

ENSURING A GENDER-BALANCED REPRESENTATION IN THE HIGHEST DECISION-MAKING BODY OF GHENT UNIVERSITY

The new election procedure

Ghent University

Belgium – 2014

First and foremost, I would like to thank you for this invitation to participate in this event. I would like to start my intervention with some facts and figures. Interestingly, the staff population at Ghent University is an exact reflection of the national male / female gender balance. In Belgium, as in our university, 51% of the citizens are women. Despite this balance, however, we observe a very unequal gender distribution in our academic institution.

- In the highest rank of academics, only ten percent of our professors are women
- Each one of our 11 faculties, is headed by a man as dean
- In 2014, almost 200 years after our university's foundation, professor Anne De Paepe was the very first female to be appointed as rector at Ghent University
- Since Ghent University was founded, the composition of the university's Board of Governors (*Raad van Bestuur*) has been traditionally male-dominated. This Board is the highest decision-making body of the university.

What was the situation?

Over the years, the increasing number of female professors at the university did not change the male composition and decision-making culture. For instance, it was a common informal practice to appoint the resigning dean of a faculty to be seated in the Board of Governors. Before the new procedure was installed, the number of female professors in this Board varied from zero to two out of 12 professor positions (or 0 to 16 %). In order to ensure a gender-balanced representation in the Board of Governors, in 2014, Ghent University changed its procedures for the election of the members of this Board.

How was this change possible?

1/ EU policies and regional laws triggering change at institutional level

In 2013, the Flemish government issued a binding decree that stipulated that gender balance ranging from 1/3 to 2/3 had to be ensured in the universities' decision-making and advisory bodies.

2/ With the election of the first female rector in our history in 2014, which was only possible due to quota we had an explicit & high commitment from our rector and from the highest level in the organisation to put forward gender equality within university.

In response to this decree, Ghent University changed its election procedures for such bodies. For the election of its highest decision-making body, the Board of Governors (*Raad van Bestuur*), the university decided to go beyond the legal minimum proportion. Instead of proposing a 1/3 share of the

underrepresented sex, the new institutional election procedures established a gender-balanced target ranging from 2/5 to 3/5 (or 40/60 %). The rationale behind this decision was that Ghent University wanted to anticipate the European Directive that stipulates a gender balance of minimum 60/40 for the boards of directors of companies and public institutions by 2017. The rector even proposed a 50/50 balance for the board of directors, but this proposal was rejected.

How was the new procedure implemented?

In the new procedure, faculties are required to have at least one male and one female candidate for the elections. If the elections have an unbalanced gender outcome (not respecting the minimum 40/60 gender balance) the candidate with the least votes from the overrepresented sex (compared to other faculties) has to give way to the faculty's candidate of the other sex with the highest number of votes.

It is interesting to note that Ghent University did not opt for a 'duo' election system in which a male and a female candidate are elected as a team. This was actually requested by opponents of the current system as the duo-system leads to a formal compliance but informally perpetuates inequality. Although the duo-system often results in duos where the female candidate is the official candidate and the male candidate is the official ad interim candidate, the male candidate is seating in practice.

Encountered obstacles

The current election procedures requested a 40/60 % gender-balanced representation. Faculties are required to have at least one male and one female candidate for the elections. If the elections do not respect the minimum 40/60 gender balance, the candidate with the least votes from the overrepresented sex (compared to other faculties) will have to be replaced by the faculty's candidate of the other sex with the highest number of votes. After its institutionalisation, 8 out of 11 faculties supported the new procedure. Three faculties boycotted the 'undemocratic procedure' by making pre-agreements as regards who to vote for.

Results

As soon as the new procedure was implemented for the first time (2014), it has instantly changed the university's male-dominated board: gender balance was achieved for the first time in the university's history. Despite such incidents, the elections represented a significant success and meant a historic shift for gender equality at Ghent University. As a result of the 2014 election, the Board had a 50/50 composition. No female representative had to be positively discriminated. To the contrary, to reach the 40 per cent minimum, one woman had to give way to her male counterpart although she had more votes in total. Furthermore, the reformed election has attracted the most voters ever in the history of the University (9,268 votes).