



Ethics in academia

an international perspective from the Flemish Interuniversity Council

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Overview

1. A short intro: the Flemish ecosystem
2. Building blocks for responsible internationalization
3. Lessons (still being) learned



1. The Flemish ecosystem

1.1. Five universities

- Leuven, Ghent, Antwerp, Brussels and Hasselt
- 4/5 are member of a European Universities Network
- +150,000 students with a diploma contract
- 18,300 FTE scientific staff and 9,100 FTE administrative/technical staff
- Total revenue exceeds 2,5 bio EUR
- Highly competitive environment: > 58% of staff on external contracts, > 158 mio EUR from European programmes, > 255 mio EUR from contract research for industry and government

1.2. The Flemish Interuniversity Council

- Established in 1976 as a member organisation
- Based in Brussels, 16 staff, funded by the universities
- Covers all fields: education, quality assurance, research and innovation, internationalization, social policy and diversity, university administration, development cooperation
- Twofold mission:
 - Concertation platform: stronger together
 - Lobby organisation
- From reactive to proactive



2. Building blocks for responsible internationalization

1.1. Ethical perspective

- Standing working group on Science, Ethics and Integrity
- Domestic and international topics
 - Scientific integrity
 - Transparency of clinical trials
 - Animal testing
 - Human rights
 - Outspokenness on the violation of academic freedom
 - Dual use research
 - Nagoya Protocol (use of genetic resources)
 - Dealing with our colonial history and decolonizing our universities
 - Knowledge security

1.2. Human rights

History

- Rectors tasked an ad hoc working group of human rights experts to develop recommendations for a human rights assessment (HRA) toolbox that can be used by academic staff as a practical instrument of self-regulation
- The report was approved in October 2019
- English translation available at https://vlir.be/beleidsdomeinen/internationalisering/#tab_3

Scope

- Only partnerships concluded at institutional level
- All new partnerships and the renewal of ongoing partnerships (education and research) with external partners (both academic and non-academic)
- Partnerships at national and international level
- No application at the level of country or a regime, with the exception of Iran
- Partners and activities within the envisaged partnership are being scrutinized





Procedure and responsibilities

- Shared responsibility by decentralized staff and central university services
- Strong recommendation to set up a central Human Rights Contact Point in each university
- Three escalating steps to assess the risk of human rights violations: screening > scoping > deciding on consequences

Step 1 – screening

- Staff at decentral level are invited to apply the HRA:
 - by examining the mission, vision and activities of the partner
 - by consulting a number of relevant websites, such as www.business-humanrights.org or www.scholarsatrisk.org
 - by answering a number of questions, which have been arranged in the form of a user-friendly checklist
- If necessary, turn to the central Human Rights Contact Point for advice

From the HRA checklist

Certain types of partners, activities and contexts may call for heightened vigilance:

1. Partners

1.1. One of the partners in the project is not an academic institution, but an actor who, by its nature, may have possible involvement in human rights violations. Examples in this regard may include:

- (elements of) the police, army or other (public and private) security services, and other public services whose operations may give rise to human rights violations;
- companies in sectors where large-scale violations of workers' or residents' rights occur on a regular basis (mining sector, clothing industry, large-scale plantations, infrastructure and utilities (e.g. a dam)).


Yes No

1.2. One of the partners is a government agency (other than a public university) in a country with a poor reputation for human rights violations. E.g. a country marked as 'not free' in the 'Freedom in the world' index (Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-world>).

Yes No

1.3. One of the partners in the project is an academic institution very closely associated with an actor mentioned in 1.1. or 1.2.

