



Internationalization in francophone Belgium

Jérémy Dodeigne¹

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This contribution seeks to offer some insights about the internationalisation practices in the Belgian French-speaking academic environment. My experience remains, however, deeply rooted in political and social sciences. I cannot fully grasp the complexity of internationalisation practices observed in the realm of other disciplines. Based on my regular interactions with colleagues from all research sectors in the Council of research at the University of Namur (since 2019), I can modestly rely what seems to be some of the general features observed in other research environments. Likewise, I do not pretend to be able to speak on behalf of the wider Belgian French-speaking academic environment. My experience as an associate professor has exclusively developed at the University of Namur (since 2017), while my former positions at the University of Liège and UCLouvain were junior positions (which come with different responsibilities and opportunities back in the early 2000s). Besides, I have no direct experience at the other French-speaking universities (University of Mons and Université libre de Bruxelles). Overall, I want to cautiously underline that I have no pretension to provide a comprehensive overview on the formal and informal behaviour in the internationalisation of the Belgian French-speaking academic context. I can modestly contribute with some informed personal reflections.

Firstly, the internationalisation practises in French-speaking Belgium relate to mobility stays abroad, as well as active participation in international conferences and colloquia. From the early start of their careers, junior scientists rapidly access the international scene via their participation in conferences, workshops, as well as methods schools organised abroad. This active participative is possible thanks to the multiplication of institutional support. Furthermore, international collaboration is encouraged in order to strengthen common co-supervision and co-financing of (post)doctoral research with international universities and research organisations. International mobility is, therefore, a practice which is included very early on in the *modus operandi* of the career development of Belgian researchers. And senior members (postdoctoral, as well as permanent members of the academic and scientific body) may continue to rely on specific instruments favouring internationalisation

✉ Jérémy Dodeigne
Jeremy.dodeigne@unamur.be

¹ Research Institute Transitions, University of Namur, Namur, Belgium



throughout their career. This is my general observation for most researchers in social and human sciences, a research domain that I know best. However, not all opportunities are equally distributed across all types of professional status, research disciplines, and private life (see below).

Moreover, the internationalisation practices are also reflected in the welcoming of foreign colleagues (be they permanent or temporary contracts). This is reflected in the universities' benchmarking of international practices such as *Euraxess* certification (acquired by all Belgian French-speaking universities). This certification implements the principles established in the "European Charter for Researchers and the Researchers Recruitment Code". The latter aims at promoting greater international mobility and transparency of recruitment, at all levels of responsibility. Welcoming international researchers depends, however, upon each Belgian University's attractiveness: academic institutions have different 'soft power' on that matter, which largely depends upon their international reputation (e.g. via the international rankings, which substantially vary between the smallest and the largest Belgian universities). By contrast, the recruitment of international personnel—be they permanent or temporary—can be undermined by specific 'academic culture': some research centres, faculties or universities are known to hardly open their doors to foreign colleagues; whereas it is a very common practice elsewhere.

Beyond this 'soft power', the international ambition of Belgian universities can, furthermore, be fostered thanks to their 'hard power' (i.e. specific resources that have been allocated to recruit international researchers). Most Belgian French-speaking universities have successfully developed funding instruments that permit outgoing as well as incoming mobility. For instance, the University of Namur has associated itself with the University of Mons to strengthen the attractiveness of both universities to invite 'mobile brilliant researchers' ("Connect With Wallonia—Come 2 Wallonia"). This programme is funded up to 4.5 million euros as part of the research framework from the European Commission (i.e. "Cofund—Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions"). Another example is the development cooperation adopted by the academic network for higher education (ARES): it provides multiple opportunities such as the "Equitable partnerships for quality higher education and research in support of the Sustainable Development Goals" (2022–2027). This program supports partnerships for quality teaching and research in Belgium, Africa, Asia, South America and the Caribbean.

Secondly, the internationalisation practices are also reflected in the publication strategies. This is partly the consequence of research funders' expectations for grant applications calls (e.g. the F.R.S.-FNRS at national level and the H2020 research programme at the European level). Hence, many of my colleagues' strategy is to publish in international journals with double-blind peer review. Because most of these international scientific outlets provide publishing guidelines in English, linguistic skills in English (writing, reading and speaking) have certainly become a necessary condition in today's academia. There are, however, a few notable exceptions of scientific journals publishing exclusively in French (or jointly with other languages) that have the same international scientific reputation. Beyond the mastery of French and English, being multilingual is an asset that is certainly highlighted in recruitment procedures.



Nevertheless, publications in the Belgian official languages remain perfectly valuable contributions on the *curriculum vitae* of many colleagues. They are part of our so-called ‘community service’ and they permit to extend scientific debates towards the wider public. Furthermore, these publications in national language are fundamental resources for our bachelor degree programmes (references in English are progressively introduced until the Master level). Likewise, these resources published in national languages allow researchers to engage with other non-academic audiences (public decision makers, journalists, managers of associations, NGOs, unions, trade organisations, etc.).

Thirdly, the funding opportunities reflect the internationalisation of the academic career. Hence, the National Fund for Scientific Research (F.R.S.-FNRS at the level of the French community in Belgium) allow researchers to finance seminars and conferences at the international level (including outside Europe). They also cover the possibility of a short research stay in a foreign research centre (3–6 months). Each university can also develop its own specific instruments to prioritise some research actions. For instance, the University of Namur has created the *Namur Research College* (NARC), awarding every year research fellowships. This nomination is aimed at promoting the visibility and research activities of some members outside the university (including on the international scene).¹

The multiplication of these internationalisation instruments is, therefore, coupled with a demand for the development of an international profile for members of the university. Consequently, evidence of international experience has become a formal condition when candidates apply to permanent positions (academic member of a university and permanent scientist at the F.R.S.-FNRS). This international experience is seen as an indicator of openness to other schools of thought, new research practices, adaptation skills to other professional contexts (including the mastery of foreign languages), and it allows the development of an international network for future scientific projects.

