

Gender Equality in Academia and Research

Belgium

COUNTRY: Belgium

PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY IN RESEARCH

Legal framework

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

In Flanders, a set of decrees^[1] issued in 2012 foresee targets for the participation of the underrepresented sex in public universities' decision-making bodies. Women's participation in research is also indirectly addressed through special research funds (*Bijzonder Onderzoeksfondsen*, valid from 1 January 2013). The legislation stipulates that:

One of the performance indicators used to calculate the funding amount per university is a diversity parameter that looks at the number of women researchers at postdoctoral/permanent level;

If one of the sexes at post-doctoral/permanent level (per faculty) is underrepresented, they must be given priority in recruitment procedures with equally qualified candidates;

University boards, research councils and selection juries must be gender-balanced. Some French-speaking universities aim for a 70/30 balance, while some Flemish universities aim for a 60/40 ratio;

The rectors of the universities of the Flemish Community were required to submit a proposal on the actions to be taken on gender balance (by early 2014).

For the legislative period of the Flemish government (2014–2019), as well as the period 2016–2020, several priority areas were defined for gender equality. These included balanced participation of women and men in political and economic decision-making, combating violence against women, closing the gender pay gap, and counteracting stereotypes^[2]. The Flemish Framework Decree mandates mainstreaming of gender equality in all policies^[3]. The French-speaking Community has also taken steps to improve gender equality in research institutions. The European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers (2005) was incorporated into the Wallonia-Brussels Partnership for women and men researchers in the Federation Wallonia-Brussels (FWB) in 2011. The Partnership translated into six specific actions, including the continuation of a Women and Science Committee, which was ratified as the supporting committee for the government in 2016. The Committee is represented by two members of each FWB university, two members of the Fund for Scientific Research (FNRS) research funding body, one member of each administration directorate, the Gender Contact Persons assigned to universities (see below) and members appointed by the Ministry for Higher Education of the Belgian Government.

The modified Decree for Institutionalising the Women and Science Committee^[4] tasked the Committee with four key actions to improve gender equality in scientific careers in the FWB:

- Formulating opinions and recommendations on all questions relating to the equality of women and men in the scientific and academic field, on its own initiative or at the request of any member of the government of the French Community;
- Ensuring the exchange of information and the dissemination of good practice between universities, the FNRS, the administration (as defined in Article 1) and the responsible ministers concerning the equality of women and men in academic careers and scientific research;
- Facilitating the implementation of the recommendations of the European Commission of 11 March 2005 concerning the European Charter for Researchers and a Code of Conduct for the recruitment of researchers with regard to gender equality;
- Participating in the definition of the role and function of the positions of the French Community delegation to the Standing Working Group on Gender in Research and Innovation.

These are essentially soft law measures taken at the level of FWB. The Wallonia-Brussels Partnership for Researchers was adopted in 2011^[5]. It targets improved gender balance in the research community, together with overall improvement in researcher recruitment, training, social security, working conditions and job access more generally. The Partnership (1) makes recommendations on ad hoc leave, (2) proposes recommendations on the composition of juries and scientific committees, (3) adopts measures to integrate life course differences into the evaluation of scientific dossiers, (4) supports associations for the promotion of women's careers in science, (5) integrates gender issues into the teaching programme, and (6) strengthens high-level follow-up of these decisions by the Working Group on Women and Science.

Policy framework

The Flemish Inter-University Council (VLIR) is an umbrella organisation that unites the five Flemish universities. In June 2020, it issued the 'Leaving No One Behind – Equality & Inclusion Policy of VLIR-UOS with a new Gender Policy 2020–2024', signed by all five universities. The Policy includes a new tripartite framework and distinguishes three approaches for improving gender equality in science and technology:

- 1** Fixing the numbers: increasing women's participation in research and technology by supporting women's education and careers. It describes the current gender balance in interventions and organisations, and puts measures in place to achieve better balance. This is already happening at the level of scholarship attribution, where 60/40 representation is set as the selection norm.
- 2** Fixing the organisation: academic institutions have identifiable cultures that developed over time in the absence of women. Gender bias in the institutional structure hinders the career paths of women, for example at the level of hiring, promotion and work-life balance. An entry point is whether VLIR-UOS reflects equal opportunities for both genders in employment patterns and decision-making bodies, for example.
- 3** Fixing the knowledge: gender bias limits scientific creativity, excellence and benefits to society. Gender mainstreaming is promoted in research by including gender analysis as a resource to achieve excellence (itself a socially constructed concept that suffers from gender bias). This approach is implemented by integrating gender analysis throughout the project cycle and within all phases of research, education and outreach activities.

