

INSPIRATION AND IDEAS FOR A **COMPASSIONATE UNIVERSITY**

"In a warm and
connected community
such as VUB strives to be,
compassion and space for
grief belong at the heart
of university life"

CAROLINE PAUWELS,
HONORARY RECTOR, VUB



VRIJE
UNIVERSITEIT
BRUSSEL

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WHY THIS GUIDE?

Serious illness, caregiving, death, grief and loss are part of life. They are also part of university life. Students miss classes because they are caring for a parent, lose a brother or sister, or try to continue their studies while everything at home has changed. Staff members lose colleagues, face serious illness themselves, or combine their work with caring for someone close to them.

Yet these experiences often remain invisible. They fit uneasily within timetables, procedures, deadlines and academic expectations. A Compassionate University starts from the recognition that care and loss are not merely individual issues, but shared human experiences that also deserve a place within the university community.

Since 2018, VUB has gradually developed an approach that makes these themes visible and open to conversation. Rather than relying on one large-scale programme, it combines rituals, policy initiatives, support services, communication, research and small acts of kindness. Examples include the Monument of Comfort, an annual Compassionate Week, guidelines following a death, support for student and staff caregivers, and a Core Group that brings together people and services across the university.

This inspiration guide brings together those experiences. It is not intended as a blueprint. Every educational institution, organisation and community has its own culture, structure and needs. Instead, it demonstrates which steps are possible, what questions are worth asking, and how care, compassion and connection can take practical shape within everyday university life.

WHAT IS A COMPASSIONATE UNIVERSITY?

Serious illness, caregiving, death, grief and loss are challenges that do not occur only beyond the walls of the university. Students and staff encounter them too. For that reason, VUB has made it its ambition to give these themes a central place within the university community.

As an expression of this commitment, in 2019 the university signed a declaration of intent to work towards becoming a more Compassionate University. The declaration describes a Compassionate University as a university that:

- recognises that students and staff experience periods of serious illness, caregiving, death, grief and loss.
- understands that such experiences can have a profound impact on the wellbeing of students and staff, as well as on their ability to study and work.
- facilitates support during these challenging times – formally and informally, individually and collectively.
- builds a culture in which caring for one another is seen not solely as the responsibility of social and healthcare services, but as a shared responsibility across the university community.



With the Monument of Comfort, the university offers its community a dedicated place for reflection where people can find solace and comfort in times of adversity, loss or grief. Every year, around 19 November, the day before the Saint Verhaegen celebrations, a minute's silence is observed at the monument in memory of the university's deceased students and staff.

WHY BECOME A COMPASSIONATE UNIVERSITY?

A Compassionate University contributes to a caring and supportive community within higher education. Its benefits are felt at the individual, organisational and societal levels.

WELLBEING AND MENTAL HEALTH

A Compassionate University creates a safe environment in which students and staff feel heard and supported when facing serious illness, caregiving, death, grief and loss. As a result, people experience less stress, the risk of burnout is reduced, and open conversations help to strengthen mental wellbeing and resilience.

STRENGTHENING SOCIAL COHESION AND INCLUSION

A Compassionate University fosters a culture of empathy and connectedness, creating a stronger sense of community. It promotes inclusion by recognising the needs of individuals and groups who are temporarily more vulnerable and may require additional support. It also encourages open conversations about difficult subjects, helping to reduce the stigma surrounding serious illness, caregiving, death, grief and loss.

GREATER ENGAGEMENT, HIGHER MOTIVATION AND LOWER ABSENTEEISM

Students and staff feel more valued and recognised, which has a positive impact on their engagement and motivation. A supportive working and learning environment helps reduce long-term sickness absence and stress-related leave. At the same time, a positive and supportive workplace can contribute to higher staff retention by placing wellbeing at the heart of the organisation. It also helps students continue their studies by reducing interruptions caused by psychological or social difficulties.

A POSITIVE REPUTATION AND GREATER SOCIETAL IMPACT

An initiative such as Compassionate University demonstrates that an organisation is a leader in social engagement and corporate social responsibility. It also strengthens the university's external reputation as an institution where care and wellbeing are genuine priorities.

In short, a Compassionate University creates a culture in which care and connectedness are central. This not only enhances the wellbeing of students and staff, but also makes the organisation as a whole more resilient and better equipped to face future challenges.

COORDINATORS SARAH DURY AND JOACHIM COHEN ON GETTING STARTED

"Students and staff bring their lives onto campus"



Sarah Dury and Joachim Cohen, both professors at VUB, jointly coordinate the Compassionate Communities Centre of Expertise (COCO). It was from there that the Compassionate University initiative also emerged: an initiative based on the idea that serious illness, caregiving, death, grief and loss are not only medical or individual experiences, but also social events. They take place within families, circles of friends, neighbourhoods, workplaces and therefore within a university as well.

"As a society, we have increasingly medicalised and professionalised these themes," says Joachim Cohen. "Doctors, nurses and professional care providers are, of course, essential. But much of what people need when they are ill, providing care or grieving is about human closeness, acknowledgement, practical help and emotional support. These are things that cannot be provided by professional care alone."

Sarah Dury adds: "Within Adult Educational Sciences, we look at communities, participation and social change. A university is also a community. Students and staff bring their lives, and everything that comes with them, onto campus. As a university, you can pretend that this remains outside the organisation, but that simply is not the case. It has an impact on learning, work, wellbeing and connectedness."

According to Dury and Cohen, this is the essence of a Compassionate University: not to replace professional care or support, but to strengthen the social networks surrounding people. "Formal support remains essential," says Joachim. "But it can never provide the 24-hour presence that people often need. Informal networks — colleagues, fellow students, friends, neighbours, local organisations or other people in the immediate surroundings — play an essential role in providing everyday practical help and emotional support."

Sarah: "Many people want to support someone who is ill, grieving or providing care, but they do not always know how. They are afraid of saying the wrong thing, do not want to impose themselves, or find it difficult to talk about death and loss. A Compassionate University seeks to lower that threshold. Not by turning everyone into a care expert, but by showing that small gestures, acknowledgement and simply being there can make a real difference."

