



Board of examiners

Prof. dr. Lucy Selman
University of Bristol, England

Dr. Sally Paul
University of Strathclyde, Scotland

Prof. dr. Koen Lombaerts
Brussels research centre for Innovation in Learning and Diversity, VUB

Prof. dr. Free De Backer
Brussels research centre for Innovation in Learning and Diversity, VUB

Prof. dr. Johan Bilsen, Chair
Mental Health and Wellbeing Research Group, VUB

Prof. dr. Joachim Cohen, Supervisor
End-of-Life Care Research Group, VUB

Prof. dr. Sarah Dury, Supervisor
Society and Ageing Research Lab, VUB

Prof. dr. Filip Van Droogenbroeck, Supervisor
Data Analytics Lab, VUB

INVITATION to the Public defence of

Hanne Eline BAKELANTS

To obtain the academic degree of

'DOCTOR OF SOCIAL HEALTH SCIENCES'

**Navigating Serious Illness, Death, and Bereavement
in Higher Education:
Insights from the Compassionate University Program
at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB)**

The public defence will take place on

Thursday, 21 November 2024 at 5 p.m.

In Promotiezaal D.2.01
VUB Main Campus, Pleinlaan 2
1050 Brussel (Etterbeek)
[Campus plan](#)

Summary of the dissertation

At various stages in our lives, everyone will face experiences of serious illness, death, and bereavement. Yet these experiences often appear as taboo topics and are almost exclusively embedded in professional healthcare narratives and practices. In response, the Compassionate Community approach has been introduced as a new public health initiative, emphasizing the need to empower communities and build capacity to support each other in times of serious illness, death, and bereavement. There is a compelling argument that higher education institutions are particularly interesting settings for adopting this approach. They can play a significant role in supporting the well-being of students and staff facing these experiences, and in fostering a culture that acknowledges these issues as an integral part of academic and professional life.

In November 2019, the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) declared itself as (mainland) Europe's first 'Compassionate University', emphasizing the importance of support and compassion during times of serious illness, death, and bereavement. The overall aim of this dissertation is to examine the VUB's development process towards a Compassionate University. To address this aim, five studies were conducted. Through these studies, the dissertation provides insights into the experiences and support needs of students and staff facing serious illness, death, and bereavement, discusses the challenges and opportunities associated with creating a compassionate university environment, and examines the activities and outcomes of the Compassionate University program.

Curriculum Vitae

Hanne Bakelants was born on February 22, 1996, in Leuven, Belgium. She obtained her master's degree in Educational Sciences from the Catholic University of Leuven (KU Leuven) in 2019. In 2020, she completed a second master's degree in Globalisation and Development Studies at Maastricht University. After graduation, Hanne started her doctorate in Social Health Sciences at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) in October 2020, joining the End-of-Life Care Research Group. Hanne is also affiliated with the Society and Ageing Research Lab (SARLab) of the VUB. Her doctoral research focuses on the development process of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) towards a Compassionate University.