

Gender Equality in Academia and Research

Belgium

PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY IN RESEARCH

Legal framework

Belgium has specific laws and policies to improve gender equality in research institutions (research and decision-making) launched at the level of the Flemish and French Communities.

In Flanders, a set of decrees^[1] was issued in 2012 which set up targets for the participation of the underrepresented sex in decision-making bodies of public universities. The participation of women in research was also indirectly addressed by providing incentives for receiving funding through the special research funds (Bijzonder Onderzoeksfondsen, valid from 1 January 2013). In particular the new legislation prescribed that:

- One of the performance indicators used to calculate the funding amount per university is a diversity parameter that looks at the number of female researchers at postdoctoral and permanent level.
- If one of the sexes at postdoctoral and permanent level (per faculty) is underrepresented, in recruitment procedures with equal candidates priority must be given to the underrepresented sex.
- University boards, research councils and selection juries must be gender-balanced.
- The headmasters of the universities of the Flemish Community were required to submit (by early 2014) a proposal on the actions to be taken in favour of the gender balance.

The French-speaking community of Belgium has also taken steps to improve gender equality in research institutions. These are essentially soft law measures taken at the level of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. The Wallonia-Brussels Partnership for Researchers, adopted in 2011, contains several orientations to improve gender balance in the research community.

[1] [Bijzonder Decreet tot wijziging van de de bestuurlijke inrichting van de Universiteit Antwerpen en de Universiteit Hasselt](#) . | [Bijzonder decreet houdende wijziging van het bijzonder decreet van 26 juni 1991 betreffende de Universiteit Gent en het Universitair Centrum Antwerpen](#).

Policy framework

To follow up on the goals of the Partnership, in 2014, the Wallonia-Brussels Federation allocated a 150,000 Euro budget to finance a “Gender contact person” (Personne de contact genre) in each Wallonia-Brussels Federation university for the academic year 2014-2015. In 2015, the grant was renewed for the next academic year (2015-2016) by the Ministry of Higher Education and Research, and now involves not only the six French-speaking universities but also the Fund for Scientific Research (FNRS). The objective is to develop gender politics within the institutions and to promote gender equality throughout the scientific careers. This new grant follows the establishment of 'Gender Contact Persons' who have been charged by the Federation Wallonia-Brussels to inventory gender policies within these institutions, to ensure better visibility of gender issues and encourage connections between actors in the field. The funding of 150,000 Euro is divided among the six universities and the FNRS equally. In Flanders, no additional funding has been provided to back up the binding measures with regards gender equality in academia.

Other stimulatory initiatives

The cooperation protocol between L'Oréal Belgilux, the Belgian Regional Commissions for the UNESCO, the FNRS (National Fund for Scientific Research) and the FWO (Research Foundation - Flanders), offers three young women the opportunity to participate in a scientific research once every two years. The three fellowships, each worth 30,000 Euro/year, are reserved for research in biomedical sciences.

The SASSY-platform (Sharing Academic Sexism Stories with You) was independently set-up by female researchers and gender advocates. It was launched on International Women's Day in 2014 to provide a safe platform for female researchers to (anonymously) share their experiences with sexism.

Key actors

The key responsible actors are the Flemish and French-speaking Ministries of Higher Education and Research, and of Equal Opportunities.

The Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) and the Fund for Scientific Research (FNRS) in the French-speaking community are independent funding bodies. The FNRS allows an extension of the mandate when a fixed-term mandate is suspended due to maternity, paternal or adoption leave, for a period equal to that of the suspension. Further, the FNRS extends the eligibility rules for female researchers on its individual fellowships: per childbirth or adoption, a year is deducted from their scientific seniority. The FWO extends the fellowship with one year when a researcher is out for more than three months due to the abovementioned reasons.

BeWiSe (Belgian Women in Science Association), a non-profit organisation, is supporting the role and position of women in science via mentoring programmes, seminars and other events.

INITIATIVES FOR GENDER EQUALITY BY RESEARCH PERFORMING ORGANISATIONS

In Flanders, in response to the 2012 decrees, the five Flemish Universities joined together in the Flemish' inter-university Council (VLIR) and formed a High Level Task Force on Gender to ensure that gender policy at universities is developed from a bottom-up perspective. This Task Force developed an Action Plan Gender Higher Education ('Actieplan Gender Hoger Onderwijs'), which was endorsed by the Ministries. In this Action Plan, the Universities committed to setting up a tailor-made Gender Action Plan in each University, as well as an interuniversity charter on gender equality that contains obligatory clauses, by early 2014. In response, all five Flemish Universities have now set up Gender Action Plans. The VLIR will undertake an evaluation of the interuniversity charter every two year. The first evaluation is planned early 2016.

In the French-speaking community, as a result of the grants received from the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, all Universities have appointed a gender contact person in charge of gender matters within their university. Their mission has been to:

- write an annual report on the gender balance in their university, including an inventory on gender policies within the institution;
- ensure networking between all people involved in gender issues in the university;
- ensure better visibility for gender matters;
- propose, in collaboration with the academic authorities, an action plan to foster gender balance in the universities of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation.

All universities, except Saint-Louis, seem to have complied with the above requirements. Some French-speaking universities have initiated the drafting process of the Gender Action Plans.

The University of Mons created in 2014 a discussion group about gender, called Genre.S, as well as an advisor position to the chief education officer concerning gender policy. This led to the organisation of several activities, including evenings about the glass ceiling with a 'lecture show' about women in science forgotten by the historians, a documentary drama and a debate, a 'Women and Religions' study day for a larger public, a poster contest to fight against discrimination, among others.

The Academic Council of the Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL) approved in 2015 the gender policy to be developed within the institution for the next five years. The principal priorities of this policy include a significant awareness-raising and information component on issues related to equality and diversity. In this context, UCL has published a communication guide, adapted to the institution's practices, which recommends to all staff members the use of a gender-sensitive approach in all communication.

Two Belgian universities are part of EU-funded structural change projects. The Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL), is part of the EU-funded project GARCIA 'Gendering the academy and research: combating career instability and asymmetries'. In the framework of this project, the UCL maps the Leaky Pipeline phenomenon in different contexts and institutions, in order to understand whether there are differences between different disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics – STEM, and Social Science and Humanities – SSH) and to find out how and why women are more involved. The University of Antwerp takes part in EGERA 'Effective Gender Equality in Research and the Academia'. The project intends to promote a full set of measures to achieve gender equality and fight gender-based stereotypes in research and the academia.

RELEVANT EXAMPLES OF PRACTICES

The GAP Steering Committee at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB)

The VUB's Steering Committee on the Gender Action Plan consists of professors from all faculties and meets regularly to follow up on progress and discuss difficulties. The Steering Committee allows for an institutionalised gender policy, flexible to track new developments and tailored to the existing needs in the faculties.

The diversity teams and the gender vanguards at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KUL)

To embed gender policy at all levels of the university, the KUL makes use of diversity teams and gender vanguards who watch over gender and diversity policy at the level of the faculties and departments. They generate support for diversity policy in the workplace and communicate about central policy decisions in the faculty, but also inform the central Diversity Policy Office about gender and diversity issues that need attention. A specific training programme is provided for the diversity teams and gender vanguards by the Diversity Policy Office.

The reform of the election procedure for the University Board at the University of Ghent (UGent)

The UGent has changed its procedures for the election of its highest decision-making body, the “Raad van Bestuur”, going beyond the requested minimum of 1/3 – a gender balance of minimum 40/60 was established in 2014. Contrary to what was expected, the changed procedure has instantly brought a gender balance for the first time in the university’s history.