The idea of building a Compassionate University within VUB took shape around 2018. Joachim had already been involved, through the End-of-Life Care Research Group, in research into compassionate communities at the municipal level. "We received research funding from the Research Foundation — Flanders (FWO) for a compassionate

communities approach at municipal level and worked with, among others, the cities of Bruges and Herzele. There, we were able to test and evaluate ideas in practice. At the same time, we realised that our own university is also a community. Here too, people are confronted with serious illness, caregiving, death, grief and loss."

Under the leadership of then Rector Caroline Pauwels, who strongly promoted VUB as a warm university, the initiative began to take shape. "We reached out to the wider VUB community and brought together people from different services and parts of the university: the Rectorate, People & Organisation, Student Guidance, Marketing & Communication, students and researchers," says Sarah. "At the same time, we developed COCO, the interdisciplinary Compassionate Communities Centre of Expertise. From there, the initiative began to gain momentum."

According to Joachim, collaboration between the different actors is essential. "A Compassionate University is not an initiative of one department or one research group. It is about co-creation: how can formal services and informal networks strengthen one another? A student with caregiving responsibilities may need administrative support, but also understanding from lecturers and fellow students. A staff member who loses a colleague may need clear procedures, but also a team that makes space for grief."

Sarah: "It is important to make it clear that this is not about a cost-saving approach. It is not about replacing professional care or formal support with 'the community'. On the contrary. Professional services remain essential, but they are stronger when embedded in a broader culture of care. A Compassionate University seeks precisely to create that connection."

According to both of them, it was only natural that the Compassionate University Inspiration Guide should be developed. Joachim: "We were increasingly asked by other universities, universities of applied sciences and organisations: what exactly are you doing, how did you get started, who do you involve, which actions work, and how do you ensure that it does not remain a one-off initiative? We could keep telling the story over and over again, but we also wanted to bring our experiences together and make them tangible."

Sarah: "We received enquiries from Canada, from Howest University of Applied Sciences in West Flanders, and Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences also got

in touch. At the same time, within VUB we were able to build on years of practical experience, on the work of COCO and on the doctoral research of Hanne Bakelants, in which the development of Compassionate Universities was studied and evaluated. This made it possible not only to present examples, but also to share insights into what helps, what is challenging and which conditions are important."

The guide is deliberately not a blueprint. Sarah: "Every educational institution or organisation has its own culture, structure and needs. What works at VUB cannot simply be copied to another educational institution or organisation. However, the underlying questions are often recognisable: how do you open up conversations about serious illness, caregiving, death, grief and loss? How do you connect formal support with informal networks? And how do you ensure that compassion does not remain dependent on individual people?"

"Professional services remain essential, but they are stronger when embedded in a broader culture of care"

Alongside the guide, a learning network also developed, bringing together universities, universities of applied sciences and other educational institutions wishing to work on these themes. Joachim: "We wanted not only to create change within VUB, but also to exchange experiences with others. Within that network, we bring together scientific insights and concrete examples from practice. That combination helps to make the topic tangible and applicable."

Is a Core Group such as the one at VUB necessary to develop a Compassionate University? Joachim offers a nuanced answer: "In theory, perhaps not, but in practice a permanent structure is very important. Especially within a university, where there is a high turnover of students and policy priorities can change. Someone has to keep the theme alive, bring people together and ensure that initiatives do not disappear when people move on."

Sarah: "You see certain themes come and go. That is why keeping the conversation alive requires constant effort. A Compassionate University is not a project that is ever finished. It is a way of continually reflecting on how, as a community, we can become more caring, more attentive and more connected."

THE JOURNEY TOWARDS A COMPASSIONATE UNIVERSITY

VUB took its first steps towards becoming a Compassionate University in 2018 and 2019. But that was only the beginning. A Compassionate University grows every day. It is a long-term commitment and an ongoing process.

ESTABLISHING THE COMPASSIONATE UNIVERSITY CORE GROUP

One of the first crucial steps was to bring together VUB staff members from different departments to establish the Compassionate University Core Group. We recruited volunteers from services that could help promote the initiative throughout the university community, including Marketing & Communication, People & Organisation, Student Guidance, the Rectorate, students, and academics from the Compassionate Communities Centre of Expertise.

Engaging students in the Core Group proved to be a major challenge. Student turnover is high, and for many students these issues still feel remote from their own lives. The initiative relies entirely on the voluntary commitment of staff, which is both a challenge and a strength. This voluntary engagement ensures that participants are intrinsically motivated. The project has deliberately been kept accessible and low-cost, but structural support from the university leadership remains essential to safeguard its long-term continuity.

MAPPING NEEDS AND EXISTING STRENGTHS

Once the Core Group had been established, it was important to gain a clear understanding of the needs and assets within the university community relating to serious illness, caregiving, death, grief and loss. To this end, a stakeholder workshop was organised on 18 February 2019, bringing together a wide range of actors from across the university. The workshop was based on the Appreciative Inquiry methodology, which explores what is already present within a community in order to stimulate positive change.

The workshop consisted of two phases: Discover and Dream. During the Discover phase, participants shared positive experiences and identified needs relating to serious illness, caregiving, death, grief and loss in small groups. These insights were then discussed and explored further during a plenary session. During the Dream phase, participants reflected on concrete strategies and actions to make VUB more compassionate. The workshop concluded with the identification of priority actions. The input gathered formed the basis for the final Declaration of Intent for the Compassionate University initiative.



DECEMBER 2018



FEBRUARY 2019



On 19 November 2019, Rector Caroline Pauwels and Chair Eddy Van Gelder signed a Declaration of Intent committing VUB to becoming a Compassionate University by 2021. The signing was followed by the unveiling of a place for silence and individual and collective remembrance at the Monument of Comfort.

