



HE. Ms. Michelle Bachelet,
UN High Commissioner for Human Rights,
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
Palais des Nations
CH-1211 GENEVA 10,
Switzerland

Dear High Commissioner,

Please find below a submission from the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA, Prins Willem-Alexanderhof 5, 2595 BE, The Hague, The Netherlands, www.ifla.org) and De Vlaamse Vereniging voor Bibliotheek, Archief & Documentatie (the Flemish Library and Archive Association; VVBAD, Statiestraat 179, B-2600, Berchem (Antwerpen), Belgium, www.vvbad.be) for the third cycle of the Universal Periodic Review in Belgium.

IFLA is the global organisation for libraries and library associations, founded in 1927, at present with over 1500 members in more than 150 countries. IFLA works to represent the interests of library and information services and their users, and is committed to promoting the principles of universal and equitable access to information and freedom of expression as drivers of development and well-being.

VVBAD is the non-profit organization for professionals working in libraries, archives and documentation centres in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. The VVBAD was founded in 1921 and represents approximately 3500 information professionals. The VVBAD advocates access to information and the transfer of knowledge, essential for an inclusive society. The VVBAD organizes seminars, workshops and foreign study tours. Informatie aan Zee is the biennial conference for the library and archive sector. The VVBAD offers news and information for the information professional. META is the VVBAD magazine for libraries and archives.

Overview:

1. Communities across Belgium have access to a network of over 1000 public libraries, as well as the Royal Library, approximately 140 academic libraries, and numerous libraries and service points focused on specific demographic groups: e.g. school and prison libraries.^{1 2} Their total collections span millions of print, audio-visual and digital materials (e.g. approx. 15.000.00 items in the collections of public libraries in Flanders); and hundreds of libraries each year organise cultural and educational activities – lessons, readings, clubs, exhibitions, workshops, information sessions, and more.³
2. With millions of visitors, registered members, and online visits and users, libraries in Belgium are well-positioned to reach and engage many people in the communities they serve. The overarching mission and commitment of the library field is to offering equitable and open access to information, knowledge and learning opportunities – and libraries in Belgium have traditionally fulfilled a number of important social roles.^{4 5}
3. By working to offer universal and equitable access to materials, organising activities, and providing information services and support to their users, libraries help deliver on the human rights to cultural participation (codified in Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) and education (Article 26); as well as helping realise the rights to freedom of thought, opinion, access to information and ideas (Article 19).

4. As such, their work is relevant to such recommendations as 138,117, 139,11 and 138,70. This report further examines the experiences of libraries in Belgium with protecting and promoting human rights, drawing on the experiences and work of the VVBAD, libraries in Flanders and in Belgium at large.

1. Access to information and knowledge, the right to participate in culture

5. People's participation in and access to cultural expressions and heritage are among their fundamental human rights, intrinsically linked to their identity and dignity.⁶ Core library services work to help remove barriers to such access and participation by offering open, equitable, no-cost or low-cost ways to access quality materials and engage in cultural activities.
6. Cultural sector statistics published by the Government of Flanders, for example, highlight that public libraries organise a wide range of activities aimed at stimulating cultural education: thematic stands, exhibitions, authors' readings, clubs, theatre performances, and more.⁷

1.1 Marginalised and more vulnerable groups in focus

UPR of Belgium 2nd cycle recommendations:

138.117 Continue to promote the access of vulnerable groups to education

138.109 Encourage the participation and representation of citizens in all sectors of the society regardless of their origin or religion

7. Crucially, statistics highlight that such library services and activities are often aimed at specific target groups, some of which may be at a higher risk of marginalisation or disadvantage. For example:
 - There are around 50.000 accessible DAISY-books across libraries in Flanders, which broaden access to knowledge and information for several thousand users with reading disabilities – as well as targeted activities and services like thematic packages and information sessions.
 - Dedicated collections, book packages, services outside of normal working hours or outside of the library building, group cards and other offers – different libraries provide these and other tailored services to help meet the needs of youth, older readers, users with less mobility, asylum seekers, residents of care homes, people with diverse ethnic-cultural backgrounds, people in poverty, and other target groups.