However, mobility is far from being an easy access for all types of researchers: it depends upon their specific (a) professional contracts (e.g. some researchers share teaching duties with their research programme, while others are hired full-time for research), (b) research enters (e.g. some researchers in life and technology sciences work on experiments in that can only be conducted under specific laboratory infrastructure), and, last but not least, (c) specific arrangement in private life (e.g. family duties are not always compatible with international mobility, which tends to undermine women’s opportunities according to a recent study²). In this respect, for junior researchers, the unequal status between a Ph.D. candidate with teaching duties (usually serving for a term of 6 years) and a full-time Ph.D. candidate (4 years dedicated almost exclusively to research) induce differentiated opportunities. A mandate as a full-time Ph.D. candidate is significantly less constrained by the academic calendar, given the low amount of time allocated to mentoring and teaching. Overall, varying

¹ Source: University of Namur, consulted 10 October 2022, <https://www.unamur.be/en/research/narc>.

² Source: CALIPER project, consulted 1 March 2023, <https://caliper-project.eu/clp-uploads/2021/07/GEP-SRNSFG.pdf>.



situations can limit research mobility which can be the sources of multiple tensions: there are increasing demands for international experience, but there is often unequal distribution of opportunities for such international orientation in one's career.

This is a potential caveat to monitor in the future, especially for the career advancement. Indeed, a researcher's prospects for internationalisation does not diminish over time, far from the contrary. Permanent academics can apply to a "sabbatical year/semester" (conducted—entirely or partly—abroad). In theory, applications for a sabbatical can be sent in every 5 years according to the University of Namur's regulations. In practice, however, permanent academics can reasonably expect to obtain three sabbaticals throughout their entire professional career. Nevertheless, this situation should not be idealised as many colleagues in Belgian French-speaking universities would identify several difficulties to be allocated a sabbatical term. Colleagues going abroad induce a large workload for the other colleagues of a department (who must endorse the pending teaching duties and administrative obligations). Overall, this type of constraint tends to undermine the effective ability to take advantage of such internationalisation instruments. To overcome these kinds of difficulties, some department and/or some universities have developed (in)formal strategies: for instance, a principle of rotation between colleagues. This principle allows members from the same department to ensure sabbatical terms for every single member over the next 5 years, while it guarantees sufficient staff presence for the bachelor's and master's programmes. It is indeed not desirable for a programme to mainly rest upon the shoulders of temporary lecturers. The latter are often motivated and talented, but the legal framework imposes that specific administrative and teaching tasks are devolved to permanent academics. This kind of (in)formal strategies can be very effective in some department and/or universities, but are not always possible in within small and medium sized research units. This creates inequalities of opportunities. Access to a sabbatical will, therefore, be possible—in practice—every 7–12 years (but not every 5 years as specified in theory).

A recent initiative by the government of the French community of Belgium should be highlighted. It aims at encouraging applications to competitive research projects, and in particular to European calls. The goal is to promote the internationalisation and excellence of research in French-speaking Belgium. Although the amount remains relatively limited (4,498,000 EUR for the six Belgian French-speaking universities, 2021 budget),³ there is a substantial support allowing promoters to focus on their submission (being partly relieved of their teaching duties), as well as to take advantage of the support of consultants specialising in applications for this kind of competitive research projects.

Finally, I would like to conclude with a few words on the environmental costs of internationalisation practices. While the negative externality of international mobility has become a central topic of debates—including constraining policies in certain universities as in France, Switzerland or the UK; most French-speaking have

³ Source: Scientific Research Budget, website consulted 10 October 2022, <https://statistiques.cfwb.be/recherche-scientifique/budget-et-financement-de-la-recherche-scientifique/budget-de-la-recherche-scientifique/>.



not yet adopted a binding policy on this issue.⁴ As a result, restrictions on mobility depend mostly upon individuals' goodwill, according to their own opportunities and constraints. Yet, I have observed that this topic has increasingly become an explicit topic of concern for many colleagues, questioning our responsibility in integrating environmental costs into our members' international research activities. For instance, various colleagues have been questioning the reimbursement of air trips for travels within Europe. There are alternative solutions with lower negative externalities for the environment (e.g. rail travels, including night trains). Travels outside Europe have always been more limited, because of the greater costs, and time-consuming trips limiting de facto their negative environmental impact. Hence, the funding of air tickets outside Europe is limited to one trip per year according to the F.R.S.-FNRS funding rules. Yet, restrictions on this matter are not without some caveats: the lockdown period for sanitary reasons (2020–2021) has strongly limited personal interactions, especially of the younger generation of researchers who need to build their networks. Overall, the publication of a *vade mecum* of good practices appears to me as inevitable in the short term, before considering more constrictive rules. Yet, we should pay attention not to (re-)create new forms of inequalities between the members of the same research entity.

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⁴ At the University of Namur, the strategic plan ("Universe 2025") is devoted to the development of a sustainable campus. Most of the objectives and resources aimed at energy performance for the university's buildings. In addition, new regulations regarding international mobility are being drafted at the time of the publication of this article: the terms, scope and nature of constraints are still under discussion.