SIGNING OF THE DECLARATION OF INTENT & UNVEILING OF THE MONUMENT OF COMFORT

Based on the stakeholder workshop, a Declaration of Intent was drafted, setting out a number of key objectives. Through this Declaration, VUB recognises that experiences such as serious illness, caregiving, death, grief and loss are an integral part of everyday life within the university community. The initiative also contributes to the university's objectives in the field of employer branding by creating a supportive and people-centred working environment, and forms part of the broader Wellbeing Plan, which aims to foster a warm and supportive university community.

When the Declaration of Intent was signed, the Monument of Comfort was unveiled on the main campus in Etterbeek as a symbol of the Compassionate University initiative. The monument serves as a place for reflection on campus, offering space for grief and quiet contemplation. It was created by the artist Philip Aguirre y Otegui and was inspired by a photograph the artist saw in a newspaper, showing a Spanish police officer placing his coat over the body of a refugee washed ashore as a gesture of comfort.

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ALL CURRENT INITIATIVES
FROM P. 15**



NOVEMBER 2019



TODAY

“That students have a place
like the Monument of Comfort
to go to, really helps”

REBECCA LÉONARD
AND LAURA FRANS



Laura Frans completed an internship for her Bachelor's degree in Adult Educational Sciences within the Compassionate University project. "I joined around the time of the first Compassionate Week and have remained involved ever since – for about three years now. I think student involvement is important in any case, because these issues concern them too. Recently, the organisation Onbespreekbaar hosted a talk on serious illness, caregiving, death, grief and loss, and around forty students attended. So these themes really do resonate within the student community, especially among those who have personal experience of them."

"In the past, we had no protocol and everyone looked to each other"

Rebecca Léonard is Head of Student Guidance and was one of the people who helped lay the foundations of the Compassionate University several years ago. "The student psychologists within Student Guidance developed a guide for dealing with the death of a student. It is a protocol outlining the steps that need to be taken, both administratively and in terms of support. The student psychologists provide support to fellow students and act as the point of contact for the parents. It is not an easy role and every case affects you on a personal level. Every situation is also different and calls for different interventions. In the past, we had no protocol and everyone looked to each other. Although everyone acted with the best intentions, responses were largely ad hoc and therefore not always as professional as they could have been. Student Guidance also supports students who have caregiving responsibilities."

Laura: "I lost my older brother some time ago, so this is a subject that is very close to my heart. The platform we now provide for students is important. The fact that they have a place like the Monument of Comfort to go to, and that these issues can be openly discussed, really helps. For me, it helped

me come to terms with my brother's death, because it enabled me to organise activities myself for people who had gone through similar experiences."

Rebecca: "That is what matters: death becomes something we can talk about. Every death, and among young people this is unfortunately quite often the result of suicide, comes with sensitivities that need to be taken into account. Our student psychologists have received training from, and work closely with, the Flemish Centre of Expertise for Suicide Prevention."

Laura: "Creating space for conversation is not only about death. I am also thinking of students living with a serious illness or those with caregiving responsibilities. We give them the attention and recognition they need and make them aware that VUB also offers support. Students with caregiving responsibilities can apply for [ReFlex status](#). In addition, they can receive psychological support from our student psychologists and financial support through initiatives such as the [Caroline Pauwels Emergency Fund](#)."

Rebecca: "We also developed the brochure [Grief for the Student](#), which explains the dos and don'ts of responding when someone is grieving. It is a very useful resource for both students and staff."

REFLEX STATUS



CAROLINE PAUWELS
EMERGENCY FUND



GRIEF FOR THE STUDENT



STAFF MEMBER BEN VAN BEECK
ON THE DEATH OF HIS FATHER:

"I received support that I thought I didn't need, yet it felt incredibly warm"

Ben experienced first-hand how VUB responds to loss. "In the past, I approached it from a professional perspective. From now on, I will also approach it from the perspective of shared experience."



VUB PROFESSOR LIESBETH DE DONDER
ON A COMPASSIONATE COMMUNITY:

"Death and dying are much closer to the lives of young people than we often think. Talking about them turns out to be incredibly powerful"

Every year, around 19 November, VUB focuses on compassion and loss during Compassionate Week. It is a time to reflect on themes that affect us all: serious illness, caregiving, death, grief and loss. Liesbeth De Donder, Professor of Adult Educational Sciences, explains why this is so important for the university community.

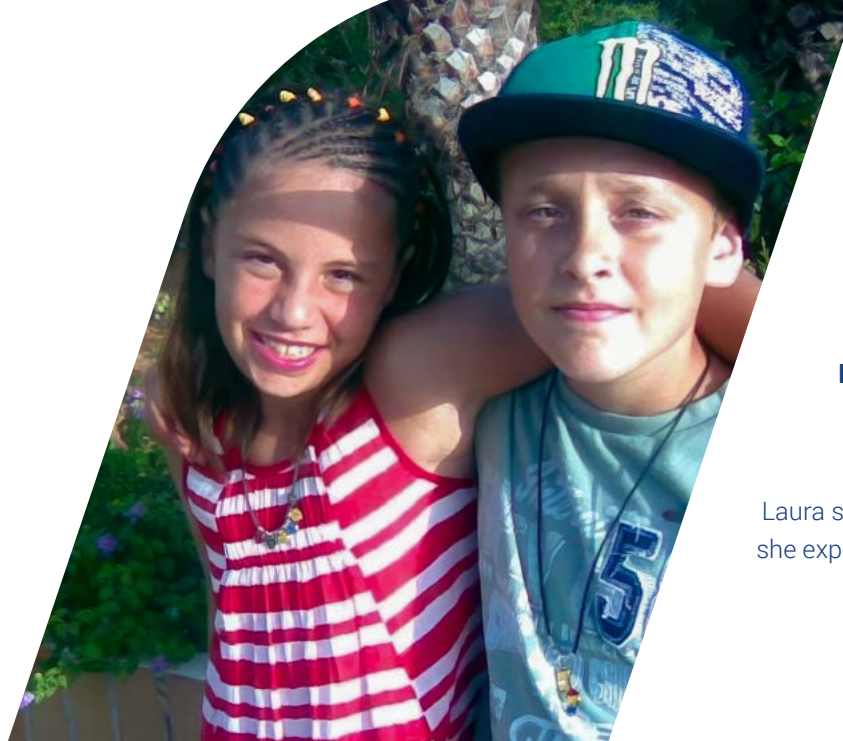


STUDENT MONTANA TACHELET ENCOURAGES EVERYONE:

"Come on, everyone – let's look after each other a little more"

Montana gained national recognition through her candid testimonies about grief, mental wellbeing and caregiving. Her story inspired the university to make these difficult themes easier to discuss or more open to discussion.