1.2 Cultural and educational rights of prisoners

UPR of Belgium 2nd cycle recommendation:

139.11 Ensure that all persons deprived of liberty are held in humane conditions, including in line with the United Nations Basic Principles for the Treatment of Prisoners and the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners

8. The United Nations Basic Principles for the Treatment of Prisoners hold that “All prisoners shall have the right to take part in cultural activities and education aimed at the full development of the human personality”. Dedicated library services to prison populations are one example of targeted initiatives working to uphold these rights. In Flanders, all prison libraries try to cooperate with educational partners whenever they can – and helping prisoners learn Dutch is one of the priorities.
9. In Saint-Gilles, for example, the municipal library has recently cooperated with a center for basic education ‘Brusselleer’ to offer communication lessons in the local prison. The inmates took part in poetry-writing workshops, and created a collection of poetry together. The emphasis was on low-threshold participation: it was important for the library that all prisoners could take part, including those who were not in class. To help achieve this, everyone was allowed to write in their own language, while the less proficient or more creative prisoners could also participate by

drawing. The library made sure that everything was translated into French, Dutch or English. The poetry was bundled in a beautifully designed edition, and the library organised a festive show moment with a Slam Poet.

10. In 2020, this poetry initiative in the Saint-Gilles prison took place for a third time, but the library was not able to organise workshops due to the pandemic. This instead took place directly in participants' cells - collections of drawings and poems were delivered to their cells for inspiration, and the writing commenced. This initiative responded to the demand for group activities and offered inmates an opportunity to express themselves, to do a different activity, and reflect on their experiences.⁸

11. Klassebak.net, a Flemish network and expertise center for prisoners' education, collects and highlights good practices around learning in detention. Some of the other library-led interventions include the following:

- Detainees visit the local library for a tour with a Dutch teacher. This happens in several prisons, for example in Antwerp.

- A newly-launched project in Saint-Gilles is offering detainees who are employed in the library an opportunity to obtain a competence certificate from the VDAB.

- Libraries build collections with attention to the needs and wishes of prisoners, for example adding books in many different languages. In general, these collections prioritise and pay attention to diversity, informative books about health, drug use, mental health, being creative, positive relationships, and others.

- Communication always takes place in at least 3 languages.

- To promote social cohesion, a library organised 'Reading Together' activities with Fikry El Azzouzi (2019), vzw De days (2019), and Michaël De Cock (2018). The group conversations that arise during Reading Together promote positive social contacts. Detainees are given the opportunity to express their opinion and support each other in a safe environment.

While it is currently still not possible to organize such group activities, the library does want to continue offering the inmates an opportunity to express themselves. To do so, they have set up the 'Put It on Paper' project. Through the library inmates can borrow sketchbooks for drawing or writing, as well as a basic package of drawing materials. This way, the library wants to support and inspire each other to give the best of themselves.

1.3 Digital inclusion in focus

12. Internet access is increasingly integral to people's rights to seek, receive and impart information. Libraries in Belgium are working to support digital inclusion to help ensure that everyone can benefit and have access to digital opportunities – from education to leisure to employment. 2019 *EU Library Factsheets* point out that in Belgium, all public libraries offer internet access and 45% offer public WiFi.⁹

13. Importantly, many libraries offer digital skills training and learning opportunities for the population. EUROSTAT data suggests that, in 2019, 61% of the population in Belgium had basic or above basic digital skills;¹⁰ meaning that such learning opportunities can be particularly useful for 39% of the population. The Flemish Government Cultural Center and Library Knowledge Portal shows an overview of activities that libraries organise to suppose digital inclusion: both beginner and technical-level workshops and courses on ICT and digital media, as well as other initiatives like thematic stands, library introductions, and others.¹¹ Similarly, libraries in Wallonie-Bruxelles traditionally provided introductions to the Internet and media to many thousands of users each year.¹²

RECOMMENDATION: Recognising the importance of equitable access to information, learning opportunities and cultural participation, we encourage further development of a policy

environment which supports and enables libraries to deliver on these rights – particularly for people from marginalized or more vulnerable backgrounds.