Yes No



Step 2 – scoping

- Activated only when screening raises one or more red flag(s)
- Carried out by the Human Rights Contact Point
- Scoping is mainly done by getting in touch with:
 - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Embassies abroad, European Union, United Nations, specialised human rights organisations, etc.
 - Researchers or staff members who have had previous experience with the same partner or activity



Step 3 – deciding on consequences

- Activated only when scoping keeps raising one or more red flag(s)
- Carried out by the Human Rights Contact Point in consultation with decentral staff
- Possible consequences:
 - Engage in dialogue in order to obtain more information
 - Ask to adapt activities of the partner or change the planned activities of cooperation
 - Remove risky activities and/or exclude the partner from the cooperation
 - Withdraw as a partner, or decide not to launch the envisaged partnership
 - Go ahead with the partnership if cooperation has more positive than negative characteristics



Implementation

- All universities were asked to implement the HRA recommendations and the accompanying HRA toolbox by the end of 2020
- As foreseen, VLIR has evaluated the implementation in 2021:
 - HRA is being applied by three universities; one university is preparing its use; one is using the ethical checklist of FWO
 - Reaction by university staff is very positive
 - Sharing experiences, particularly on the handling of difficult cases, is crucial. Twice a year this will be done within the standing Working Group on Science, Ethics and Integrity

1.3. Dual use research

- Guidelines for researchers on dual use and misuse of research
 - Published in 2017 to raise awareness with researchers on an ethically and legally very complicated issue
 - <https://vlir.be/publicaties/brochure-dual-use/>
 - Updated version planned for the summer of 2022



1.4. Duty to speak

- Long tradition of speaking out publicly on violations of academic freedom and the freedom of expression, both inside and outside of Europe, often at the level of the Board
- Recent cases:
 - Hungary: Central-European University; gender studies; restructuring of HAS
 - Freedom of expression, following the murder of Samuel Paty and political hate speech in Belgium
 - Turkey
 - Egypt
 - Ethiopia



1.5. Dealing with our colonial history and decolonizing our universities

- Working group of all Belgian universities in the wake of BLM protest
- Report delivered in October 2021
 - <https://vlir.be/publicaties/koloniaal-verleden/>
 - http://www.cref.be/communication/20211027_Gestion_du_pass%C3%A9_colonial.pdf
- How can universities contribute to a better understanding of the colonial past? How to deal with the impact of that past within the universities themselves and within society at large?
- Rich document for further inspiration and reflection



1.6. Nagoya Protocol

- Utilizing genetic resources means that researchers must deal with due diligence obligations under Regulation (EU) 511/2014
- Highly technical and complex matter, which surpasses the expertise of individual universities
- Expertise has been pooled at VLIR
 - Providing a checklist to researchers
 - Setting up training and awareness sessions
 - Exchanging experiences in a trusted environment
- <http://nagoya.vlir.be/en/home-tool/>



1.7. Knowledge security

- Growing political awareness to include academic assets as part of a broader economic security policy
- Driven by national parliaments, media and the European Commission



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COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

on the Global Approach to Research and Innovation

Europe's strategy for international cooperation in a changing world



Gezichtsherkenningstechnologie op een veiligheidsbeurs in China. © REUTERS

Hoe Belgische universiteiten het Chinese leger 'helpen'

Een aantal Belgische universiteiten, waaronder de KU Leuven en UGent, werkt samen met de 'Seven Sons of National Defence'. Dat zijn Chinese topuniversiteiten die in opdracht van veiligheidsdiensten en het leger onderzoek doen naar gezichtsherkenning, onderwaterdrones en andere technologie die China inzet bij mensenrechtenschendingen. De Vlaamse uniefs zeggen stappen te ondernemen.



3. Lessons (still being) learned

Final reflections – 1/3

- Pressured by domestic or international incidents, governments show a willingness to act quickly and in a top-down way, often without too much knowledge on academic reality. Consultation and interaction with the academic community is key to avoid disproportionate decisions.
- Universities should invest in raising awareness about academic practices with security services and ministries they normally don't deal with that often.

Final reflections – 2/3

- When researchers have to comply with highly technical and legally complicated supranational legislation, a coordinating role for the NRC may be considered.
- Raising awareness with individual researchers requires a constant quest for the most appropriate communication channels.
- NRCs should look at ways to actively exchange relevant good practices amongst each other.

Final reflections – 3/3

- Self-regulation by universities is recommended as the main building block for any policy. It generates trust with policy-makers and the public at large.
- Self-regulatory measures should be developed with the active help of the universities' own experts in the field.
- Recommendations by the experts do not always please university management. The latter have to maintain a delicate balancing act, e.g. between human rights principles and the reality of strategic priorities that govern a university's policies on research, higher education, international relations and corporate administration.



Tack för inbjudan !

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