In 2014, the FWB allocated EUR 150,000 for the introduction of a Gender Contact Person in each FWB 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 FNRS. The objective is to develop gender policies within the institutions and to promote gender equality throughout scientific careers. The Gender Contact Persons take stock of gender policies to ensure better visibility of gender issues and also encourage networking between actors in the field. The funding is divided equally between the six universities and the FNRS. Flanders provided no additional funding for binding gender equality measures.

Other stimulatory initiatives

A cooperation protocol between L'Oréal Belgilux, the Belgian Regional Commissions for UNESCO, the FNRS and Research Foundation Flanders (FWO) offers three fellowships to women Masters' students in biomedical sciences. The fellowships are offered every two years and are worth EUR 30,000 per year.

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

Since 2014/2015, two inter-university Masters' programmes in Gender and Diversity Studies have been available at five Flemish universities (UGent, KULeuven, VUB, UHasselt, UAntwerp) and at six French-speaking universities (UCLouvain, ULiège, UNamur, St. Louis, ULB, UMons).

Key actors

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

The FWO (Flanders) and FNRS (French-speaking Community) are independent funding bodies. The FNRS extends funding periods when a fixed-term period is suspended due to maternal, paternal or adoption leave, for a period equal to that of the suspension. It also extends the eligibility rules for its individual fellowships for women researchers, with a year deducted from their scientific seniority for childbirth or adoption. The FWO extends fellowships by one year when a researcher is out for more than three months for maternity, paternal or adoptive.

The Committee for Women and Science was ratified by the Belgian government in 2016. It provides a useful network for uniting Gender Contact Persons in each French-speaking university, as well as the FNRS, the Académie de recherche et d'enseignement supérieur (ARES) and ministry officials.

The VLIR created a High-Level Task Force that prepared a Gender Action Plan (GAP) for Higher Education for Flemish universities in 2014. It issued a renewed gender policy in 2020.

The 'Belgian Women in Science Association' (BeWiSe) is a non-profit organisation that supports the role and position of women in science via mentoring, seminars and events.

INITIATIVES FOR GENDER EQUALITY BY RESEARCH PERFORMING ORGANISATIONS

In response to the 2012 decrees, the five Flemish universities came together in the VLIR and formed a High-Level Task Force on Gender to develop gender policy at universities from the ground-up. The Task Force developed the Action Plan for Gender Higher Education, which was approved by the Ministries of Higher Education and Research, and Equal Opportunities. Under the Action Plan, universities committed to setting up a tailored GAP in each university, as well as an Inter-University Charter on Gender Equality by early 2014 (renewed for 2019). The VLIR is to carry out a biennial evaluation of the Inter-University Charter.

Using grants received from the FWB, all universities in the French-speaking Community appointed a Gender Contact Person. Their mission is to:

Compile an annual report on gender balance, including a list of gender policies within the university;

Facilitate networking between all people involved in gender issues at the university;
Ensure better visibility for gender matters;
Propose an action plan to foster gender balance in the university, in collaboration with academic authorities.

All universities seem to have complied with the above requirements. Most French-speaking universities initiated the drafting process of the GAPs for 2020.