LAURA FRANS ON
THE DEATH OF HER BROTHER:

“VUB gave me a platform to transform my grief for my brother into something meaningful”

Laura speaks openly about the difficulties she experienced in trying to rebuild her life after her brother's death.



STUDENT MAXIMILIAAN IS A CARER FOR HIS SISTER:

“Focusing on myself is difficult – after all, she is my little sister”

Maximiliaan is a Bachelor's student in Geography and a carer for his younger sister, Marjolein. He shares what it is like to care for a loved one while at the same time trying to live his own life.



Five personal stories of losing a loved one

STRONGER TOGETHER

LEARNING NETWORK FOR COMPASSIONATE SCHOOLS

The Compassionate University is also part of the Compassionate Schools Learning Network. This network started as a European partnership bringing together organisations committed to developing Compassionate Schools and has since grown into an international network. It brings together a broad range of partners, including researchers, policymakers, healthcare professionals and, of course, teachers. Together, they have developed, among other resources, a comprehensive [inspiration guide to support the development of Compassionate Schools](#).

COMPASSIONATE UNIVERSITY AND THE COMPASSIONATE COMMUNITIES CENTRE OF EXPERTISE (COCO)

The Compassionate University is a living lab of the Compassionate Communities Centre of Expertise (COCO) at VUB. COCO is a consortium of researchers that was established in 2019 with internal seed funding. Since then, it has grown from eight to eleven research groups across five different faculties.

Where research into experiences of serious illness, caregiving, death, grief and loss

has traditionally been conducted from the perspective of a single research group, COCO deliberately brings together researchers from a wide range of disciplines. The consortium aims to explore the potential of a shared public health approach to end-of-life experiences.

During COCO's first project phase, three doctoral research projects were launched, including one specifically focused on the development of the Compassionate University. The other doctoral projects focused on developing Compassionate Communities within cities and municipalities. More information about current projects and doctoral research can be found on the COCO website.

Collaboration between the research project and Compassionate VUB took the form of a continuous exchange between scientific insights and practice-based initiatives. The doctoral research examined the development, implementation and evaluation of VUB as a Compassionate University. Using action research, it mapped the processes and underlying mechanisms of change, as well as the barriers and opportunities influencing the development of a Compassionate University. You can read the full doctoral thesis via the QR code on the right.

INSPIRATION GUIDE



DOCTORAL THESIS



COMPASSIONATE UNIVERSITY IN PRACTICE

HOW WE PUT IT INTO PRACTICE AT VUB

Since the establishment of the Compassionate University Core Group, a range of initiatives has been developed across VUB to make care, compassion and connectedness tangible within the university community. These initiatives range from small-scale activities to policy measures and are aimed at both students and staff.

This guide provides an overview of the concrete initiatives developed within the Compassionate University programme. They are intended to inspire and demonstrate the many ways in which a more compassionate and supportive environment can be created. The overview is not exhaustive and should not be regarded as a fixed blueprint; rather, it offers an impression of the approach taken and the diversity of possible initiatives.

The activities of the Compassionate University can be grouped into three domains:

- ▼ REMEMBERING, CONNECTING
AND RAISING AWARENESS
- ▼ STRENGTHENING SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE
AND ATTITUDES
- ▼ EMBEDDING A COMPASSIONATE POLICY
AND PROCEDURES ACROSS THE UNIVERSITY

REMEMBERING, CONNECTING AND RAISING AWARENESS

The Compassionate University initiative seeks to increase the visibility of, and open up conversations about, themes such as serious illness, caregiving, death, grief and loss within the university community through a range of small-scale initiatives. The aim is to make it clear to the VUB community that no one has to face these experiences alone. By making these themes visible within the university, this makes it easier for people to seek offer and support.

ANNUAL REMEMBRANCE MOMENT



Every year, around 19 November, the Annual Moment of Comfort takes place at the Monument of Comfort on the Etterbeek campus. This remembrance event brings together the VUB community to commemorate students and staff who have passed away. The date of 19 November is symbolic, as it falls on the eve of the commemoration of Pierre-Théodore Verhaegen, founder of the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), from which VUB emerged in the late 1960s.

The remembrance event includes live music, personal testimonies, an address by the Rector and a symbolic remembrance ritual. The Rector's annual presence and speech underline the broad support for this initiative within the university community. The relatives of those who have passed away are invited to attend. One example is the Comfort Tree, on which attendees can hang cards bearing the names of deceased students

or staff members. Participants are also invited to lay flowers together at the Monument of Comfort. This annual moment of comfort creates a respectful space for reflection, remembrance and grief, while highlighting the importance of connectedness within the university community.



Following a death, spontaneous remembrance gatherings often take place around the Monument of Comfort. The monument has therefore grown into a meaningful place of remembrance and reflection within the university community. Where needed, the Compassionate University Core Group provides practical guidance and suggestions for organising such spontaneous commemorations. This is a fine example of how initiatives arising organically from the community can contribute to a culture of care and connectedness.

THE EMPTY CHAIR DURING THE ACADEMIC OPENING CEREMONY



The Core Group also seeks to incorporate symbolic initiatives into existing events. During the 2021 Academic Opening Ceremony, held in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, a moment of reflection was included to remember everyone who could not be present. The names of deceased students and staff were projected onto a screen. Throughout the ceremony, an empty chair remained on stage as a symbol of those who are no longer with us.

