



**ALLIANCE FOR
EQUALITY IN ACADEMIA**

PRESS RELEASE:

For a decree that truly protects victims of harassment, discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual violence in higher education

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The Parliament of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation is currently debating a draft decree aimed at ensuring the prevention, support, and protection of students against harassment, gender-based and sexual violence, and discrimination in higher education. A vote in plenary session is scheduled for the coming days.

Minister-President Degryse's intention is commendable. However, as currently drafted, the text risks missing its essential goal: to truly protect victims.

A protection decree must first clearly state what it protects. The choice of words is not trivial. They determine who is protected, in what situations, and with what rights. However, the draft decree draws on disparate definitions from Belgian law without explicitly linking them to the systemic framework of the Istanbul Convention, which views gender-based violence as a form of discrimination and a violation of fundamental rights. The problem is not that a decree must reproduce the terms of the Convention word for word. The problem is the lack of a clear link between Belgian legal categories and the victim-centered approach mandated by the Convention.

This lack of an integrated framework risks undermining the proper classification of complex situations: sexual harassment, cyberviolence, retaliation following a report, abuse of power in educational relationships, a hostile, sexist environment, and acts of violence committed off campus but directly affecting a student's academic progress. In these situations, victims should not be confronted with fragmented legal categories or with agencies that defer responsibility to one another. By ratifying this convention, Belgium has committed to aligning its legislation with international standards for the protection of victims.

But simply defining acts of violence correctly is not enough. It is also necessary to ensure that reports are handled in an independent, competent, and impartial manner. This is where the

draft decree raises a second major difficulty: it leaves the handling of complaints largely within the institutions themselves.

A recent case has just made this point very clear. Michaël F.-B., an external associate professor at UCLouvain, who was sentenced on Tuesday May 19 2026 by the Brussels Court of Appeals to four years in prison, including for rapes committed against two students, had continued to teach throughout the proceedings, despite the victims' warnings to the university. This case highlights the limitations of internal procedures. When an institution is directly involved, it cannot be both judge and jury in its own cases.

The BEHAVES study, conducted among higher education institutions in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation, and cited in the draft decree, also emphasizes the need for independent complaint mechanisms. Handling reports internally exposes investigations to conflicts of interest.

The Sexual Violence Care Centers (CPVS) could offer a practical solution. As entities independent of higher education institutions, their involvement would allow for the outsourcing of complaint handling. CPVS also possess specialized professional investigative expertise, enabling them to verify allegations and collect physical evidence. Such a solution would help restore victims' trust and ensure a more objective and professional analysis of the facts.

The decree should also strengthen the accountability of universities. It is not enough to simply point out that a higher education institution has no judicial authority. It has professional, institutional, and disciplinary responsibilities. A mandatory code of conduct, applicable to all higher education staff and students, would clearly define prohibited behaviors, the obligations of each individual, and possible sanctions.

Such a code already exists in Flanders, following the Flemish decree of December 8, 2023. A comparable instrument is also being developed at the European level as part of the GenderSAFE project. There is no reason for the Wallonia-Brussels Federation to lag behind.

Finally, the decree should protect the entire university community: undergraduate students, graduate students, as well as academic, research, administrative, and technical staff. Graduate students often find themselves in an ambiguous position, situated between student and employee status. As for students, they do not enjoy the same level of legal protection as employees. This means they cannot file a claim with the labor court and must rely exclusively on criminal courts or internal disciplinary proceedings, neither of which is suited to their situation.

A decree designed to combat harassment and discrimination cannot rely solely on good intentions. It must ensure clear definitions, independent procedures, a binding code of conduct, protection for whistleblowers, and a scope that truly covers the entire academic community.

Victims of harassment and discrimination in our institutions of higher education do not need superficial measures. They need a decree that protects them, that compels institutions to

fulfill their responsibilities, and that does not make their experiences even more difficult. This draft decree does not meet these essential needs. We call on lawmakers to amend it.

Text written by "[the Alliance for Equality in Academia](#)", an international nonprofit organization founded in 2025 that is dedicated to promoting true gender equality in higher education and research in Europe by fostering systemic change through support, research, and advocacy. Its founders are:

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