The right to education – campus libraries, digital inclusion, literacy

UPR of Belgium 2nd cycle recommendation:

138.117 Continue to promote the access of vulnerable groups to education

14. **Academic libraries – democratising education.** Libraries help deliver on people’s right to education – by ensuring their access to educational materials and many other services. Campus libraries and learning centers, for example, play a central role in helping democratise education. Traditionally, most college campuses have their own library, media library or learning center – and students and staff can always go to this neutral space on campus, as equals. The libraries and learning centers are designed and equipped to optimally support the various educational needs of its stakeholders. While every library/learning center works to meet the diverse needs of different users depending on the context, all Flemish university libraries do share the overarching goal of facilitating knowledge creation by students, teachers, researchers and other employees.
15. These libraries offer a customized collection of educational, teaching and study materials. Depending on the courses, the emphasis is on physical and/or digital holdings. The needs and collections strongly vary across different study courses; and libraries’ physical collections range from books to manuals and magazines to reference works, while their digital collections are an increasingly important source for any training. Okapi2, a statistics and benchmarking database for scientific libraries in Flanders, shows that in some cases the borrowing in physical materials is rapidly declining (with exceptions, naturally), but loans of other teaching materials are on the rise everywhere – this also includes laptops, tablets, cameras, and game materials.
16. Libraries also support education by offering work and study spaces. These vary from quiet workplaces to inspiring brainstorming and relaxation areas – these allow users to study, learn, create, practice and collaborate. Libraries’ role as a meeting and relaxation space are also crucial. Finally, each library/learning center offers additional services, sometimes in collaboration with partners - such as assisting research, lessons in information skills, exhibitions, workshops, and more.
17. The work of the university library of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel is another example of democratising and helping deliver on the right to education. The University Library is open to everyone; and anyone can access the library facilities, without having to pay for an access card or day pass. The VUB University Library’s MOOC on information literacy is open to the world, which also helps improve access to learning opportunities on this topic. More broadly, the VUB Library attaches great importance to respecting human rights, working within the broader framework of VUB’s commitment to diversity and equality. The VUB works on the basis of the vision "Diversity & Equality", and has an "Equality Action Plan 2019-2021".
18. **Open Access.** Belgian libraries and educational institutions are also making great efforts to help support the transition to Open Access (OA) – a publishing model for scientific and scholarly materials (particularly results of publicly-funded research) which makes them immediately and freely available online. OA helps remove barriers to valuable educational and scientific resources, making them accessible to much broader audiences and allowing more people to benefit from scientific progress. Many Belgian research organisations, as well as relevant government representatives and educational institutions have long supported Open Access; signing the Berlin Declaration on Open Access to Knowledge in the Sciences and Humanities in 2007. The Brussels Declaration on Open Access was signed 2012; and an OA provision was codified into national law in 2018.¹³