REMEMBRANCE DURING GRADUATION CEREMONIES

During graduation ceremonies, the Rector dedicates a few words to all students who have passed away. These words have been incorporated into the script for every graduation ceremony and are therefore passed on from one Rector to the next. In this way, these students continue to be remembered, while their relatives receive recognition and comfort. It also demonstrates that, even during joyful occasions such as graduation ceremonies, there is room for loss and remembrance.

CARDS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



In December 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, all VUB students and staff received a set of postcards by post. These cards were intended as a gesture of encouragement – a way of offering support to those who needed it. Students and staff were also encouraged to send a warm message to someone else.

BEFORE I DIE WALL



In October 2023, a permanent Before I Die Wall was installed on the main campus in Etterbeek. The wall invites all members of the university community to

share their thoughts and aspirations. Before I Die is a global art project that encourages people to reflect on their mortality and on what truly matters in life. The concept was first developed by artist Candy Chang in New Orleans. Today, there are more than 5,000 Before I Die Walls in over 75 countries and in more than 35 languages. A do-it-yourself guide is available on the Before I Die website for anyone wishing to install their own wall.

COMPASSIONATE WEEK

From 13 to 16 November 2023, the first Compassionate Week took place on VUB's Etterbeek campus. The aim of the week is to make themes such as serious illness, caregiving, death, grief and loss visible and open them up for discussion within the university through a range of activities. The programme was aimed at the entire VUB community and included information sessions, workshops, creative activities and storytelling. Compassionate Week has since become an annual event held every November.

COMPASSIONATE CARDS AND THE COMFORT TREE



During Compassionate Week, a stand is set up on campus where students and staff can write their own message of comfort. These cards are then sent by the university. Participants can also write a message of comfort on a ribbon and hang it in the Comfort Tree. These symbolic activities are deliberately organised outdoors on campus so that they also engage passers-by. In this way, they visibly demonstrate that there is space within the university to share experiences of grief and loss.

COMPASSIONATE CAFÉ



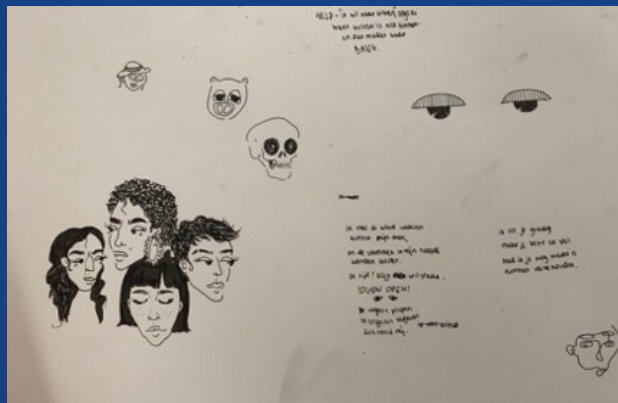
The Compassionate Café is inspired by the Death Café movement, in which people come together, without the involvement of a professional facilitator, to talk openly about death, grief and loss. At VUB, the Compassionate Café was organised in a café setting, where participants used a specially designed card game to engage in conversation in small groups. This created space for personal reflection and the sharing of experiences.

VOICES OF COMPASSION



Voices of Compassion is a literary evening organised by the Research Centre for Literary and Intermedial Crossings at VUB. During the event, members of the VUB community read poems, book extracts and song lyrics, performed by and for the community. Participants may present their own texts or have them read aloud by one of the moderators. Between the readings, the VUB Orchestra provides musical interludes, actively involving different groups within the university in the organisation of the event.

GRIEF WORKSHOP



Creative expression can help people give voice to emotions surrounding serious illness, caregiving, death, grief and loss. During Compassionate Week, a grief workshop was organised by a student association. A selection of words was placed on the tables as inspiration, encouraging participants to paint or write about these themes.

CHERISH WALK



During the first edition of Compassionate Week, the Grief Collective organised a Cherish Walk. The walk guided participants across the VUB campus, pausing at the four elements: earth, fire, air and water. At each location, a symbolic ritual was performed, creating a place for cherishing — a symbolic space for peace, remembrance and reflection.

COMFORT FOOD

To make these themes more visible within the wider university community, a special campaign is organised in the student restaurant during Compassionate Week. Adapted menus featuring creative wordplay, such as the 'dead delicious menu' and 'comfort food', provide an accessible way of opening up conversations about grief and loss.

"The insights from my research can help other universities and universities of applied sciences"

HANNE BAKELANTS
ON RESEARCH INTO
COMPASSIONATE
UNIVERSITIES

Hanne Bakelants conducted her PhD research within COCO on the development of the Compassionate University at VUB. She is now actively involved in the project on a daily basis.

"There has long been recognition that experiences of serious illness, caregiving, death, grief and loss are increasingly being referred to professional services. By bringing these themes back into the community and working together with existing support services, we create social networks of people with lived experience. Many researchers had already been working on these issues for some time but, strangely enough, had never applied their findings to the place where they themselves work: the university. Part of my research consisted of a process evaluation examining how the Compassionate University initiative was developing at VUB. This gave me insights that can help other universities and universities of applied sciences develop a similar community."

"I interviewed students and staff who had experienced bereavement, grief or caregiving responsibilities. One striking finding was the difference between the two groups. Students are much less connected to a physical campus. When they miss classes because of bereavement or grief, this often goes unnoticed. If a member of staff is absent, however, it is immediately visible and felt by colleagues. When talking about their needs, students mainly mentioned administrative issues: not knowing what to do, whom to contact, and so on."



HANNE BAKELANTS

"And because it was so difficult to arrange the necessary paperwork, it was often equally difficult to postpone exams. As a result, many students still sat their exams, not always with good outcomes. I spoke to an international PhD student who lost her father and, towards the end of her doctorate, also lost her mother. She simply continued working because nobody had told her that she was entitled to take leave. Bereavement leave exists for staff, but awareness of these arrangements is also insufficient."