University of St. Louis

At the suggestion of the rector, the Governing Board set up an internal Gender Policy Support Committee in 2014. The Committee was tasked with drawing lessons from the annual report on the state of gender equality and submitting recommendations for action. The Committee comprises representatives of the three bodies, the different fields of study, those with interest in gender issues, and the student community. In 2015/2016, the new position of Gender Policy Advisor to the Rector was created. In addition, the function of Gender Policy Councillor to the Rectorate was assigned to a new, dedicated staff member. The Council mandated the Rector's Advisor and the Gender Policy Support Committee to develop a gender equality action plan to be implemented from 2016/2017. In 2017, the Governing Board invited the Rector's Advisor and the Gender Policy Support Committee to continue to work to raise awareness and to ensure better work-life balance among the university community. The approved action plan has four axes: (1) ensuring adequate work-life balance; (2) actions to raise awareness among students; (3) communication and awareness-raising for staff members; and (4) compiling a report on the state of gender equality at the university

University of Liège

Women remain underrepresented among professors, particularly at the level of full professors. Rather than imposing quotas in its 2018–2022 programme, the university authorities aim to encourage culture change through integration, diversity and gender equality. The programme sought to implement an awareness-raising and training scheme for non-discriminatory recruitment and evaluation. This request was approved by the Vice-Rector for Welfare and the Board of Directors on 3 July 2019. Since 2017/2018, new provisions have allowed transgender individuals to use their social name within the institution and on their student identification card (information on their sex is masked, allowing discretion). The university also designated a contact person for all questions and/or difficulties. Several research groups on gender-related questions were initiated (Étude sur le genre et la diversité en gestion (ÉGID), Feminist and Gender Lab (FER)). The HRS4R subgroup on gender began to develop a GAP in five areas: work-life balance and organisational culture; gender balance in leadership and decision-making; gender equality in recruitment and career progression; gender mainstreaming in research and teaching content; and measures against gender-based violence and sexual harassment.

Catholic University of Louvain (UCL)

In 2020, the university added three new points of focus to its 2016 GAP: combating gender inequality in work-life balance (parental leave policy, flexible working hours, working from home); gender balance on administrative councils; and zero tolerance culture for harassment and sexual violence. Two Belgian universities were part of EU-funded structural change projects. UCL was part of the EU-funded project on Gendering the Academy and Research: combating Career Instability and Asymmetries (GARCIA). UCL mapped the leaky pipeline phenomenon in different contexts and institutions in order to understand the differences between 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 took part in Effective Gender Equality in Research and Academia (EGERA). The project intended to promote a full set of measures to achieve gender equality and fight gender-based stereotypes in research and academia.

Since 2015, the following universities have implemented gender policy and action plans in line with the GAP set up by the VLIR:

KU Leuven: most of the initiatives recommended by VLIR and the Young Academy of the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts (KVAB) are embedded in human

resources and diversity policy, such as regular monitoring of gender figures, training of assessment committees, gender and diversity vanguards, confidential network. Currently, about 40 % of the assistant professors at KU Leuven are women. In addition, women candidates for vacancies of assistant professorships have at least equal opportunity to be hired, and women and men have demonstrably equal chances of promotion. Nevertheless, a gender balance between professors was not achieved by 2020. The Academic Council approved a new set of gender actions on 26 May 2020. These include evaluating and optimising support for gender vanguards (who monitor implicit bias in Assessment Committees), supporting career advancement of new assistant professorships (paying attention to diversity), evaluating the coaching trajectory for tenure-track faculty and expanding that coaching to all starting assistant professors, systematic career interviews, and improved access to information about mentoring and flexible work organisation (including work-life balance), and balanced gender distribution in faculty and departmental boards.

The University of Antwerp's Strategic Action Plan 2014 Sustainable Gender Policy for Academic Personnel promotes gender diversity among academic staff through operational policies, actions and education. Measures for improving work-life balance resulted in a policy paper on family-friendly meeting hours. The Board of Directors harmonised the university's internal rules with the Flemish Parliament Act, amending the University of Antwerp's management structure and facilitating the equal representation of women and men in policy-making and advisory bodies. The Equal Opportunities Unit organises interactive group sessions to provide doctoral students with realistic information about academic careers. This addresses the significant decrease in numbers of women in academia after doctoral level - 56 % of students are women, falling to 39.52 % at post-doctoral level and further again to 30 % at lecturer level. The sessions feature the testimonials of academics and alumni, helping women and men researchers to make informed career choices.

