weapons, where excellence and mastery require an equally rigorous apprenticeship. The same applies to the jewellery and watchmaking sections, which are subject to identical constraints.

These measures are more than just administrative adjustments: they jeopardise the transmission of rare skills and threaten the future of unique training courses.

What are the practical consequences of these measures?

The school's economic model is based on the number of students enrolled, whose number of class periods determines the viability of the sections the following year. Gunsmithing, engraving, jewellery and watchmaking are the flagship courses that attract students and ensure the survival of the 20 other sections, spread over three main buildings. Restricting access to French and foreign students will have a domino effect: a drastic drop in enrolments, jeopardising the funding of the sections and possibly leading to the outright closure of the school. The unique structure of the school, created by the merger of three establishments, relies on a broad base of periods to function. Without the contribution of key courses, the whole system becomes untenable.

Impact in figures:

If these measures are applied, there will be 120 fewer students, i.e. a quarter of the total number of students, 350 lost teaching periods and a minimum of 15 teaching posts lost. These figures are low estimates. The most pessimistic internal

The most pessimistic internal scenarios envisage up to 30% of options being withdrawn, or even the complete closure of the school.

A specificity that precludes any alternative:

Training in gunsmithing and engraving is subject to federal government approval. No other school in Belgium is subject to this constraint, making any alternative impossible and justifying an urgent request for an exemption.

If these restrictions remain in place, unique expertise will be lost, along with an institution of excellence recognised far beyond Belgium's borders.

Deadlines and urgent matters

The decision-making schedule is tight, and each step is crucial for the future of the school: the number of students determining the school's funding will be set after an auditor's visit in early March. It is from this date that the fate of the school and its departments will be determined and the number of available course periods will be allocated.

With open days scheduled for 31 March, it is essential that the school is able to reassure students and parents about the future of its courses.

In the meantime, the government of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation must recognise the impact of these restrictions on unique craft courses that train skilled artisans who are recognised and sought after around the world.

An exemption: an absolute necessity

The granting of an exemption to allow foreign students to enrol, in accordance with the Bologna student mobility agreements, is essential to ensure the continuity of the courses and the future of the school. Resistance actions are underway, organised in particular by associations aiming to protect the armoury heritage in Belgium or its practice, as well as the

related industrial sector. An official response has been promised by 31 March. In the meantime, it is imperative to communicate that the school is continuing to operate normally and that the open days will go ahead as planned. Any confusion or doubt could lead to a drop in enrolments, which would be fatal for the institution.

The resistance must therefore remain mobilised and make its message heard:

- The school, its teachers, the related industry and its current and former students are highly motivated;
- The school is open and continues to welcome students;
- The open day on 31 March will go ahead as planned.

The stakes are clear: to ensure the survival of the school and the transmission of rare and valuable skills.

The UFA has sent a letter to the President of the Walloon Parliament expressing its dismay.

It is unthinkable that a school or university should turn in on itself.

Can we imagine Oxford and Cambridge being accessible only to English people, or the Sorbonne being reserved for French people?

Liège must also remain open to the world!