"It does not take much to start an initiative such as Compassionate University; the real challenge is giving it meaningful content"

"As a result of my research, a number of things have changed. One example may seem small, but it is meaningful: previously it was not possible to purchase a gift for

someone who was seriously ill over a longer period; now it is. A policy has been developed for responding to a death on campus, with designated people responsible for its implementation. Considerable effort has also gone into raising awareness, for example through the empty chair during the Academic Opening Ceremony. Compassionate Week was introduced and is now being organised for the fourth time, with activities on campus focusing on grief, loss and caregiving. We concentrate on making the best possible use of the support services that already exist. The university's existing Wellbeing Plan already offers a great deal, but many people are simply unaware of what is available."

"It does not take much to start an initiative such as Compassionate University; the real challenge is giving it meaningful content. The visible initiatives we already have in place, such as the Comfort Tree and the Compassionate Cards during Compassionate Week, help to create informal networks."



SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE AND ATTITUDES

The Compassionate University also focuses on developing skills within the university community, enabling students and staff to support one another effectively during difficult times. Colleagues, managers and fellow students often want to help each other but do not always know how or what they can do. This is not due to a lack of willingness, but rather to uncertainty and a lack of practical guidance. For this reason, Compassionate University places emphasis not only on raising awareness and developing sensitivity, but also on developing skills and providing practical tips.

PRACTICAL GRIEF GUIDE

How do you cope with grief, whether your own or someone else's? Grief is a profound and complex process, and it is not always clear how to deal with it, whether you are experiencing a significant loss yourself or wish to support someone who is grieving. To provide staff and students with practical guidance, we developed practical grief guides. These contain clear, practical tips and guidance on the grieving process and how to navigate it. They are presented as concise reference cards with hands-on advice and are made available to the university community following the death of a staff member or student.

SEMINARS AND WORKSHOPS

Through the Compassionate Communities Centre of Expertise (COCO), in collaboration with Compassionate University, we organised a seminar on grief in the workplace. The seminar provided insight into the complexity of the grieving process and challenged common misconceptions, such as the idea that grief follows a linear process with fixed stages. It also explored in greater depth the challenges faced by employers and colleagues, including concentration difficulties and reduced productivity among bereaved staff and students.

In addition, the Compassionate Workplace Training was made available to staff through the VUB LRN online learning platform. This training focused on

developing a compassionate working environment by promoting care and support for staff experiencing serious illness, death or loss. It combined theoretical insights with practical guidance for creating a supportive workplace culture and also provided opportunities for participants to exchange experiences.

During Compassionate Week, the Student Guidance Service organised the Together with Compassion workshops. Their aim was to gain a better understanding of students' experiences and needs relating to grief, loss and caregiving. The sessions included sharing experiences, discussing challenges and identifying support needs. Student Guidance also provided an overview of the support services and facilities available, as these are often not widely known or are easily overlooked during times of crisis.

GRIEF LIBRARY

During Compassionate Week, the Central University Library on the Etterbeek and Jette campuses made a valuable contribution by purchasing an extensive collection of books on serious illness, caregiving, death, grief and loss. These books were presented to the VUB community in a variety of ways. The library itself featured a striking book tower as a visual focal point. In addition, a digital book river on the library website highlighted a selection of titles. This enabled students and staff to access the collection quickly and explore these themes in greater depth. Involving existing university services, such as the library, is a key element in extending the reach of initiatives like these.



“Those social moments of saying goodbye, whether with or without euthanasia, receive far too little support”

COMPASSIONATE
UNIVERSITY
AMBASSADOR
LUC DELIENS

Sociologist and President of Public Health Palliative Care International (PHPCI), Professor Luc Deliens, was one of the initiators of the Compassionate University initiative within the Faculty of Medicine. PHPCI is a global association that develops, promotes and disseminates palliative care from a public health perspective as a complement to clinical services.

“In essence, dying is a social event with a medical component, not a medical event with a social component. I have been researching end-of-life care for thirty years. Policy has always focused on the professionalisation of healthcare services and palliative care. If you look at the entire palliative care budget, the vast majority is spent on medical and nursing professionals. Yet around 80% of the problems people face are social and psychological in nature, and these aspects are largely ignored in policy. Moreover, the most important care is provided 24 hours a day, seven days a week by those closest to the patient: family members, friends, neighbours and acquaintances. Doctors and nurses are, of course, indispensable in palliative care, but only for a limited number of problems and challenges. At the end of life, many different challenges come together. Two generations ago, people could rely on extended families. That was a natural form of support within society, without a price tag attached to it.

Through the individualisation and professionalisation of society, we have lost much of that. Even at the end of life, we see an overuse of specialised medical care. Between a quarter and a half of the public

healthcare budget is spent during the final year of life. This also includes inappropriate treatments that may further increase a patient's suffering. That is completely at odds with the philosophy of palliative care, which seeks to prevent or relieve suffering.”

“With Public Health Palliative Care International, we aim to maximise social support, for example by developing compassionate communities. This has now become a global movement. From VUB, for instance, we coordinate a learning network on Compassionate Schools, which already includes more than 75 schools, universities of applied sciences and universities. One of my final major achievements before my retirement was the establishment of COCO, the Compassionate Communities Centre of Expertise at VUB. It brings together expertise from five faculties and eleven research groups across the university.”

As a VUB ambassador, Luc Deliens also attends international conferences and study days to present the Compassionate University initiative.

“A university can serve as an example of a compassionate community. VUB therefore functions as a living lab where research is carried out and theory is tested in practice. Together with the University of Cape Town, we are developing two compassionate communities in South African townships. Building social networks around palliative care involves many different aspects. But we are still learning, experimenting and testing new approaches at VUB as well. A university is often a complex organisation, bound by procedures and budgets. So if it

can be successfully implemented here, it can be implemented elsewhere too.