19. Many libraries, educational and research institutions support and champion OA, in a way that addresses the need for multilingualism and inclusion of readers and authors in the Global South. An example is the KU Leuven Fund for Fair OA, which provides subsidies for non-commercial, community-driven forms of OA, both by supporting fair OA initiatives, fair OA publishers and funding OA eBooks that are published by Leuven University Press. The latter initiative is also open to authors from other universities worldwide, and the readership data proves that these OA eBooks are very popular on all continents.¹⁴
20. **Supporting literacy and fundamental (school and early-childhood) education.** Libraries also work to support youth and children’s rights to education fundamentals. In many cases, the focus is on literacy – Boekstart, for example, is a project run by IedereenLeest, which offers “bookstart” packages to parents of babies and toddlers. The packages, containing book(s) suitable for babies or toddlers, and informational materials for parents, are distributed through libraries and Child and Family consultation offices.¹⁵
21. Libraries also cooperate with formal educational institutions – particularly primary and secondary schools – to offer a wider range of learning opportunities for youth. In Flanders, public libraries often cooperate with primary and secondary schools, as well as childcare, adult basic education and other institutions for various activities to promote reading skills, from library introductions to pre-lessons, read-aloud and storytelling sessions, training and other activities.¹⁶
22. Finally, public libraries offer equitable access to **lifelong learning opportunities** for their communities. The 2019 *EU Library Factsheets*, for example, highlight that in Belgium, 1.5 million people attended learning/educational activities in a public library in 2019.¹⁷ Also notable are initiatives focused on language learning and support – in 2018, for example, there were language “points” in more than 80 libraries in Flanders, with over 2000 activities and more than 15000 participants; over 80 dedicated courses with 800 participants. While some library initiatives focusing on language skills target basic or secondary education students, others are geared towards non-native speakers, e.g. refugees and newcomers – which can be a valuable opportunity for them to develop the language skills necessary for active participation in social, cultural and political life.¹⁸

RECOMMENDATION: We support Open Access and lifelong learning initiatives as important contributors to people’s right to education and to benefit from scientific progress; and encourage further adoption of such practices.

Social cohesion and human rights awareness-raising

UPR of Belgium 2nd cycle recommendations:

138.67 Implement public awareness campaigns to promote tolerance and respect for cultural diversity and to counter prejudice, stereotypes, discrimination, racism, and Islamophobia.

138.70 Develop and implement education and awareness-raising campaigns to promote diversity and respect, while condemning racism and xenophobia.

23. The point above also leads to another field of public libraries’ work: helping facilitate and promoting social cohesion. The Flanders Government’s statistical’ database referenced earlier also keeps track of library activities that stimulate community formation (e.g. some of the activities discussed earlier – clubs and circles, exhibitions and so on). In addition, it offers an overview of activities which ‘strengthen community feeling’ – in particular, hundreds of theatre performances, film screenings, concerts, the language stimulating activities mentioned above, as well as community information sessions and debates.
24. One example of such social cohesion initiatives is a pop-up library organised by the Dutch public library of Ukkel in ‘de Merlo’, a large apartment complex in Ukkel where people from many

different nationalities live together. The pop-up library, set up in 2018, is popular with children and youth, and contributed to a cultural exchange, learning, and residents' linguistic skills (with the help of the French-speaking library of Ukkel, this pop-up library offers both Dutch and French reading materials).¹⁹

25. In addition, libraries can be a valuable tool to **help raise awareness around human rights**. In 2016, for example, the Brussels-Capital Region ran a campaign to address the issues of gender-based violence through bus-stop posters and flyers – which were distributed through cultural centres, associations, and libraries.²⁰
26. Similarly, libraries can help raise awareness and promote measures to address racism. ‘Muntpunt’, the biggest Dutch-speaking library in Brussels, has launched an anti-racism initiative in recognition that cultural, archival and information practices need to be questioned on how some forms of knowledge have been prioritised over centuries, and how erased stories and frames can renew these practices. Muntpunt assembled a committee of curators who will work with the library to examine and address these concerns, renew and broaden the library offerings and programming accordingly.²¹
27. The NGO “Hand in Hand Tegen Racism” has launched a campaign “Decolonise”, and further discussed how libraries are places where culture manifests, both carrying and preserving narratives from the past and reflecting current worldviews.²² As such, there are many ways libraries can help address the issues of racism. Other examples include, for instance, the Ixelles libraries participating in the 2019 Black History Month through various initiatives – a literary walk, reading club activities, film screening.²³

RECOMMENDATION: We encourage further action and further adoption of such practices to support social cohesion, community building, and public awareness around human rights.

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