The VUB established a Plan of Action on Equality Monitoring and Reporting 2019-2021, which was approved by the Academic Council (18 February 2019) and the Executive Board (26 February 2019). The GAP comprises 10 actions: (1) For every assistant professorship, there should be a maximum of two-thirds of candidates from the overrepresented gender on the shortlist; (2) evaluating and expanding recruitment channels to attract more diverse candidates; (3) inclusive recruitment notices; (4) establishing a vision for diversity and anti-discrimination; (5) investing in anti-discrimination training and coaching on knowledge building, cultural change and diversity awareness; (6) monitoring and reporting on diversity; (7) raising awareness of diversity among the VUB community; (8) making diversity initiatives and points of contact available via an online platform; (9) launching a call to action for equality and inclusion of (international) students; and (10) reviewing the curriculum to enable meaningful reflection on diversity in existing research.

Hasselt University developed a Gender Policy Plan (2017–2021) that reflects women's and men's struggle to combine their professional and personal/social lives. The measures can be classified in three groups: (1) measures related to the company culture (target group: all staff); (2) measures related to intake and transfers (target group: academic staff); and (3) measures related to work-life balance (target group: all staff). An important objective of the Plan is to facilitate researchers' academic careers through the measures on staff intake and transfer. Hasselt University plans to assess current actions, update the Gender Policy Plan and define specific objectives.

Since 2014, the University of Ghent has created instruments for gender-neutral recruitment and selection. Post-doctoral academics could join a mentoring programme and enjoy individual career guidance, while a new career policy for full professorship took gender factors into account. Due to the severe underrepresentation of women in executive committees and boards, a new decree entered into force on 1 October 2014, requiring that all councils must be at least one-third women. The university's diversity and gender policy call proposed actions for a better work-life balance for both women and men. There is a pending inquiry to replace pregnant lecturers structurally and centrally. Finally, in 2013, Ghent was the first university in Flanders to appoint a professor of Gender Studies and, in 2014, it launched an Inter-University Master of Arts Programme in Gender and Diversity. The university has an active gender policy and seeks to develop gender mainstreaming through evaluation and exchanging good practice with other partner universities.

RELEVANT EXAMPLES OF PRACTICES

BEWISE mentoring programme

BEWISE was established as an independent non-profit organisation cutting across the linguistic borders in Belgium. It currently involves around 300 volunteers who offer mentoring to women STEM researchers, as well as skill-building workshops. Mentees are matched with experienced mentors (at least 10 years' experience) from other fields and institutions, reflecting their needs, career choices, strategies, work-life balance and mobility.

Observatory for Research on Scientific Careers

The independent Observatory for Research on Scientific Careers was created following the joint decision of representatives of the different French-speaking universities, the FWB and FNRS. It aims to create and follow up (missing and random) data on researchers in order to create a comprehensive, objective data collection. Its main goals are to monitor and use the expertise of different universities and partners to carry out analytical evaluations and statistics on researchers in the FWB.

Zero Tolerance in UCLouvain

In 2021, the Gender Officer of the Catholic University of Louvain began a university-wide 'Zero Tolerance' campaign to combat harassment and sexual violence at student and faculty level. The campaign includes several measures: (1) mandatory online training for all students and staff (in French and English) to raise awareness of the different types of violence and the notion of consent; (2) 35,000 stickers were distributed in student welcome packs, with the message "Harassment? Sexual assault? The perpetrator is the guilty party! UCLouvain supports you. A listening ear, psychological help, accompaniment, filing a complaint, in complete confidentiality"; (3) a symposium in 2022 will bring together experts and policymakers to raise awareness and involve other higher education institutions; (4) the App'Elles app lets people call the police in dangerous situations; and (5) a six-episode podcast, Les louv.es, addressing sexual violence in higher education (ordinary sexism, harassment, aggression, rape culture) to give students a voice, deconstruct the mechanisms underpinning such violence, and encourage critical thinking.

Footnotes

[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.

[2] Policy Memorandum 2014–2019 Equal Opportunities, <https://publicaties.vlaanderen.be/view-file/15676>

[3] [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2015/519192/IPOL_IDA\(2015\)519192_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2015/519192/IPOL_IDA(2015)519192_EN.pdf)

[4] Decree for institutionalising the Women and Science Committee (Décret instituant le Comité Femmes et Sciences): https://www.gallilex.cfwb.be/document/pdf/42601_001.pdf

[5] https://www.frs-fnrs.be/docs/Brochure_Parteneriat_FR.pdf