You do, of course, have to create visibility. At VUB, several initiatives have been developed for that purpose, including the annual Compassionate Week and the Monument of Comfort, where members of the VUB community who have passed away are commemorated together with their families. There is also the Before I Die Wall on the Etterbeek campus, an accessible way of raising awareness among students and staff about what they still want to achieve and experience before they die.

We plan almost everything in our lives, except our own ending. Naturally, people prefer to deny that they will one day die, but towards the end of life we often still want the opportunity to say certain things to one another. That is also one of the strengths of euthanasia: it allows you to determine that moment yourself and to take the time to say a genuine goodbye to life and to the people you love. These are crucial moments in life. Everyone remembers the death of their parents. Those social moments of saying goodbye, whether with or without euthanasia, receive far too little support."

"If you can
turn VUB into a
compassionate
community, then
it can be done
elsewhere too"

LUC DELIENS



POLICY AND PROCEDURES

In addition to raising awareness of and normalising themes such as serious illness, caregiving, death, grief and loss, it is equally crucial to examine which procedures and policies are in place within the organisation to deal with these challenging situations. Encouraging an open dialogue alone is not enough; clear guidelines and structures are also needed to support both students and staff. Without well-defined procedures, people may feel lost when confronted with illness or loss. Policies not only provide practical guidance, but also contribute to creating a culture in which support and understanding are structurally embedded. The Compassionate University has therefore been incorporated into VUB's overall wellbeing policy and framework.

PROTOCOL FOLLOWING THE DEATH OF A STUDENT OR STAFF MEMBER

The death of a student or staff member evokes many emotions, while at the same time those left behind are faced with numerous administrative tasks. To support them, an internal document was developed providing a clear overview of the actions required and who is responsible for carrying them out.

Although a protocol is not a miracle solution, it serves as a valuable guide and source of support for managers, staff and students alike. It helps ensure that important matters are not overlooked during difficult times. At the same time, it is essential that the protocol is not applied rigidly, but leaves room for individual needs. It should serve primarily as a memory aid and ensure that practical matters are dealt with properly, so that those who are grieving are not burdened with additional concerns.

PROTOCOL FOR CRITICAL INCIDENTS

A critical incident falls outside the normal course of everyday life and is distressing and disruptive for almost everyone. It concerns a situation in which the demands of the environment greatly exceed an individual's ability to cope. Such events can trigger intense stress reactions, including fear, helplessness, horror or a profound sense of insecurity. In these situations, a

rapid and careful response is essential, addressing both emotional and practical needs.

For this reason, an internal protocol has been developed to provide guidance on immediate support, follow-up care and, where necessary, referral after a critical incident. Although it does not offer ready-made solutions, it serves as a valuable guide during difficult times. In this way, we work together towards a caring and resilient university.

AN ADDITIONAL BEREAVEMENT DAY DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

During the COVID-19 lockdown, VUB offered every staff member the opportunity to take one additional day of bereavement leave for each loved one who passed away. Although a single additional bereavement day is not sufficient in itself, the gesture symbolised the need for greater recognition of grief. Its most important effect was to foster a culture of understanding and compassion within the VUB community. The initiative also highlighted the broader need to review the current regulations governing bereavement leave.

In Belgium, bereavement leave currently amounts to ten days following the death of a partner, child or parent-in-law, and only three days following the death of a grandchild or another close family member. This is often insufficient to deal with the practical and administrative matters that arise, meaning that bereaved people may need a medical certificate from their GP and, in effect, treating grief as though it were an illness.

REVISION OF THE BUSINESS EXPENSES POLICY

Previously, it was not possible to purchase gifts for colleagues who were on long-term sick leave. The revised business expenses policy now includes a budget for small gifts for staff members who are seriously ill over a prolonged period. This amendment removes procedural barriers that previously hindered compassionate behaviour.

It enables colleagues to express care and support in a simple but meaningful way during difficult times and underlines the importance attached to this theme within the organisation.

PROCEDURES FOR LONG-TERM ILLNESS AND RETURNING TO WORK

Both during a period of (long-term) absence and when returning to work, a colleague may need someone to

talk to, practical support or help in overcoming barriers. Several forms of support are available:

- Both staff members and managers can contact the Wellbeing Team (People & Organisation) with any questions.
- In the case of long-term absence (more than 30 days), the staff member receives practical information from their case manager, while both the staff member and their manager receive an email from the Wellbeing Team outlining the available support and providing additional information.
- The first day is not always easy and may be accompanied by feelings of uncertainty and stress. An informal or formal reintegration pathway can help ease the transition back to work. The Wellbeing Team also provides support throughout this process.
- To make all information relating to illness and returning to work easier to access, a SharePoint site has been created containing, among other things, information on the steps involved in a phased return to work, what happens to annual leave, where to turn with questions and which formal procedures are in place.

TIME CREDIT AND THEMATIC LEAVE

If you take on a caregiving role or need time for yourself and/or your family, several options are available, depending on your circumstances and the age or needs of the person requiring care. These include working part-time, time credit for care purposes, parental leave, leave for medical assistance, palliative leave, care leave, leave for compelling reasons and carers' leave.

Staff members can either consult the available information internally or via the National Employment Office (RVA/ONEM), or contact their case manager, who can provide the necessary information and help them choose the most appropriate option.

INCLUDING SERIOUS ILLNESS, GRIEF AND CAREGIVING RESPONSIBILITIES IN THE VUB WELLBEING SURVEY

The 2022 staff wellbeing survey included specific questions about serious illness, grief and loss. The 2026 survey explored the extent to which colleagues have caregiving responsibilities. These questions aimed to establish how many staff members had been confronted with these issues during the previous year and whether they had received sufficient support from the university. Collecting this information enabled the university to gain

a better understanding of the experiences and needs of its staff, thereby helping to improve its support policy. By systematically including these themes in the wellbeing survey, they remain visible and become an integral part of university policy.

EDUCATION & STUDENT AFFAIRS

Since VUB committed to becoming a Compassionate University, the vision of student wellbeing within the Education & Student Affairs Department has been further developed. Central to this vision is the ambition to create a caring community: an engaged, welcoming and compassionate environment in which every student feels safe, recognised and supported.

To translate this vision into practice, the department has developed a range of procedures that provide guidance in a variety of situations. For example, its crisis policy offers guidance on recognising and responding to psychological distress, ranging from subtle signs without an explicit request for help to acute, life-threatening crises. In addition, work is ongoing to develop a compassionate and workable exceptional circumstances policy, providing flexibility for students who are temporarily unable to meet the standard study requirements due to exceptional circumstances such as mental health difficulties, medical problems or significant personal situations.

This policy is based on the principles of reasonableness and trust and provides tailored solutions that support both student wellbeing and academic success. At the same time, it requires appropriate evidence of the exceptional circumstances and sets balanced boundaries to support sustainable wellbeing and academic achievement.

Alongside these policy initiatives, the department also organises preventive actions that make student mental wellbeing more visible and open to discussion. For example, on World Mental Health Day, heart-shaped stickers bearing the message 'Mental health = student success' are distributed as an accessible way of emphasising the importance of mental wellbeing within the university. Through the Finding Your Way to Wellbeing referral leaflet, the department also provides a practical tool enabling students, staff and bystanders to quickly identify appropriate support for mental health concerns. The leaflet offers an overview of support services and contact points, providing an accessible first step towards professional help.

“Providing good support during major life events has a positive impact on the entire organisation”

NOËMI VERREYEN
AND JEROEN
DE SAMBLANX
ON EMBEDDING
COMPASSIONATE
UNIVERSITY IN
POLICY AND
ORGANISATIONAL
PRACTICE

Jeroen De Samblancx was one of the initiators of the Compassionate University initiative and has coordinated the Core Group since its inception. Noëmi Verreyen is Team Coordinator for Wellbeing within the Human Resources department at VUB. “People & Organisation, VUB’s HR Department, became involved in the Compassionate University initiative at an early stage to translate the initiative into support for VUB staff.”

“One of the strategic objectives of People & Organisation is to enhance staff engagement and wellbeing, and this initiative is part of that ambition. We invest in wellbeing policy, psychosocial support (such as the Employee Assistance Programme), support initiatives such as Compassionate Week, and coordinate the process following the death of current or former staff members. This means that we act as a point of contact, coordinate internal communication and, thanks to the work of COCO, have developed brochures for both students and staff containing practical guidance on how colleagues and managers can respond to a death.”

“The last thing someone wants when confronted with illness or loss is to deal with paperwork. Unfortunately, it is part of the process”

Jeroen: “Compassionate University originally started at the initiative of our former Rector, Caroline Pauwels. One of the priorities in her policy plan was to make VUB a warm and caring organisation. She came into contact with colleagues from the End-of-Life Care Research Group, who were already conducting research into compassionate communities. The concept already existed internationally. With Rector Caroline Pauwels encouragement, we started adapting that concept to the context

of a university. It was a long process to determine what a Compassionate University should actually be. Even today, we notice that people sometimes have misconceptions about what it does and does not encompass. At VUB, we chose to focus on serious illness, caregiving, death, grief and loss, and on the impact these experiences have within our organisation. The impact of losing someone with whom you study or work is profound. Providing good support during major life events has a positive impact on the entire organisation.”

Jeroen continues: “The pioneering phase, during which we were very much exploring what was possible, is now behind us. We have noticed that the organisation has become more open to grief and loss. One example is that students and staff now spontaneously use the Monument of Comfort as a place for reflection following a death. That shows that people have embraced the idea that grief also deserves a place within a learning and working environment.”

Noëmi: “We have indeed moved beyond that first phase, but we continue to build a warm and caring university. We therefore invest in factors that promote wellbeing, such as a strong feedback culture, leadership, greater awareness of available wellbeing services and continually improving our practices. For example, my team is currently reviewing the entire process surrounding a death. Our colleagues in Education & Student Affairs also regularly evaluate their procedures. We also review existing initiatives. Is Compassionate Week still taking place at the right time? How can we reach a wider audience? Or is our priority to focus on quality rather than scale? At the same time, we take into account developments beyond the university, such as the impact of social media, internationalisation, financial challenges and changing legislation. Because colleagues are

unfortunately confronted with loss, grief and caregiving responsibilities, and because these experiences can have a major impact, we want to support them as effectively as possible and continue exploring how we can improve. That is why these themes were included in the VUB wellbeing surveys of 2022 and 2026.”

Jeroen: “That is really the essence of what inspired this whole initiative from the very beginning: serious illness, caregiving, death, grief and loss are part of life. And if they are part of life, they must also have a place within our organisation.”

Noëmi: “Following a death, a dedicated team is available to support both staff and students. Within People & Organisation, I act as the central point of contact. Together with Jeroen from the Rectorate, Naomi Beke from Education & Student Affairs and Ben Van Beeck from Marketing & Communication, who coordinates all communication, we form VUB’s crisis team for deaths. It is very much a team effort and an all-round approach. As Jeroen said, serious illness is also part of life. That is why we are currently developing a new policy on illness and return to work, while the Wellbeing Team acts as a sounding board for staff members and managers when a colleague is on long-term sick leave or returns to work.”

Jeroen: “That is one of the areas where we have seen clear improvements. Especially during the first few days after a death, people need support. Anyone who suddenly loses a close colleague goes through an intense grieving process. A helping hand during those first days can make all the difference.”

Noëmi: “We focus on both the human aspects and the practical administrative matters that accompanies these situations. The last thing someone wants when they are confronted with illness or loss is to have to deal with paperwork. Unfortunately, it is part of the process. Providing clear guidance through that process is therefore enormously valuable, both for the individual and for the organisation. The more smoothly the administration is handled, the more time and attention can be devoted to the people involved.”



JEROEN DE SAMBLANCX
AND NOËMI VERREYEN

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